

# CINEMA 3

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EMBODIMENT AND THE BODY  
edited by Patrícia Silveirinha Castello Branco

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## EDITORIAL:

### CINEMA, THE BODY AND EMBODIMENT

The third issue of *Cinema: Journal of Philosophy and the Moving Image* takes up the theme of embodiment and the body, its relationship to Cinema's history (theory and practice), and its reawakening in a recent body of research which is attentive, not only to film, but also to new media practices. It encompasses the dismantling of one of the foundational theoretical perspectives of film studies for over a century — the metaphor of the disembodied eye — and focuses on a groundbreaking field which has been attempting to integrate the body in conceptual models for understanding art and cinematic spectatorship. It aims to be a contribution to the approaches which have been recently trying to show the fallacy of the distinction between the physical and the mental, focusing on the concept of embodiment taken, either as phenomenological encounter immersed in everyday practices, or as a material and physical process made of fluids, energies and forces. In both cases, the quest for understanding Cinema entails acknowledging its inherent sensuous qualities and recognizing that the intellectual, mental and cognitive activities must be reinterpreted as embodied and carnal.

This new understanding of cinema's spectatorship, which integrates the spectator's body in the process of his/her emotional and mental encounter with images, has been accompanied by an ongoing development of the moving image's sensuous and haptic qualities in contemporary world, media practices and artistic scene.

Two directions form the pivotal points of two vastly different paradigms for the sensuous qualities of images, which underpin understandings of cinema based

on divergent concepts of visual excess, the body and the senses. On one hand, we find the commercial uses of this visual excess, attached to logics of pure commodity consumption of images. On the other, we have a purely disruptive use of this visual excess, in practices that aim to explore the role of the senses and of the body, not as a place for amusement and diversion, but quite on the contrary: as a place of resistance to the dominance of rational/verbal based social order and scientific and capitalistic ordering of the self. It is an erotics of the image, an "acinema" (Lyotard), a "cinema of the body" (Deleuze), a dilation of the senses, an ecstasy (Eisenstein), a "vertigo" (Picabia), a nervous excitation, but more than that, it is an opening of perception. Their understanding of the body as an excess relates closely to Walter Benjamin's material rehabilitation of "reception in distraction," which is narrowly connected to his understanding of the term *aesthetics*. This idea of sensuous experience primarily associated with *aesthesis*, is fully present in the logic of "pure sensation," one of the pivotal aims of the first artistic avant-gardes of European cinema, supported by some of the most influential filmmakers at the height of artistic modernism in the twentieth century, like Epstein, Artaud, Delluc, or even Gance, not to mention the soviet montage theorists like Eisenstein. For all of them, the "sensations" produced by films depend upon the physical domain, upon the spectator body, acting directly on the senses, taking the field of aesthetics, in its original use in the Greek *aesthesis*, and the body in its corporeal material nature.

How do we understand this *aesthesis* in cinema and its relationship to the spectator body taken as an excess based on its corporeal material nature?

The understanding of this relationship arises from how the body or embodiment is conceptualized as the existential or/and material ground of perception, and bridges different traditions of thought. It stems mainly from two backgrounds: a phenomenological and a materialistic one, that have recently come

together in post-cognitivist approaches to film. Despite their mutual differences, there is an undeniable congruence between the phenomenological approaches to film, the concept of embodiment and the idea of the body as a corporeal material nature capable of creating meaning that are responsible for the proximity of these approaches in post-cognitivist views. They share the very same notion of physical sensation as a creative and productive excess and they both ascribe the same understanding of "sensation," "ecstasy" and "embodied affect" but, most importantly, they both assign a formulation of a non-dichotomous concept of mind and body that we discover in the idea of "sensory understanding," of a "flesh ontology" (Merleau-Ponty) or of "carnal thoughts" (Sobchack), and a challenge to cognitivist disembodied understandings of film's spectatorship, as well as an attempt to conceptualize embodied vision and spectatorship as an inherently tactile and affective process.

How can we integrate this movement of the image towards the body and embodied perception, in its corporeal material nature, into the contemporary discussion of cinema and the moving images?

Currently leading in new digital media and fully present in the concepts of interactivity and immersion, haptical visuality looks for a palpable sensuous connection between the body of the viewer and the body of the image, a correlation between the physical perception, its affective dimension, and its resonance in the image. The aim is to achieve a new understanding of cinema's spectatorship based, not on an idea of *mimesis*, but exploring the far more complicated notion of *contact*. And *contact* here is conceived as a complex visceral and perceptive experience of "porosity between the body of the image and the perceiver's body." Shape, texture, colour, protuberances and curls, all touch the perceiver and involve her/him in a sensuous and affective continuous resonance. They are not simple features of the image, but "energetic impulses," which vibrate through a tactile, palpable cinematic

space and that are understood by the body of the spectator, by his/her “carnal thoughts” to use Vivian Sobchack vivid words.

It is precisely with an article by Vivian Sobchack entitled “Fleshing Out the Image: Phenomenology, Pedagogy, and Derek Jarman's *Blue*” that we open this issue. The choice to begin this first thematic issue of *Cinema* with an article by Vivian Sobchack is simultaneously a privilege and a tribute to one of the leading figures of the “neglected tradition of phenomenology on film studies” (Sobchack) during the XX century, a tradition that has only, in recent years, begun to be recognized in its full importance. In this article, Sobchack, lectures on Derek Jarman's film *Blue* (1993), taking it as an example of existential phenomenological philosophy which can be grasped by the phenomenological method of “fleshing out” of the film experience. Addressing Jarman's *Blue* is also a way of interpreting the reciprocal contributions that philosophy and film studies can bring to each other.

The selection of articles that meet in this issue reflect the exceptional amount of work and the diversity of approaches, which are being currently carried out on our topic. It integrates contributions from film studies, philosophy and neurosciences.

Ana Salzberg's article “Seduction Incarnate: Pre-Production Code Hollywood and Possessive Spectatorship” discusses movies produced before the Production Code Filmmaking of 1920s/30s Hollywood, in order to address issues of cine-eroticism, suggesting that through specific techniques, these films incorporate the very erotic ideas and drives that are being enabled by contemporary viewing practices. By examining pre-Code productions, Salzberg proposes that the “intimate visuality enabled by contemporary viewing practices” are already present in these early films and suggests that both (early films and new media) “engage their viewers in a flirtatious visual pleasure: promising possession while eluding its grasp.”

Taking an interest on a different kind of moving images, Gavin Wilson's "A Phenomenology of Reciprocal Sensation in the Moving Body Experience of Mobile Phone Films" focuses on phone films, in order to investigate reception in this "minor cinema." Wilson proposes that this "hybrid media" is a privileged means of connecting perceptions and physical sensations of the filmmaker and of the spectator and tries and demonstrates how reception in phone films is "located within phenomenological experience," which is dependent upon a kind of "participatory experience." Wilson further argues that in phone films "the filmmaker and spectator are connected to one another through the exchange and sharing of a prototypal filmic experience. Whilst not involved in a physically, co-present form of engagement with screen-based moving images, both of them are nonetheless engaged in a kind of participatory involvement: what Laura Marks calls 'a dynamic subjectivity between looker and image'." Wilson's main argument is that phone films facilitate the physical, body-centred, cellular nature of the spectator's engagement with film and their makers.

Shifting again from "minor" to "major cinema," Angelos Koutsourakis' "Cinema of the Body: The Politics of Performativity in Lars von Trier's *Dogville* and Yorgos Lanthimos's *Dogtooth*" takes Gilles Deleuze's notion of "cinema of the body" and investigates how bodily gestures can be producers of filmic excess. Using two films as case studies — *Dogville* (2003) and *Dogtooth* (*Kynodontas*, 2009) —, the author analyses the means and meaning of the focus on the gesture and on bodily features in a certain kind of cinema. Koutsourakis proposes that in the cinema of the body we find a rupture with filmic narrative order, which creates visual excess. That visual excess, in these particular kinds of movies, corresponds to a shift from the representation sphere to a performance domain. Koutsourakis further argues that these disruptive characters of visual excess contained in the gesture and physical expression of the bodies within the image, entrusts this body-images also with an important political dimension.

Also exploring the political aspect of visual excess and the body in cinema, Marco Luceri's "The Myth of the Political Physicality of Mussolini in Marco Bellocchio's *Vincere*," moves from a disruptive dimension to an ideological one, analysing the role of the body and of the "cinema of the body" as a privileged place for fascist aesthetics. In contrast to Koutsourakis' Brechtian approach, which explores the idea of the cinema of the body as a means for political resistance and augmented political awareness, Luceri stresses that, in Italian fascist aesthetics, the body was explored as a political statement of a different kind. Drawing on Marco Bellocchio's film *Vincere* (2009) Luceri demonstrates how fascist aesthetics — using mass media images — has always relied mainly upon the figure and upon the physical gestures of Mussolini, and has used his gestures and bodily excess as a political statement.

Moving again to the disruptive power of exploring new sensory dimensions in our relationships to images — and on a different note but also focusing on the image as an embodied experience that interplays affective, perceptual and cognitive strategies of our "being in the world" —, Andrew Conio's article "Eija-Liisa Ahtila: The Palpable Event," proposes a new reading of Eija-Liisa Ahtila's work. Conio analyses how, in using the installation form, Ahtila's work explores the ways film can create meaning and new relations between viewer and screen, by using devices of rupture, exploring an event unique in the video installation.

On the same note, Adriano D'Aloia's "Upside-Down Cinema: (Dis)simulation of the Body in the Film Experience" also focuses on the disruptive powers of cinematic experience. D'Aloia interweaves a series of upside-down images in different genres of narrative films and investigates its uses and its effects on the viewers, stressing cinema's capacity to destabilize spacial coordinates. Departing from here, D'Aloia demonstrates "that narrative cinema provides a *re-embodiment* of an experience that is inevitably *disembodied*."

Also focusing on the issue of embodiment, but this time merging film studies, philosophy and an important contribute from the neurosciences, Vittorio Gallese and Michele Guerra's article "Embodying Movies: Embodied Simulation and Film Studies," could not be more clear: approaching film from an embodied point of view and trying to demonstrate that our relationship to movies is an embodied experience. The novelty of their approach lies on the fact that they entail a fundamental dialogue both with philosophical and film studies approaches to cinema, integrating contributions from science and the humanities. Specifically, Gallese and Guerra draw on a concept that was triggered by the discovery of the mirror neurons: the idea of "embodied simulation (ES)," trying to investigate the role it plays in film experience. They conclude that these neuroscience discoveries prove that our relationship to images is embodied, physical and that we feel movements, feelings and sensations through the images we see, in our own body, as if they were ours. According to Gallese and Guerra, such shared experiences between the film and the viewer ground an important field of embodying images and show that our relation to images is primarily physical and sensorial.

Continuing exploring the issue of emotions and empathy in film experience, Dina Mendonça article: "Existential Feelings: How Cinema Makes Us Feel Alive" proposes an encounter between phenomenological and cognitivist approaches to film experience. Drawing chiefly on the phenomenological concept of "existential feelings," as M. Radcliffe develops it, and trying to apply it to specific film experiences, Mendonça concludes that the emotional impact of cinema can only be properly understood in the light of the way films promote emotional awareness. Films are to be understood "as emotional laboratories" where emotions can be fully recognised and experienced.

Our final article, Seung-hoon Jeong's "The Body as Interface: Ambivalent Tactility in Expanded Rube Cinema," discusses the chief concepts of *interface*,

*embodiment* and *tactility*, in light of the tradition of Rube films, which the author believes are being updated in new media tactile devices and practices, through the notion of interface. The author starts with a close analysis of Roberto Rossellini's short *Virginity* included in *Ro.Go.Pa.G* (1963), reinterpreting it as a modern Rube film and further proposing that Rube film genre and its actualization in cutting-edge new media interfaces incorporates a shift from perception to action that signals a change which is transversal to several media: the change from transcendent to embodied spectatorship.

In the interview section, our editor Susana Nascimento has invited Vanessa Brito to conduct an interview with Marie-José Mondzain in French, apropos her last book, *Images (à suivre). De la poursuite au cinéma et ailleurs*. In a fascinating talk, Mondzain explains her immanent conception of the image, its connection to the idea of embodiment, and of irreducible place of political, social and aesthetic resistance.

In the conference reports section William Brown offers our readers a thought provocative review of four important events to film studies that took place during 2012 summer: *Powers of the False*, Institut français, London, 18-19 May; SCSMI Conference, Sarah Lawrence College and New York University, New York, 13-16 June; *Film-Game-Emotion-Brain*, Center for Creation, Content and Technology, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, 14-21 July; and, finally, a review of the 2012 Film-Philosophy Conference, Queen Mary, University of London, King's College London, and Kingston University, 12-14 September.

Completing this issue is an essay in the Portuguese language by Eduardo Barroso, which is not directly related with this theme, but is linked to our frequently "neglect tradition of Portuguese cinema." It is an homage to one of our most important filmmakers, which has passed away this year: Fernando Lopes. Barroso's fascinating article is not only an unquestionable piece of our finest academic

investigation on Lopes' films, but it also intends to serve as a tribute to one of the most important Portuguese filmmakers.

I hope you enjoy the issue.

#### THIS ISSUE'S EDITOR

Patrícia Silveirinha Castello Branco

P.S.: We sadly report that Paulo Rocha died on the 29<sup>th</sup> December 2012, aged 77. Paulo Rocha stands in the history of Portuguese cinema as one of its foremost filmmakers. Films like *Os Verdes Anos* (1963) and *Mudar de Vida* (1966) are hallmarks of the Portuguese New Cinema. Given that the news of Paulo Rocha's passing only came to us after the closing of the present issue, it is impossible to include a proper testimony of his work and legacy. This journal welcomes contributions on Paulo Rocha's work from a philosophical perspective, to be published in the following issues.

## ABSTRACTS

**SEDUCTION INCARNATE:  
PRE-PRODUCTION CODE HOLLYWOOD  
AND POSSESSIVE SPECTATORSHIP**

Ana Salzberg

**Abstract**

This article considers questions of embodied visibility, sexuality, and spectatorship in the pre-Production Code filmmaking of 1920s/30s Hollywood. With Laura Mulvey's theorization of possessive spectatorship in new media and Jennifer M. Barker's embodied approach to early cine-eroticism providing a conceptual framework, "Seduction Incarnate" suggests that the very elements of momentum and stillness, elusiveness and control examined by these scholars are incorporated into the sensual subjectivities of pre-Code films; and through techniques like close-ups, elliptical montages, and suggestive fade-outs, these filmic bodies make material the dramas of revelation and concealment that drive the narratives themselves. In close readings of movies like *The Divorcée* (1930), *The Cheat* (1931), *Red-Headed Woman* (1932), *Three on a Match* (1932), and *Baby Face* (1933) — as well as a consideration of their remediation (following Bolter and Grusin's terms) in home-viewing collections and on the internet — the article proposes that pre-Code productions invite the intimate visibility enabled by contemporary viewing practices, even as they assert the autonomy of their cine-subjectivities. No longer forbidden but still provocative, these films continue to engage their viewers in a flirtatious visual pleasure: promising possession while eluding its grasp.

**Keywords**

Censorship, Embodied visibility, New media, Pre-Production Code Hollywood, Spectatorship

**A PHENOMENOLOGY OF RECIPROCAL SENSATION  
IN THE MOVING BODY EXPERIENCE OF MOBILE PHONE FILMS**

Gavin Wilson

**Abstract**

The screening of films made on mobile phones to spectators, either on a mobile phone or projected before an audience, significantly affects the material instrumentality of the phone film, with profound consequences for its reception and the ontological truth that results from such kinds of audience engagement.

In the transformative process between the capture of real events and the reception of representational moving images by the spectator, the phone film transitions from a particularised kind of audio-visual artefact recording a filmmaker's personal experience, to become the material component of a potentially innovative discourse that foregrounds the body as central to an understanding of how we experience images on the screen of a mobile phone.

Drawing on notions of a physical, quasi-biological interaction between filmmaker and spectator that implies a particular kind of cellular connectivity, this article reaches back through a Deleuzeian-Guattarian concept of the rhizome to the philosophy of Bergson, and back to the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and Sobchack that underpin it. Reception of the phone film is thus located within phenomenological experience, revealing the act of seeing screened representations

of the body as contingent on objective thought about sensation and interconnected movement within the world.

### **Keywords**

Body, Cellular, Mobile Phone, Phenomenology, Sensation

### **CINEMA OF THE BODY:**

### **THE POLITICS OF PERFORMATIVITY IN LARS VON TRIER'S *DOGVILLE* AND YORGOS LANTHIMO'S *DOGTOOTH***

Angelos Koutsourakis

### **Abstract**

Gilles Deleuze's distinction between the "cinema of action" and "the cinema of the body" has been quite influential in contemporary studies of film performance. Deleuze analyzes the ways in which certain directors reduce their narratives to the bodies of the actors so as to disturb narrative coherence. The camera's interaction with the body goes beyond narrative motivation and according to Deleuze, the primary concern of this type of cinema is not dramaturgical consistency, but the production of a performative excess by means of the development of bodily attitudes and gestures which are not subordinated to narrative requirements. Using two films as case studies — *Dogville* (1998) and *Dogtooth* (*Kynodontas*, 2009) —, the article discusses the politics of this shift from representation to performance. I draw attention to the ways Lars von Trier and Yorgos Lanthimos place emphasis on the materiality of film performance and valorize the performative over the representational aspect of the medium, so as to answer a set of questions not posed so far: i) what are the political implications of this aesthetic? ii) Can this stress on

performativity be understood under the rubric of minor cinemas? iii) In what ways and why does corporeal cinema defy dramatic realism? In accounting for these questions, the article investigates the filmmakers' dialogue with the modernist debates of the past, so as to elucidate why form is the key to our understanding of the politics of corporeal cinema.

### **Keywords**

Bertolt Brecht, Cinema of the body, Gilles Deleuze, Yorgos Lanthimos, Lars von Trier

### **THE BODY OF IL DUCE:**

### **THE MYTH OF THE POLITICAL PHYSICALITY OF MUSSOLINI IN MARCO BELLOCCHIO'S *VINCERE***

Marco Luceri

### **Abstract**

In 2009, Marco Bellocchio made the film *Vincere*, which tells the tormented relationship between Benito Mussolini and Ida Dalser. The film not only retraces Mussolini's personal life, but also his ascent to power. In the narration of this political aspect, Bellocchio, thanks to his collaboration with the actor Filippo Timi, reinterprets and sheds new light on one of the most interesting aspects of the biography of il Duce: the importance of the mediatic use of his body as a political statement. By way of some important stylistic choices, the director shows that these media images are nothing but illusions hiding the true, dark and perverse side of Mussolini's character.

### **Keywords**

Benito Mussolini, Body, Marco Bellocchio, Media

### **EIJA-LIISA AHTILA:**

#### **THE PALPABLE EVENT**

Andrew Conio

### **Abstract**

The widely accepted reading of Eija-Liisa Ahtila's work is that her use of multiple screens and fragmented, multilayered, narratives of unstable subject positions and multiple assemblages of enunciation produces an embodied experience of the palpitations of time as it flows backwards and forward in heterogenic durations.

It is claimed that her use of the installation form to portray this resolves the longstanding and still pressing debates about the seeming irreconcilability between the demands of the critical viewer and the seductions of the immersive environment. This paper reviews the way this question is framed by Marc Augé, Peter Osborne, Jane Philbrick, Catherine Elwes and Jessica Morgan, and argues that her film installations recompose the problem in the creation of works that "think" through dynamic and non-decomposable interplays between affective, perceptual and cognitive strategies.

This movement away from the stagnant debate between formalism and illusionism is pushed still further by the deployment of the Deleuzian concept of the Event. For Deleuze, the Event is both an historical instance and an ongoing instantiation of the features of European consciousness. *Where is Where?* (2010) is an exemplary rendition of the Event structure of life and the potential of the cinematic

installation form to make the Event palpable. In this way, the Event is intensified and the installation is made into an Event itself.

This paper uses the concepts rarely used in film theory, *aion*, *chronos* and the *event*, as they were developed by Deleuze in one of his most philosophical books, *The Logic of Sense*, and takes other concepts from his wider conceptual armory, to identify a singularly productive encounter between philosophy, film and the installation form.

### **Keywords**

Aion, Chronos, Event, Installation, Narrative

### **UPSIDE-DOWN CINEMA:**

### **(DIS)SIMULATION OF THE BODY IN THE FILM EXPERIENCE**

Adriano D'Aloia

### **Abstract**

This essay examines the motif of the upside-down image in cinema and focuses on the perceptual and cognitive activity of the spectator. In the first (theoretical) part, I refer to Maurice Merleau-Ponty discussion of psychological experiments on retinal inversion and describe the dynamic *disembodiment / re-embodiment* as a way of providing the spectator both the thrill of unbalance and the perceptual re-orientation functional to the cognitive comprehension of the film. In the second (analytical) part, I analyse the formal and stylistic modes of representation of the upside-down image of the character in selected film scenes. In particular, I argue that the rotational camera movement is a filmic "gestures" that (dis)simulates the human bodily movement.

**Keywords**

Embodied cognition, Film-body, Perceptual adaptation, *Prägnanz*, Upside-down vision

**EMBODYING MOVIES:****EMBODIED SIMULATION AND FILM STUDIES**

Vittorio Gallese and Michele Guerra

**Abstract**

Recent discoveries in neuroscience, among which that of mirror neurons (MNs), have strongly influenced the debate on spatial cognition, action, emotion and empathy, all aspects that in recent years have been deeply reconsidered within film studies. This article focuses on the role embodied simulation (ES) theory — triggered by the discovery of MNs — plays in film experience. ES has been proposed to constitute a basic functional mechanism of humans' brain. Because of a shared bodily representational format, we map the actions of others onto our own motor representations, as well as others' emotions and sensations onto our own visceromotor and sensory-motor representations. We wonder how relevant this mechanism is in our film experience reconsidering both classical and recent theories that to some extent have foreshadowed ES, and testing our hypotheses through the stylistic analysis of two sequences from Hitchcock's *Notorious* (1946) and Antonioni's *Il grido* (1957).

**Keywords**

Alfred Hitchcock, Embodied simulation, Film style, Michelangelo Antonioni, Mirror neurons

**EXISTENTIAL FEELINGS:**

**HOW CINEMA MAKES US FEEL ALIVE**

Dina Mendonça

**Abstract**

This paper explores the role of existential feelings in films, and the impact of the connections between cinema and existential feelings for emotional life in general. After explaining the notion of existential feelings and illustrating them in films with *Black Swan* (2010) and *The Help* (2011), the paper concludes that movies offer provide insights about our own existential feelings because films promote emotional awareness by the way they function as emotional laboratories. This will lead to an examination the presence and role of surprise for emotional awareness in general, and more specifically by seeing how it works within suspense movies with the illustration of *Rebecca* (1940). The analysis will show how the paradox of suspense is tied to the way we can be surprised by our own feelings, including our own existential feelings. The paper concludes that the cinema is capable of providing this privileged place for exploration because it maintains our ability to feel surprise and keep open to surprise.

**Keywords**

Cinematic emotional laboratories, Existential feelings, Manipulation of time, Paradox of suspense, Surprise

**THE BODY AS INTERFACE:**

**AMBIVALENT TACTILITY IN EXPANDED RUBE CINEMA**

Seung-hoon Jeong

**Abstract**

This paper addresses the issue of embodiment by looking at (expanded) Rube films in which the maladjusted to new media, confusing reality and illusion, directly touch the screen to catch the object of desire. The shift from perception to action here signals that from transcendent to embodied spectatorship, revealing the screen as a material “interface” that both provokes and frustrates the real contact. Defining this “ambivalent tactility” as a key aspect of interfaciality, the paper explores it in the frame of various spectatorship theories broadly from Lacanian semiotic psychoanalysis to Merleau-Pontian phenomenology of embodiment, while revisiting and reinterpreting such concepts as the mirror stage, narcissism, and skin ego in relation to the screen function. This investigation suggests not only that the screen is a touchable interface for tactile experience, but also that the subject is “in touch with” surroundings before it “touches” something — i.e., one’s body is an inherently embodied interface generated through the primary *écart* from the mother’s body. Then, one can map three forms of interface from external to internal — screen, mirror, skin — and see that the artificial technological interface turns out to be derived from the ambivalently tactile skin as the embodied interface.

**Keywords**

Ambivalent tactility, Embodiment, Interface, Rube film, Spectatorship,

**FLESHING OUT THE IMAGE:  
PHENOMENOLOGY, PEDAGOGY,  
AND DEREK JARMAN'S *BLUE*<sup>1</sup>**

Vivian Sobchack (UCLA)

In what follows, I want to address the reciprocity between two questions: What might a particular philosophical tradition bring to the study of film? and What might film studies bring to the practice of philosophy? Here, explored from a pedagogical perspective, my exemplar is existential phenomenological philosophy as it illuminates — and is illuminated by — Derek Jarman's seemingly "monochromatic" film, *Blue* (1993). Made when the filmmaker was almost completely blind and dying of AIDS and theatrically released in 1993, *Blue* is an instance of cinematic perception and expression at their extremity. Seemingly without figures, the screen rectangle is filled with a field of cobalt blue (except for a flash of white light at the end) as a soundtrack of voices, sound effects, and music weaves a poetic and fragmented first-person narrative of Jarman's observations, memories, and emotions in relation to his failing eyesight, horrific medical experiences, and approaching death, all in the context of a larger community of lovers, friends, and strangers living with and dying from AIDS. *Blue* not only elicits extremely positive or negative responses from most of those who experience it but also challenges our "natural attitude" (better termed "naturalized attitude") about the phenomenon we call a "film."

Screening *Blue* seems to me an ideal way to begin "Visual Perception," a graduate seminar in critical media studies that I teach at the UCLA School of

Theater, Film and Television. Shown in 35mm and a theatrical setting, the film's particular sensual and categorical provocations allow me to introduce students to phenomenological method (and philosophy) as a mode of empirical and qualitative research that demands focus not only on the cinematic text but also on the cinematic experience. My pedagogical goal is to forestall my graduate students' habitual rush into the abstraction of theoretical and formal "analysis" or contextual "readings." Phenomenological method insists on an embodied as well as reflective engagement with the cinema, grounding such secondary "analyses" and "readings" in a "fleshed out" and synthetic description, thematization, and interpretation that, I would argue, should be foundational for film and media studies.

Phenomenological method's "fleshing out" of the film experience also makes *palpable* the basic precepts of existential phenomenology — not only for film students but also for those studying philosophy. Indeed, as French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty<sup>2</sup> suggests, the cinema is a phenomenological art, "peculiarly suited to make manifest the union of mind and body, mind and world, and the expression of one in the other." Through its particular perceptive and expressive technology, the cinema's modes of perception and expression not only *refer* to embodied experience but also *use* embodied experience (of material enworldedness, orientation, movement, seeing, hearing, and reflection) as the medium of such reference. A radical transformation of photography (and, as with *Blue*, not even completely dependent upon it), the cinema made the dynamic *action of vision* visible for the very first time: choosing its objects as it prospects the world, displacing itself in space, time, and reflection, and always engaged in making meaning. Cinema thus makes the phenomenological concept of "intentionality" explicit; it becomes *sensible* as a materially-embodied and actively-directed structure through which meaning is constituted in an on-going sensual, reflexive, and reflective process that, entailed with

the world and others, is always creating its own provisional history or narrative of becoming. In effect, *the cinema enacts what is also being enacted by its viewer*.

Thus, as I've elaborated in *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*,<sup>3</sup> the film experience entails at least *two viewers viewing* (film and spectator) in a dynamic relational structure. Even such an extreme case as *Blue* reveals (and, indeed, illuminates) the essentially embodied, intentional, and meaningful entailment of two perceptive and expressive subjects who, in their respective (and supposed) "deprivation" of sight and its objects, are not only engaged in a sensually-enhanced mode of audiovisual experience but also intra- and intersubjectively enriched by intensely reflexive (as well as dialogic and dialectical) forms of "insight." Indeed, whether valued positively or negatively, the experience of *Blue* makes explicit Merleau-Ponty's description of cinema as the union of mind and body and mind and world and their expression of one in the other — not only *in and as* the film but also *between* the film and its viewer/listener.

Phenomenological investigation of this conjunction of viewer/listener and film thus entails correlating the dynamics, modulations, and effects of *(subjective) acts of audiovisual cinematic perception* with *(objective) structures of cinematic expression*. This involves not only seeking out the symmetries of acts and structures that both constitute the film object and the ways in which it is taken up by the viewer/listener but also their asymmetries. That is, particular modulations (or variations) of cinematic experience in relation to a given film are identified and described but then interpreted within the more general structures of the experience.

These opening remarks sum up to great degree why I want to introduce film students to phenomenological method — and to its foundational premises. Existential phenomenology's call to an awareness of our lived experience of the objects we study seems to me of the utmost importance in the context of the commonly abstractive practices of the humanities disciplines in today's research

university. Today, most graduate students are in such a hurry to “professionalize” and “talk the talk” of their disciplines that they often forget to attend to their own experience of “seeing” and “listening” — or they devalue it. Instead, they rush to quote others, and describe their objects of study through a range of “floating signifiers” that tend to overdetermine and foreclose their objects and their descriptions before the latter have even really begun. Hermeneutically sophisticated yet overly dependent upon “received knowledge,” these students are also secretly insecure and worried that everyone else ‘knows’ more than they do — and intellectually aware of “the death of the subject,” they are highly suspicious of their own “subjective” experience. They ignore, mistrust, and devalue it as trivial, mistaken, or irrelevantly singular — this last, a false, indeed arrogant, humility that unwittingly rejects intersubjectivity, sociality, and culture. Thus, ignoring the apodicticity (or initial certainty) and presence of their own lived-bodies engaged in being-in-the-world (and in the cinema), their thought about the world (and cinema) has no existential ground of its own from which to empirically proceed. Phenomenological inquiry affords redress to this contemporary situation: it insists we dwell on the ground of experience before moving on to more abstract or theoretical concerns, that we experience and reflect upon our own sight before we (dare I pun?) cite others.

Nonetheless, my preamble here as to “why phenomenology?” is not something I initially present to the students in my “Visual Perception” seminar. Rather we turn to *Blue* and begin — for, as Don Ihde claims, “Without doing phenomenology, it may be practically impossible to understand phenomenology.”<sup>4</sup> Before the first substantive seminar meeting, students attend a screening of *Blue* and are also assigned Ihde’s *Experimental Phenomenology: An Introduction* (1979). Accessible in style and full of phenomenological exercises, this little volume presents an overview of phenomenology (what and why it is, and how it proceeds) as well as translating

more arcane descriptions of phenomenological method into what seems a rather humble set of five operational “hermeneutic rules” (or critical commitments) that guide phenomenological inquiry (and will be elaborated in what follows). Ihde then focuses on our visual field as his initial exemplary object, first pointing out its invariants and providing a basic vocabulary for its description. What follows are a series of increasingly difficult exercises in phenomenological “seeing” — these based on investigation of the visual perception of seemingly simple line drawings of multi-stable visual objects such as the Necker cube and other reversible figures and optical illusions. The variants possible to the perception of these drawings beyond their “first appearance” are not only identified and described but also *increase* — this enabled not only by shifting the figures’ position on the page but also by provoking new modes of seeing them through contextualizing narratives (these, as we shall see, highly relevant to the perception of *Blue*’s “blueness”). *Experimental Phenomenology* thus sensitizes students to the ways even seemingly “simple” visual figures are habitually “taken up” and appear to their perception in limited ways that foreclose many of their visual possibilities. Further, it also allows them to *do* phenomenology and, by expanding the limits of their own perception, to see why it might be a valuable qualitative method of empirical research. At this point, however, students are not yet sure how to apply what they’ve done perceptually with a Necker cube to their perceptual experience of a film.

Thus, in our engagement with *Blue*, we begin by following Ihde’s hermeneutic rules — as well as the order of inquiry appropriate to phenomenological method. That inquiry does not, as students may believe, begin with the perceiving subject. Indeed, Ihde writes, it is “the inverse of introspective analysis,” in which “the ‘I’ claims direct, immediate and full-blown self-awareness as an initial and given certain.”<sup>5</sup> Rather, investigation “moves from that which is experienced towards its reflexive reference in the how of experience, and terminates in the constitution of

the 'I' as the correlated counterpart" of the thing experienced.<sup>6</sup> That is, "the phenomenological 'I' takes on its significance [only] through its encounter with things, persons, and every type of otherness it may meet."<sup>7</sup> The initial tasks, then, to quote Ihde's first and second hermeneutic rules,<sup>8</sup> are: "attend to the phenomena of experience as they appear" and to "*describe, don't explain.*" As he writes, these "first methodological moves seek to circumvent certain kinds of predefinition" or "any sort of theory, idea, concept or construction that attempts to go behind phenomena, to give the reasons for a phenomenon, or account for it in terms other than what appears."<sup>9</sup> I might, for example, at the outset, have asked students, "Is *Blue* a film?" but this question implies a theory and set of predefined criteria for what a film is rather than attending to what was before us. Certainly, this question was articulated in a few reviews of *Blue* or some negative user comments on the Internet Movie Database (hereafter IMDb), but, following phenomenological method, it must be addressed at a later point — and not through a theory of cinema but through a set of thought-experiments or phenomenological variations. My first question, then, is "What did you see and hear?"

A phenomenological "description" of *Blue* emerges initially in cursory and habituated perceptual responses — these then interrogated by a "careful looking [that] precedes classification and systematization."<sup>10</sup> Critical here is Ihde's third hermeneutic rule of phenomenological description: "*Horizontalize or equalize all immediate phenomena.* Negatively put, do not assume an initial hierarchy of 'realities' that might foreclose the phenomenon's possibilities."<sup>11</sup> As class discussion develops, so does the radical difference between description in the "naturalized attitude" and description that emerges from a careful looking at and hearing of the object and its modes of appearing. This difference is also reflected in (and cross-checked through) a range of discourses that extend beyond the classroom: mass media film (and DVD) reviews, comments by IMDb users, and academic essays. These affirm what might

be deemed either an anecdotal or highly-controlled description in a single context as also a more general — and intersubjective — description of *Blue* as it is perceived and expressed across a variety of contexts. (These responses also provide variations on the class descriptions that are critical to the later phenomenological reduction and interpretation.)

Initially, my sophisticated graduate students tend not to answer the question “What did you see and hear?” in terms of their sensual experience. Within the “naturalized attitude” of film studies, they generally first respond with more abstract generic categorizations of *Blue* as a formally avant-garde and experimental work that tests the limits of cinema; or a part of Jarman’s “auteurist” and multi-media *oeuvre*; or an introspective and poetic “diary” film, charged with documentary realism by the fact of the filmmaker’s death; or an historically activist intervention in the public perception and treatment of those with AIDS. They rarely tell me, at first, what it was they actually saw and heard and how it was experienced as they saw and heard it. Furthermore, when prodded, they begin to describe *Blue* as not having any images, as an “unchanging” rectangular visual field of bright and monochromatic cobalt that was difficult to watch (and also *not* to watch). Despite my question which involved sound, the students’ hierarchical emphasis is on the film as a visual phenomenon that (irritating or tedious to some) lacked anything visible to see. Sound is initially subordinated to the visible despite its prominent presence in *Blue*’s beginning *audio*-visual incantation: “You say to the boy open your eyes / When he opens his eyes and sees the light / You make him cry out. Saying / O Blue come forth / O Blue arise / O Blue ascend / O Blue come in.”

Students haven’t yet “horizontalized” or “equalized” all aspects of the film as it is first experienced. Indeed, as Philip Brophy suggests of film studies’ general subordination of sound, the students’ initial response tended to focus on *Blue*’s “destabilized reprioritization of the aural [as if it were] a disability.”<sup>12</sup> This, of

course, is not all that surprising. The course's departmental name — “Visual Perception” — inherently privileges vision over our other senses and thus continues the long-standing (if now often challenged) presupposition that film is primarily a visual medium. Nonetheless, this initial emphasis on visual “deprivation” rather than sonic “plenty” is also predominant outside the film studies classroom, appearing throughout mass media and viewer description of *Blue* in the visualist bias (and imprecision) of words such as “blank,” “unchanging,” “unwavering,” “empty,” “image-less,” and “nothing to see.”

The movement from this “naturalized attitude” into “careful” seeing and listening challenges such description. Looking, for the moment, only (and at first) at what is *visible* both through and in the film’s visual perception (and, correlatively, the viewer’s), *Blue* does, indeed, provide an *image* — and it appears as insistently fulsome as it does insistently deprived. Certainly, as cultural phenomenologist Steve Connor suggests, a “blank” screen is often used to represent the nonvisual. However, he continues,

as [...] *Blue* makes plain, blankness itself [...] projected on a screen, and [...] accompanied by sound, comes to have a kind of substance that can be shaped and inflected by other elements of the film experience. Blankness is not nonvisual, but is itself a certain visible content projected on to a screen.<sup>13</sup>

Watching *Blue*, we are not looking at a non-image, at “nothing”; rather, and more precisely, we are looking at *an image of “no thing”* — that is, at a *referentially indeterminate* but visible projection of a rectangular, bounded, and thus framed, bright blue visual field. Its chromatic fullness and containment prominent against the visible darkness surrounding the screen in front of us and centered in our visual field as we look at it, this visible image, this plenitude of blueness — particularly as

qualified and transformed by Jarman's sonorous invocations of the color as attached to different things, themes, and experiences — appears both literally and mutably as a 'floating signifier' not only for Jarman but also for the film and viewer. As Jarman intones on the soundtrack, "In the pandemonium of image / I present you with the Universal Blue [...] / An infinite possibility / becoming tangible." Even objectively, *Blue* is not *image*-less. Rather, it is *figure*-less.

At this point, however, given its theatrical screening from a film print, a student will invariably point out that, in fact, *Blue* does have figures: the wear scratches (usually yellow and green) that appear and disappear on the cobalt field, and that move both independent of and in seeming relation to the soundtrack's music. (One reviewer speaks of the film's only visual "highlights" as "imperfections in the film: a hair caught [...] in the projector lens, or a snow-like effect when the film changes reels."<sup>14</sup>) Although these figures are not intentional or significant in terms of the "text," they certainly are in the experience of the "film" — for, at the very least, they visibly indicate spatial and temporal *projection* and *movement*. Once these visible artifacts are mentioned and not trivialized, the students' description tends to become more reflexive — moving from *Blue* as a *visible object* to the film as a perceptual and somatic *visual experience*. Several students speak of seeing "after-images" of geometric shapes when they redirected their eyes to the screen after looking away from it, these shapes briefly imposed on the blue field as the faint and partial outlines of squares or rectangles in hues of orange and green. One IMDb viewer writes: "You notice the tricks your eyes play on you. As you watch, your eyes become saturated with the color blue, and begin to try and compensate for the overstimulation, shifting to oranges, showing illusionary shapes in the blank field of the screen" — this echoing Jarman, much later on the soundtrack, describing his own visual experience: "The shattering bright light of the eye specialist's camera leaves that empty sky blue after-image. Did I really see green the first time? The

after-image dissolves in a second. As the photographs progress, colors change to pink and the light turns to orange.”

Students note also that alterations in their visual attention — narrow or diffuse focus, visual attentiveness or fatigue — modulate the blue to varying degrees of intensity and density. And, here, in reflexive description, the soundtrack becomes prominent and equal to the image: listening is horizontalized with seeing. Students begin describing various qualifications of the supposed unwavering “constancy” of the blue image in their response to the music, sound effects, and specificity of Jarman’s narration. The tonal and affective qualities and the depth or flatness of the blue field change with the music (chimes, choral fragments, raucous punk) and sound effects (the interior of a coffee shop or a hospital waiting room). This mutability is most apparent in relation to Jarman’s varied evocations of “blueness” in relation to his descriptions and memories: a “blue bottle buzzing,” “a cobalt river,” a “blue funk,” “a sky blue butterfly,” “azure seas,” “the slow blue love of delphinium days,” the “fathomless blue of Bliss.” Thus, one reviewer writes: “As the [...] words modulate from plummy to morbid to bracingly obscene to ethereal, the blue on the screen seems to undulate with feeling — it alternately suggests a serene sky, a burnt retina, the chilliness of death, and, maybe, transcendence.”<sup>15</sup> Although viewers/listeners do not project precise representations of Jarman’s objects of blueness onto the screen (or in their imaginations), Jarman’s contextualization (his “narrativization”) of the blue field before us “possibilizes” it, aurally changing its perceived qualities and conjuring up, however diffuse and invisible, a nonetheless *sonorously visual* world. In this regard, phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard, whose *The Poetics of Space* (1958) will also be required reading, is apposite in suggesting that through the poetic image (here the visible blueness conjoined with Jarman’s aurally visual figurations) a “vibrating sonorous world”

emerges<sup>16</sup> — this from a seemingly empty screen. And, quoting psychologist/phenomenologist Eugène Minkowski, he continues:

Here, to “fill up” and “plenitude” [...] have a completely different sense. It is not a material object which fills another by espousing the form that the other imposes. No, it is the dynamism of sonorous life itself which [...] fills the [...] space, or better, the [...] world it assigns itself by its movement, making it reverberate, breathing into it its own life.<sup>17</sup>

In this regard, as one reviewer writes, “Instead of watching for colors, you listen to them.”<sup>18</sup> This is particularly evident in Jarman's descriptions of yellow which, other than in occasional scratches on the film, never appears as such onscreen.

Nonetheless, as many students note, we *sense* yellow when Jarman aurally figures it — against blue — as the “yellowbelly, slit-eye,” color of disease and speaks of wilted sunflowers, “jaundiced corn,” a “lemon goblin,” a “jaundiced kiss,” “mustard gas,” “nicotined-stained fangs,” “yellow bile,” and “piss.” Here students also begin to note the sensuality of Jarman's *voice*. Critical to the impact of Jarman's qualifying adjectives and descriptive scenes is what Roland Barthes would call the “voluptuous sound-signifiers” of its “grain.”<sup>19</sup> Indeed, rather than experienced as “voice-over” narration (which suggests a detachment from the image), the tone, musicality, depth, and affective qualities of Jarman's voice *in-form* both the objective “grain” of the film and our own perceptual experience. Thus, in relation to the visible and immanent screen, even as his invisible and transcendent voice is charged with dialectical tension (both for him and for us), the present shifts of his cadence and tone — mellifluous, angry, grieving, poetic, observational, reflective, loving, satiric, ironic, resigned — and the screen together co-constitute a *gestalt*. In sum, it is

Jarman's voice that phenomenologically *correlates* the intended visual object with the modality in which it appears and is experienced.

In this regard, students come to realize that, as Michel Chion writes in *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, the "aural field is much less limited or confined [than the visual field], its contours uncertain and changing."<sup>20</sup> Film sound (to historically varying degree) surrounds and envelops us and is not, like the image, "in front" of us. Merleau-Ponty tells us: "To see is *to have at a distance*."<sup>21</sup> To hear not only bridges that distance but also brings it near so that things resonate on and in our bodies. Although cooperative, as Brophy notes, "sight 'displac[es]' the self and hearing 'incorporat[es]' the self."<sup>22</sup> Sound is also sensed as multidimensional, voluminous, ambient, as spatial and temporal. It provides a sense of situation and dimension to the things we see — and, in the case of *Blue*, those we don't. Indeed, *Blue's* intense insistence on the objective direction and limits of its visual field and the subjective (and enveloping) expansiveness of its aural field, its sonorous plenitude and figural deprivation, destabilize the dominant audiovisual hierarchy and resonate with Ihde's comment in *Listening and Voice: A Phenomenology of Sound* that "the whole realm of spoken and heard language must remain unsolvable so long as our seeing is not also a listening. *It is to the invisible that listening may attend*."<sup>23</sup>

*Blue's* overall demand that listening attend to the invisible at the same time that seeing is engaged (for some, futilely) in prospection of a non-normative visible object provokes extreme conditions of somatic attention that are valued both negatively and positively by those who experience the film. Some felt held captive to *Blue*, while others, "giving in" to the film, were captivated by it; whichever the case, "adjusting" to the experience was difficult and remarked upon. Indeed, this difficulty and the correspondent tendency to displace their vision from the screen and then invariably return to it is emphasized not only by my students but by almost everyone else — and this primarily in reflexive terms of *physical response* and

its related *affects*. One reviewer writes that *Blue* “can get dizzying, nauseating or hypnotic — depending on your sensory makeup or your attitude toward visual deprivation [...]. You may retreat to the more comforting darkness at your feet.”<sup>24</sup> And an IMDb viewer posts: “After a few minutes I felt angry, annoyed at having to stare at a screen of blue. I tried looking at the floor, closing my eyes, anything to avoid the blue. But I kept looking back.” Indeed, “boredom,” “frustration,” and “tedium” emerge as frequent negative descriptors of this experience, these often couched in expressions of anger at the film — as a film. One IMDb poster writes: “To stare at a blue screen [...] for 79 minutes while people talk over it is entirely pointless and frustrating [...]. This is literally the worst film I have ever seen. In fact, I hate calling it a film because it isn’t.”

Positive responses also emphasize the film’s physical demands but their valuation of the experience is quite different. One IMDb posting reads: “Amazingly rich. Jarman has created the closest movie experience to a director talking to the inside of your head. The concomitant feel of terrifying hallucination and control-losing peace [...] provides an extraordinary experience [...] of letting go and getting lost.” And a reviewer writes: “Jarman evokes a sense of journey within the viewer, and the effect is hypnotic and moving [...]. Once your eyes return to the corporeal world, it’s as though sight has been restored.”<sup>25</sup> Another agrees: “You may sit through *Blue* with nothing to see, but leave it rich with images.”<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, what cuts across these often polarized (but also often ambivalent) descriptions is their reflexive emphasis on the viewer/listener’s lived-body and its material, immanent, presence to the film. It is in recognition of this *invariant structural feature* of *Blue* that we move from phenomenological description (in existence never complete or “finished”) to *phenomenological reduction* (or thematization) — and Ihde’s fourth hermeneutic rule: “Seek out structural or invariant features of the phenomena”<sup>27</sup> as they appear. To assist us in this task is *variational*

*method* which, Ihde writes, “requires obtaining as many *sufficient* examples or variations upon examples as might be necessary to discover the structural features being sought.”<sup>28</sup> These variations “‘possibilize’ phenomena,” bringing forward “the invariants in variants” and also determining “the limits of a phenomenon.” Through comparison with other phenomena like and unlike it, a general (albeit not universal) shape or pattern of *Blue* and its experience emerges — a shape we’ve in many ways already discovered but which has not yet been made explicit as to its structural features: these including, as a major example, the perceptual fact that *Blue’s* synthetic *gestalt* — *as a film* — is constituted both intra- and intersubjectively in — and by — its general structure as a dialectic between image and sound, seeing and hearing.

It is important to note Ihde’s requirement that we obtain a range of “sufficient” examples or variations. Sufficiency here does not refer to the quantity of examples but to the “whatness” rather than the “thatness” of *Blue*. The necessary conditions that constitute *Blue* as a film would seem not to be at issue then. And yet, in the phenomenological reduction, an unsettling paradox emerges as itself an invariant structural feature of the film: *the particular dialectic presented and synthesized by Blue’s sufficiency as what it is foregrounds the general question of the cinema’s necessary conditions for its existence as such*. Hence the question of *Blue’s* “film-ness” — this usually raised by angry or frustrated viewers. Given that *Blue* as a film structurally generates this question, it cannot be avoided — and here we have some help from Jarman himself.

Indeed, *Blue* found its cinematic form through a set of phenomenological variations of its *first-person narrative content* (another structural invariant) that provide the seminar with a range of “possibilities.” Versions of *Blue* include a performance piece; a written text; a multi-media event shown on British television with accompanying sound on radio; a theatrically-released film; an audio CD; VHS

and DVD releases of the film; and even a gallery installation. As the class considers these possibilities, the film-ness of the film and the sensual plenitude of the film experience become explicit. We have already identified experience of the film as a synthetic (if also enigmatic) *gestalt* of projected and framed image and sound. Furthermore, the “grain” of the film and objective artifacts on the filmstrip indicate cinematic *movement* as not only audible through the temporal stream that is the soundtrack but also visible — differentiating it in degree from its “cleaner” DVD exhibition and certainly in structure from a projected blue slide. Unlike a slide, then, the film is experienced as a *temporal phenomenon*. Thus, some viewers are disgruntled that “nothing visibly happens,” but they are disgruntled within the structure of a particular and invariant experience of *temporal expectation* that would not be present if they were looking at a slide, or reading a written text at their own pace, or listening to an audio-only CD. All these entail spatiality and temporality in different modalities and frames of provocation and experience. Indeed, even the theatrical space constructed for film-going provides generally invariant viewing conditions — at least to the extent that *Blue* is *isolated in darkness* and *audiovisually privileged in space*.

Our (provisionally) last variation is a thought-experiment: Would *Blue* be what it is if it provided *visible representation* — perhaps a dramatization of Jarman’s experiences or something more figurally abstract? As they explore this “possibilization,” students come to realize the significance of Jarman’s radical refusal of representation and move toward phenomenological interpretation. Unlike viewers who question *Blue*’s “film-ness” because it lacks representations or figures, my students understand this lack as a formal choice and thus a salient property of the film and its experience. As Noël Carroll writes, questioning the “essence” of cinema, certain films “*present* visual stimulation to audiences with the intention of eliciting certain perceptual states, toying with the spectator’s perceptual apparatus

*directly* rather than via ‘mediated’ representations.”<sup>29</sup> If *Blue* had characters and dialogue, students realize that their attention would be intentionally-directed “elsewhere” and “elsewhen” — toward the mediating bodies (and their voices) on the screen rather than their own immanent “here” and “now” in the darkened theater aware not only of the “floating signifiers” of the blue screen, Jarman’s voice, and music, but also, and reflexively, of their own lived-bodies. Furthermore, specific representations would overdetermine the phenomenological shape of attention. That is, not only would the viewer/listener’s intense sense of their lived-body’s *material immanence* (whether experienced negatively and/or positively) be greatly diminished but also diminished would be the film’s invitation (whether accepted or not) to *transcendence* — to perceptive and expressive *acts of imagination, reverie, and thought* that, in dynamic concert with the blue screen and Jarman’s own voiced imagination, reverie, and thought, are rooted in our lived-body’s immanence but also exceed its corporeal limits. Thus, although experiencing *Blue* in a representational (rather than presentational) mode might be less physically discomfiting, the possibility of “losing oneself” in Jarman’s “fathomless blue of Bliss” would be lessened.

Alternatively, if *Blue* were figurally abstract rather than representational, Jarman’s voice and the music would remain prominent in experience. Nonetheless, we would still be intentionally-directed toward the kinetic figures onscreen, these underdetermined and ambiguously located not only “elsewhere” but also “now” because of their abstraction. Given the figures’ ambiguity, however, both our awareness of our own immanence as well as our transcendent acts of imagination would be less *physically* self-reflexive than they are with *Blue* as it is. Rather, we would be engaged (to varying degree) with either “making sense” (however vaguely) of the figures onscreen in relation to the content of Jarman’s voice or be

engaged in a distracted (rather than explicitly reflexive) form of sensuous reverie in relation to the musicality of the soundtrack.

Students realize that, in both these variations, their intense awareness of their own lived-bodies in the “here” and “now” would be diminished — as would their awareness in immanence of their own transcendent acts of consciousness. Correlatively, their sense of Jarman’s *persona* — his invisible and transcendent presence embodied through voice — would not be as intense. That is, however invisible, Jarman is embodied and insistently present, the terribly consequential content of his (posthumously-heard) voice indexically connected to his corporeal existence and mortality. Barthes writes: “The ‘grain’ [of the voice] is that: the materiality of the body speaking.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, as Alison Young writes of *Blue*: “The moving image inscribes the other [not only] in the ear [but also] on the body of the spectator.”<sup>31</sup> In sum, variational method reveals that an *embodied sense of immanent presentness and presence* as well as an *embodied sense of transcendence* are structural invariants of *Blue* as the film and experience it is (or can be) — and this in relation not only to the viewer/listener but also to the film object and Jarman, the filmmaker.

This insight brings us to phenomenological *interpretation* and Ihde’s fifth and last hermeneutic rule: “Every experiencing has its reference or direction towards what is experienced, and, contrarily, every experienced phenomenon refers to or reflects a mode of experiencing to which it is present.”<sup>32</sup> Here, the *meaning* of the phenomenon, as it is intentionally and significantly *lived*, is specified through the *correlation* of the previous description and reduction. In some ways, we have been doing this all along — and, indeed, from the beginning. It is not as if *Blue* had no meaning or value prior to phenomenological inquiry. This meaning, however, was intuitive and summary. The task of phenomenological method was both to “unpack” it as constituted, lived, and given value — and then to expand its horizons and possibilities. Focus in the phenomenological interpretation is thus on the synthetic

correlation of consciousness and its object in a *lived body-subject* as it is, at once, particular in experience and general in structure. This incorporates (and I do not use the word loosely) both the symmetrical relation of consciousness and its object in experience and also its asymmetry. Thus, along with the symmetry between them, we also recognize that *Blue's* viewer/listener and Jarman have a radically *different* material and consequential experience in terms of their respective forms of visual deprivation and bodily dis-ease. Nonetheless, in their entailment with *Blue*, both intra- and intersubjectively share the experiential structure, shape, and temporality of sensual deprivation — as well as a reflexive and enhanced sensual awareness of both the richness and fragility of material existence. As Ben Bennett-Carpenter writes, the film “provoke[s] experience [of] one’s own materiality in a sort of carnal sublime.”<sup>33</sup>

Ihde’s last hermeneutic rule thus leads us, in the face of *Blue*, to the affecting and sensual discovery of the lived-body subject being-in-the-world not only as object and subject, visible and invisible, immanent and transcendent, as intersubjective yet fundamentally grounded in our own and the world’s materiality. Interpreting *Blue*, Patrizia Lombardo is eloquent: “With a violent leap, the most bodyless film ever produced projects the human body in its most cruel and unspeakable presence: pain, illness, suffering, at the borderline between the physical and the mental, the conscious and the unconscious, life and death.”<sup>34</sup> As we have seen, however, the human body projected by *Blue* is not only cruel and “unspeakable.” Indeed, Jarman’s body also serves — in the film experience — as the immanent ground of a benediction in its breathing and speaking presence: distilling, giving poignant life to, and affirming the transcendence of what Bachelard has called our “sonority of being.”<sup>35</sup> Blind and looking at death, insisting on bodily immanence and transcendence, Jarman thus creates — through *Blue's* sensuous dialectic and its synthesis — a privileged space and time that provokes from the still

living bodies before it not only reflexive self-awareness but also the conditions for ethical thought and care.

In sum, phenomenological method “fleshes out” our initial interpretations and reveals that *Blue* is not only objectively about the richness, complexity, and sensuality of audiovisual perception (as well as the pain of its diminishment and loss). It also, and more fundamentally, reveals that *Blue* is *performative*: through its seeming “minimalism,” subjectively constituting for its viewers/listeners a meaningful experience of extreme self-reflection on the dynamics, habits, creativity, and plenitude of their own embodied perception. Certainly, much more can be said about *Blue* in relation to its historical and cultural context; its generic status; its aesthetic, thematic, and social significance; and its place in the filmmaker’s *oeuvre*. In this regard, phenomenology does not dismiss the importance of culture, history, aesthetics, and ideology. As a “first philosophy,” however, what phenomenology demands is that we not rush to interpretation and judgment but attend, first, to the actual and possible embodied experience that grounds *Blue*’s meaning not only as it is thought but also as it is perceived.

## NOTES

1. This article was first published in *New Takes in Film-Philosophy*, ed. It is reprinted here with the kind permission of Vivian Sobchack and Palgrave Macmillan.

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3. Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

4. Don Ihde, *Experimental Phenomenology: An Introduction* (New York: Paragon Books, 1979), 14.

5. *Ibid.*, 50-51.

6. *Ibid.*, 50.

7. *Ibid.*, 51.

8. *Ibid.*, 34.

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10. *Ibid.*, 32.

11. *Ibid.*, 36.

12. Philip Brophy, “Where Sound Is: Locating the Absent Aural in Film Theory,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Film Studies*, ed. James and Michael Renov (London: SAGE, 2008), 425.

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[http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/bluenrhowe\\_a0b031.htm](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/bluenrhowe_a0b031.htm).

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19. Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), 182.
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21. Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," in *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. and trans. James M. Edie (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 166.
22. Brophy, "Where Sound Is," 430.
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25. Paul Haynes, DVD review of *Blue*, *DVD Beaver*, <http://www.dvdbeaver.com/film2/DVDreviews26/blue.htm>.
26. Howe, review of *Blue*.
27. Ihde, *Experimental Phenomenology*, 39.
28. *Ibid.*, 40.
29. Noël Carroll, "The Essence of Cinema," *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, 89:2/3 (1998): 324-25.
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31. Alison Young, "Into the Blue: The Image Written on Law," in *Cultural Analysis, Cultural Studies, and the Law: Moving Beyond Legal Realism*, ed. Austin Sarat and Jonathan Simon (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 344.
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33. Ben Bennett-Carpente, "Moving Memento Mori Pictures: Documentary, Mortality, and Transformation in Three Films" (PhD thesis, The Catholic University of America, 2008), 188.
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**SEDUCTION INCARNATE:  
PRE-PRODUCTION CODE HOLLYWOOD  
AND POSSESSIVE SPECTATORSHIP**

Ana Salzberg (University of Edinburgh)

Early in *The Cheat* (1931), troubled socialite Elsa (played by Tallulah Bankhead) visits the home of wealthy art collector Livingstone (Irving Pichel). While touring his mansion, Elsa finds herself isolated with her host in a chamber of Oriental *objets*, sliding doors, and mysterious cabinets — one of which contains a number of doll-size effigies representing Livingstone’s former conquests. It is, as the sinister *roué* proclaims, a “gallery of ghosts” preserving the memory of “lovely women who were *kind* to me.” After Elsa discovers a crest etched into the pedestals beneath the dolls, Livingstone clarifies its meaning: “I brand all my belongings with it. It means, ‘I possess’.”

A disturbing exchange that foreshadows Elsa’s eventual debt to Livingstone and his own brutal branding of her, the moment resonates even beyond *The Cheat* to illustrate several concerns central to other films of the time — that is, the movies released in Hollywood’s pre-Production Code era. Livingstone’s past escapades and unapologetic lust for Elsa, braless in a figure-hugging gown, reflect the sexual energy that would characterize many of those films made before the Code’s strict enforcement in 1934; and the Orientalist *mise en scène* speaks to a broader film-historical fascination with exotic sensuality, as well as to the allure of privilege so foreign to mass audiences during the Depression.<sup>1</sup> Considering certain theoretical issues with which scholars have recently engaged, the significance of the scene extends further to film studies itself: how male desire may reduce women to icons,

objects for visual consumption; cinema's capacity to preserve a fleeting past and revive a "gallery of ghosts"; and, perhaps most topical, how spectators seek — and technologies of new media allow them — to "possess" the film itself. Indeed, decades before Laura Mulvey conceived of the term, *The Cheat* would evoke notions of "possessive spectatorship."

In her work *Death 24x a Second*, Mulvey examines the balance between animation and stasis, life and death that haunts cinema, placing the star him/herself within a context of "uncanny fusion between the [...] human body and the machine."<sup>2</sup> Analyzing new-media viewing practices and their implications for the audience's relationship to the cinematic body, Mulvey states that the ability to control (pause, replay, fast-forward) the flow of the film leads to a possessive spectatorship; a domination of the filmic form and its star (whether male or female), the motivation for which lies in the viewer's fetishistic fascination.<sup>3</sup> In a related analysis of early cinema, Jennifer M. Barker explores the historical tradition — and embodied stakes — of these cinematic starts and stops: She proposes that the mechanics of early viewing machines, in which audiences would turn a handle in order to propel images forward and pause them at will, parallel cinema's broader "titillating and terrifying" interplay between motion and stillness.<sup>4</sup> To unite Mulvey and Barker's discussions, then, the desire for control over the filmic body and its stars coexists with a dread of their *inanimation*; and while stimulating, this very uncertainty undermines the spectator's sense of definitive "possession."

As glimpsed in *The Cheat*, such questions of embodied visuality, sexual tension, and film history recall the visual culture of 1930s Hollywood and pre-Production Code cinema. Once available only in archives, these movies have found new audiences through their release in collections like Turner Classic Movies' *Forbidden Hollywood* box-sets, as well as through their online streaming on sites like YouTube. Belonging to both cinema's past and present, the classic works have been

remediated (following Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's terms) into today's modes of possessive spectatorship as analyzed by Mulvey, even as they directly descend from traditions of early cine-eroticism. With this in mind, this article proposes that Mulvey and Barker's discussions provide a framework within which to consider pre-Code movies – not only because of their sensual nature, but also because the very elements of momentum and stillness, elusiveness and possession examined by the theorists are incorporated into the filmic bodies themselves.

Ultimately, the sensual subjectivities of these films contribute their own dramas of revelation and concealment to the process of possessive spectatorship: Self-reflexive dialogue, for example, imbues the intimate tableaux with a coquettish performativity that deliberately courts the off-screen audience; close-ups of the female form cede to suggestive fade-outs; and elliptical montages depict the consequences of real-time seductions. Through close readings of movies like *Red-Headed Woman* (1932), *The Divorcée* (1930), *Three on a Match* (1932), *Baby Face* (1933), and *The Cheat* — as well as a concluding consideration of their contemporary remediation — the following suggests that the bodies of pre-Code films invite the intimate visuality enabled by contemporary viewing practices, even as they assert the autonomy of their cine-subjectivities. No longer forbidden but still provocative, these films continue to engage their viewers in a flirtatious visual pleasure: promising possession while eluding its grasp.

### PRE-CODE HOLLYWOOD IN CONTEXT

The understanding of the filmic body employed in the subsequent analyses follows the phenomenological terms set forth by Vivian Sobchack. Outlining the subjective capacities of the cinematic form, Sobchack has written: "Perceptive, [film] has the

capacity for experience; and expressive, it has the ability to signify.”<sup>5</sup> She reconciles the autonomy of this subjectivity with the agency of the spectator who “shares cinematic space with the film” and, in so doing, “negotiate[s].., contribute[s] to and perform[s] the constitution of its experiential significance.”<sup>6</sup> This embodied approach, then, demands an understanding of film as what Sobchack calls a “viewing-view” as well as “viewed-view.”<sup>7</sup> Certainly, as evidenced by Barker and Mulvey’s respective discussions, the dialogical perspectives of movie and spectator — as well as the conditions of their engagement — have evolved over time: from nickelodeons featuring a pre-/non-narrative “cinema of attractions” (to employ Tom Gunning’s term) to talking pictures exhibited in movie palaces; and now to televisions and computers, as well as iPhone and iPad screens. Where the historical spectator had to invest, as Barker notes, both monetarily and bodily through the motion of dropping a coin into the slot of the viewing machine,<sup>8</sup> today only the click of a mouse or touch of a screen opens a virtual window and brings a film to life.

Yet even in considering the technological sophistication of contemporary audiences, the spectator of early cinematic works contributed to a foundational revolution in literally *social* media. As Janet Staiger has explored in her study of sexuality in early cinema, the diverse range of ethnicities and classes attending motion-picture venues (including amusement parks and vaudeville houses) introduced “an element of social danger” to the very act of cinema-going.<sup>9</sup> Women also contributed to the radical quality of this spectatorship: Entering the workplace at the turn-of-the-century and so becoming active consumers, they joined the crowds, bought their tickets, and invested a portion of their income in the burgeoning film industry.<sup>10</sup> The sensual nature of many early moving pictures imbues this female spectatorship with a further sensationalism. As Gunning has commented, erotic and exhibitionist tendencies characterized much of the cinema of attractions, featuring images that highlighted the female body and actors that

deliberately returned the gaze of the viewer.<sup>11</sup> In this way, women engaged with these motion pictures as, to borrow Staiger's terms, "both subject [of the film] and spectator."<sup>12</sup>

Transposing this experience to the context of embodied visibility, then, the continually-forming constellations of contact — between spectator, viewing machine, and the film itself; and between the many patrons who frequented the venues — suggest that the conditions of early movie-going made material Sobchack's concept of "sharing the space of the film." As Barker sets forth, films of the era presented a "kinetic thrill" kindred to that of the often-adjacent roller coasters and park rides; and in more basic, even intimate, terms, "without the motion of the viewer depositing the coin, there could be no 'motion pictures'."<sup>13</sup> The sheer "kinetic thrill" of films at the time was, however, monitored by a National Board of Review. Founded by theatre owners in 1909 in an effort to prevent government-imposed censorship, the Board allowed the inclusion of sensational material — provided that it was a realist element essential to the plot, motivated by the demands of the narrative, and/or introduced an educational component.<sup>14</sup> With these relative inhibitions as a guide, the silent film industry of the 'teens and 'twenties drew from the eroticism of early motion pictures to offer audiences evolving incarnations of the "new woman" of modern times: worldly flappers like Clara Bow and Joan Crawford; vamps including Theda Bara, Nita Naldi, and Pola Negri; and continental "woman of the world" Greta Garbo.

Yet as a series of star-scandals in the early twenties proved, titillation and pleasure-seeking were not confined to diegetic worlds. In 1922, responding to public dismay over Hollywood's alleged hedonism, the industry formed the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America organization in order to monitor the content of films. As Mulvey has pointed out, the invention of talking pictures at the close of the 1920s imbued these questions of morality and industry-

influence with a further urgency. Tales of sex and crime could, she remarks, “now not only be shown but spoken”; as Mulvey quotes from a comment of the time, “Now sexy starlets could rationalize their criminal behavior.”<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, in 1930, the MPPDA — headed by Will Hays — adopted the official Production Code, a document composed by a Jesuit priest and Catholic publisher.<sup>16</sup> In an attempt to control the moral tone of Hollywood films, the Code included the decree that “the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, or sin”; and it also set forth that “scenes of passion [...] must *not* be *explicit* in action nor vivid in method, e.g. by handling of the body, by lustful or prolonged kissing.” Ultimately, the Code intoned, “where essential to the plot, scenes of passion should *not* be presented in such a way as to *arouse or excite the passions of the ordinary spectator.*”<sup>17</sup>

Film historian Thomas Doherty maintains, however, that the studios’ “compliance with the Code was a verbal agreement that...wasn’t worth the paper it was written on” until the 1934 formation of the Production Code Administration, an enforcement organization created to appease the continued indignation (and threatened boycott) of reform groups.<sup>18</sup> Up to that juncture, as Doherty outlines, a variety of factors impelled the continued production of risqué, socially-relevant films: the national trauma of the Depression, which unsettled cultural mores and inspired the provocative narratives that, in turn, drew disillusioned audiences; the rise of talkies themselves, presenting characters now able to articulate sensational dialogue; and Hollywood’s attention to the “rumblings in the theaters,” or the audience’s positive or negative reactions to particular diegetic themes.<sup>19</sup> Among the most popular were films from what Lea Jacobs has termed “the fallen woman” genre, featuring (as in several of the movies discussed here) the dramatic, sometimes darkly comic tales of women straying from moral conventions in their pursuit of sexual fulfillment and/or material wealth.

Aware that in appealing to audiences, it risked alienating state censor-boards that could omit entire sequences and even prevent exhibition, the MPPDA practiced what Jacobs has termed “self-regulation”: That is, preemptive alterations to plots and the cutting of images and/or dialogue that may have been considered offensive.<sup>20</sup> Rather than attempt explicit imagery, then, the pre-Code production process favored subtle tricks of camerawork and editing, knowing dialogue, and evocative *mise en scène* to recount its tales of vice and amorality. Further, as Jacobs has noted, studios included conclusions that “domesticated” the fallen woman through the triumph of the traditional couple – but only after she received a punishment for her actions.<sup>21</sup> Recalling (or rather presaging) the possessive spectatorship that would, as Mulvey has remarked, allow contemporary audiences to alter the cinematic form, the industry itself modified each movie’s “viewing-view” of the modern age. In this way, the impetus of pre-Code Hollywood — focused on the attraction of audiences and avoidance of censure — fostered a generation of cinematic bodies that, like many of their diegetic heroines, offered a conditional pleasure.

Today, certainly, audiences may engage with these films in a more direct manner: collecting VHS or DVD box-sets, streaming the movies online, or watching them on cable classic-movie channels. Yet rather than entirely align the notion of possessive spectatorship with the new-media viewer, Mulvey has noted that early products like film stills, pin-ups, and posters granted the historical audience a sense of intensive proximity to the star. These supplements to the movie crafted what Mulvey calls “a bridge between the irretrievable spectacle and the individual’s imagination,” or the material trace of an ephemeral experience.<sup>22</sup> Yet with the advent of home-viewing, the “irretrievable” evolved into not only the instantly-accessible, but also the instantly-controllable; she cites DVD menus, for instance, as a tool of new technologies that allows “non-linear access” to the film and immediate

engagement with favorite images.<sup>23</sup> Through starting and stopping, or fast-forwarding and rewinding the film at will, the spectator is brought closer to the body of the star — only, as Mulvey argues, to uncover the inherently stylized gestures and poses that render it akin to a cinematic automaton.<sup>24</sup> Though the viewer finds that “the Medusa effect is transformed into the pleasure of Pygmalion” under his/her command, s/he also becomes aware that, in fact, the “rhythm” of this flux between stasis and animation “is already inscribed into the style of the film itself.”<sup>25</sup>

In Mulvey’s theorization of possessive spectatorship, then, the viewer’s proximity to the star yields disillusion, the realization of a performative process rather than a spontaneous existence. Further, the spectator’s manipulation of the film represents “an act of violence,” expressing a “sadistic instinct” and “will to power.”<sup>26</sup> Yet even in exploring the *inorganic*, sometimes sinister qualities of cinema and the viewing experience, Mulvey nonetheless calls attention to the spectator’s utterly organic response to film: the elemental desire, that is, for “a heightened relation to the human body” as figured in the star and extending to his/her cinematic world.<sup>27</sup> Certainly the spectre of stasis, with its evocation of what Mulvey describes as “the human body’s mutation from animate to inanimate,”<sup>28</sup> speaks to an uncanny aura of death in cinema; it is, however, that very flux between movement and stillness, life and death, that encapsulates the vicissitudes of the lived experience itself. In so relating Mulvey’s concept to an embodied approach to visibility — and, more specifically, to films of the pre-Code era — one could then paraphrase her above statement to suggest that these rhythms of existence are already inscribed into the *bodies* of the films, and viewers, themselves.

**“CAN YOU SEE THROUGH THIS?”:**

**REFLEXIVITY IN *RED-HEADED WOMAN***

In the opening sequence of *Red-Headed Woman*, gold-digger Lil, played by Jean Harlow, readies herself for the conquest of her married boss, Bill (Chester Morris). The brief montage of Lil's *toilette* — dyeing her hair, choosing her clothes (according to whether one “can [...] see through” her backlit skirt), placing Bill's picture in her garter — would be fairly unremarkable, but for the line of dialogue that begins the film. As Lil/Harlow reclines in medium close-up, burnished hair flowing, she grins, “So gentlemen prefer blondes, do they?” All but winking at the camera, Harlow-as-Lil references not only screenwriter Anita Loos' 1925 bestselling novel *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, but also the audience's association with her own “blonde bombshell” persona. Here, the line establishes the reflexive, even coquettish, tone of a film that goes on to engage with its own extra-diegetic context and performative nature: Lil/Harlow describes her tryst with Bill/Morris as “like an uncensored movie”; the eponymous theme song is showcased in a later scene, opening with a shot of the sheet music with title emblazoned; and the red-headed woman herself conveys her attraction to her boss in terms of a fan-star dynamic. “You're all I've been able to think about for years,” Lil relates, “I've been crazy about you from a distance, ever since I was a kid.”

A box-office success in 1932 (though banned in parts of Canada and cut by state censors), *Red-Headed Woman* managed, as Richard Maltby sets forth, to make “comedy out of what had previously been [...] the material for melodrama” — that is, the story of the fallen woman.<sup>29</sup> Though not an outright satire, Loos' glib treatment of the genre imbued the production with a self-awareness that complements the reflexive gestures of other films of the era. Michael Curtiz's *Female* (1933), for example, plays upon the deliberate reversal of patriarchal conventions (with Ruth Chatterton portraying an industry magnate and rapacious pursuer of young lovers) to contemplate representations of the ideal feminine; while, as

Doherty notes, Mae West's *I'm No Angel* (1933) places its star in a carnival context that references her own extra-diegetic sensationalism.<sup>30</sup> Harlow herself would go on to star as a star in *Bombshell* (1933), Victor Fleming's screwball comedy about the machinery of the film industry. Even as these films diverge in their narrative concerns, their shared reflexive subjectivity suggests that they – and not only the contemporary viewer – may access “the pleasure of Pygmalion” in creating *themselves*.

This intersection between Pygmalion and Galatea arguably gives rise to Narcissus, and certainly the characterization of Lil includes narcissistic elements: a preoccupation with her appearance and sensual impact, and a perception of others as expendable in her drive to fulfill sexual and/or material desires. Yet Lil *shares* with the filmic body this pleasure in and for the self, that reflexive existential stance that actively flirts with the spectator's own desire to possess the seductive cinematic being. Highlighting this sensibility is the turning-point sequence in *Red-Headed Woman*, in which Bill becomes definitively entangled with Lil. After he comes to her apartment to break off the dalliance and pay her to leave town, Lil locks herself into her bedroom with him and refuses to surrender the key. After a furious Bill smacks her — only to have Lil enthuse that she “likes it” — there is a cut to Lil's equally-stimulated roommate, Sally (Una Merkel), listening to the sounds of a charged scuffle emerging from the bedroom. A cut back to the disheveled couple reveals Lil lying on the floor, feigning distress. Penitent, Bill carries her to the bed and asks her again to give him the key; and the scene ends as the sniffling Lil recovers enough to slide the key down her blouse. The following sequence presents, logically enough, the dissolution of Bill's marriage in divorce court.

No straightforward depiction of a battle between Bill's (alleged) virtue and Lil's vice, the sequence is — as one character describes the red-headed woman herself — “strictly on the level, like a flight of stairs.” Indeed, just as Lil demands

Bill's acknowledgement of his lust for her, the film itself insists upon the audience's awareness of the performance in play: Lil virtually narrates Bill's conflict — "Now you're afraid; you're afraid of yourself because you know you love me. You're afraid you're going to take me in your arms. You're afraid you're going to kiss me"; while following the ostensibly discreet cut, Sally acts as a titillated "audience" to the proceedings. With quasi-orgasmic sighs, she eagerly comments, "She's locked him in!" The camera also takes part in this overt seduction of the spectator: panning forward to frame Lil and Bill in intimate two-shot as she describes her effect on him, then pulling back slightly and reframing to capture the spastic jolt of Bill smacking her. After Bill throws Lil away from him and out of the frame, the teasing cut to the closed-door renders this sado-masochistic exchange an *off-screen* spectacle performed within the consciousness of the viewer and Sally, his/her on-screen proxy.

Even if the sado-masochistic interplay between Bill and Lil alternately entices and eludes the possessive gaze of the spectator, the conclusion of the sequence offers still another sensational *ménage*. As Lil lies prone in medium close-up and slides the key down her blouse, the radiance of the lighting — imbuing her hair, skin, and clothing with a near-pearlescent quality — gradually cedes to dusky gray as Bill's shadow heralds his approach. Finally the dark mass of Bill's back is visible to the right of the frame, its darkness moving to the left and ultimately concealing Lil as he literally blacks-out the shot to access her body. Doherty has characterized such pre-Code effects as techniques of "figurative literalness," or "timely detour[s] [...] [that] could infuse the onscreen narrative with otherwise censorable material...for the imagination."<sup>31</sup> The corporeal gravity to the image, however, suggests a figurative *materiality*: the merging of Bill's body with the film's, an act that simultaneously signals and conceals his merging with Lil's. With both Lil's coquettish self-awareness and Bill's fleshly desire literally incorporated into the

filmic body, the material of the movie renders explicit the *implicit* carnality of the scene.

With this in mind, a censor's 1932 description of Lil as "a common little creature from over the tracks who steals other women's husbands and who uses her sex attractiveness to do it"<sup>32</sup> belies not simply the comedic subtlety of *Red-Headed Woman* but also the sex appeal of its very filmic form. For it is not only the adult content or glimpses of the female body that render pre-Code films so sensational, but the intertwining of these with a sensual cinematic body. Courting the gaze as surely as the diegetic "fallen woman" pursues her conquest, the film lures its audience with promises of visual consumption — only to evade consummation and, ultimately, call attention to this teasing process itself. At the beginning of the scene, Bill angrily tells Lil, "You've only got one filthy idea in your whole rotten make-up"; to which Lil retorts, "Well, if I have, then don't try to fool yourself that you don't share it." As the closing shot reveals, the carnality of which Bill accuses Lil is shared not only by him, but by the "make-up" of the film itself.

### URBAN DISSOLVES IN *THE DIVORCÉE* AND *THREE ON A MATCH*

In her study of "Cinema and the Modern Woman," Veronica Pravadelli discusses the pre-Code evolution of Gunning's cinema of attractions. Suggesting that the female-focused films of the 1930s offered a "gendered" attraction for audiences, Pravadelli cites two techniques that recalled early cinema's affect even as they materialized the conditions of modernity: the exhibition of the female body and the "urban dissolve."<sup>33</sup> Films like *Red-Headed Woman* and *Female* undoubtedly engage in the former through their inclusion of images that highlight the allure of the stars' bodies; whereas *The Divorcée* and *Three on a Match* incorporate the urban dissolve —

a montage of streets, cars, shops, and city-dwellers that creates “pure movement and energy”<sup>34</sup> — to evoke the kinetic sexuality of their heroines. As mentioned earlier, Barker has proposed that the crank handle of early viewing machines granted the spectator a sense of control over the cinema of attractions, allowing him/her to slow down the images at their most provocative in the longing to glimpse the unseen and “tame the relentless movements of” the film and its subject.<sup>35</sup> The modern cine-attraction of the urban dissolve, however, simultaneously acknowledged and undermined this inherent desire for possession of cinematic time-space — countering contemplative shots of the female body, for instance, or sly ellipses with a burst of motion that exceeded the visual “grasp” of the viewer. As erotically-charged as the women themselves, the urban dissolves in these two films materialize the condition of the urban *dissolute*.

A comedic drama that explores (double) standards of fidelity between man and wife, *The Divorcée* begins with Ted’s (Chester Morris) proposal to Jerry (Norma Shearer). She charms him with her assertion of what he calls “a man’s point-of-view”: Forgive Ted his past, Jerry remarks, “You’re just human, and so am I.” But on her third wedding anniversary, she learns that her beloved husband has had an affair; and in an effort “to hold,” as Jerry explains, “onto the marvelous latitude of a man’s point-of-view,” she herself has a dalliance — for which Ted divorces her. Jerry proceeds to carry on a number of high-society romances, until she realizes her enduring love for Ted and pursues a reconciliation.

Until the climactic scenes in which Jerry and Ted’s marriage collapses, the film proceeds at a near-theatrical pace with long takes in (for the most part) stage-like interior sets. The sequence following their divorce, however, introduces the frenetic energy of the urban dissolve. Though admittedly the montage does not take place on a city street, it nonetheless captures the nightclub environs so intrinsic to what Jerry wryly calls “the sweet, pure air of 42<sup>nd</sup> Street and Broadway.” The scene

features Jerry-as-divorcée at a New Year's Eve party, and opens with a long establishing shot of the dancing masses before cutting to a closer shot of the crowds. Overlaying this image are shots of the various musicians and instruments that produce the raucous jazz music of the soundtrack. After a brief exchange between Jerry and Ted, she is swept away by the revelers — her image replaced by a literally kaleidoscopic dissolve that rotates shots of dancers, balloons, and streamers. Pravadelli has noted that the urban dissolve represents ideas of “movement and metamorphosis”<sup>36</sup> in the modern age; and on a diegetic level, this montage channels the fragmenting momentum of events that have redefined Jerry's identity as wife and woman.

The association of Jerry's escapades and a “man's point-of-view” does, however, complicate the narrative significance of this montage. Recalling Mulvey's seminal concept of the woman's “to-be-looked-at-ness,” it could be argued that the dissolve makes a spectacle out of Jerry own newfound identity as sensual spectacle; her radical perspective always already usurped by the extra-diegetic patriarchal gaze. Yet introducing these series of shots is Jerry's reluctant divorce-court determination to “take all of the hurdles, see all the scenery, and listen to the band play.” With the frenzied dissolve of the party immediately following this declaration, the film itself expressly assumes Jerry's pleasure-seeking point-of-view — employing a figurative materiality to transform “the marvelous latitude” of the male outlook into the quasi-vertiginous, sometimes-disjointed experience of a woman realizing her sexual freedom. Carnavalesque in its marking of the metamorphosis, the merging of these two subjectivities parallels Mulvey's recent contention that the new-media viewer's fragmentation of a film both “wounds” its “integrity” and “opens it up to new kinds of relations and revelations.”<sup>37</sup>

Where *The Divorcée's* montage of dissoluteness materializes the fragmentation of convention as well as the myriad “relations and revelations” of a

liberated woman, *Three on a Match* at first employs a more traditional mode of urban dissolve. Tracing the intertwining lives of friends Mary (Joan Blondell), Ruth (a young Bette Davis), and Vivian (Ann Dvorak) from their 1909 childhood to adulthood in 1930, the film explores issues of class, sexuality, and even drug addiction. Pravadelli cites the film's use of montage (intercuts of newsreel footage and newspapers encapsulating the events of the day) as a means of anchoring the diegesis in a historical context<sup>38</sup>; and intersecting this "fast-forwarding" through time is the momentum of the sequence in which Vivian begins her fateful affair with a small-time crook and leaves her husband. The former perceives in Vivian "all the works that make a woman want to go, and live, and love" — and indeed, the filmic body here channels its kinetic impulse to share in the woman's seduction and, at the same time, share it with the viewer.

Even as the most privileged of the three women, Vivian experiences an *ennui* that renders marriage and motherhood utterly unfulfilling: "Somehow, the things that make other people happy leave me cold." She decides to travel to Europe with her young son, only to meet the handsome Loftus (Lyle Talbot) on the ship before the voyage even begins. As cuts to a clock mark the half-hours from 10:30pm (the time of their meeting) to five minutes before midnight (the time of the ship's departure), the couple drinks, dance, and eventually leave the boat together. To paraphrase Barker, the film does not tame, but *frame*, the relentless movements of this sexual attraction within the near-episodic structure of the preceding urban dissolves; assuming, in this way, the urgency of Vivian's desire to be sexually possessed. With this rushed liaison taking place in only about four minutes of screen time, the film further demands that the spectator occupy the couple's charged present. Indeed, when at first Vivian protests that they have only met that night, Loftus exalts the fast-forwarding of their romance. "Tonight or an hour or ten years, what's the difference," he declares. "It's now that matters."

Yet the allure of the “now” soon cedes to a life of poverty and drug-addiction for Vivian. After Loftus kidnaps her son from the custody of her ex-husband, Vivian finds herself the prisoner of gangsters who hold the child for ransom in her squalid apartment. Realizing that they plan to kill her son and escape the encroaching police, Vivian desperately scrawls the child’s location on her nightgown in lipstick and throws herself from the window. The visceral impact of the scene – with Vivian shattering the glass, and a subsequent bird’s-eye shot framing her body as she flies through the air and smashes through a skylight — offers a tragic corporeal release countering the glamorous *frisson* of the shipboard seduction. Furthermore, it redirects the energy of the urban dissolve from the film’s body to Vivian’s own. Once only glimpsed in the rushing images of the montages or brief exterior shots, the modern metropolis now settles definitively into a diegetic territory anchored by Vivian’s body as it lies on the pavement. Hers is, ultimately, an urban dissolve.

The capacities of new media technology could, of course, render even the elusive urban dissolve an object of the Medusa/Pygmalion effect. The kaleidoscopes of Jerry’s “debut” and Vivian’s first meeting with Loftus could be isolated from their respective cinematic bodies and released as YouTube clips for a cinephilic visual pleasure; or a viewer might re-edit the montages entirely, dissolving the original dissolve. Yet the very presence of the urban dissolve in these films attests to their own inherently possessive impulses. For the montages of *The Divorcée* and *Three on a Match* pursue “unexpected links” unto themselves, to return to Mulvey’s terms — whether making material the radical pursuit of sexual satisfaction and unsettling of convention, or laying claim to time and space itself.

#### **ONE BODY FOR ANOTHER:**

#### **MODES OF EXCHANGE IN *THE CHEAT* AND *BABY FACE***

In her discussion of *Baby Face*, Lea Jacobs comments upon its “emphasis on the idea of exchange,” noting how camera movements, musical cues, and *mise en scène* stand in place of explicit representation and thus parallel the narrative’s own focus on the exchange of sex for status and or /security.<sup>39</sup> Certainly other films of the pre-Code era share this notion of exchange — *Red-Headed Woman*’s own use of figurative materiality, for instance, or the creation of a montage that trades the union of time and space for a spectacle. Further, a parallel economy occurs in the process of possessive spectatorship itself: the interchange between human and cinematic form, motion and stillness; and, as Barker points out, the trade of the early spectator’s motion (inserting of a coin) for the motion picture itself. Exemplifying these registers of interplay, intrinsic to both pre-Code film and the possessive spectator, are *The Cheat* and, indeed, *Baby Face*. As these cine-subjectivities incorporate a diegetic preoccupation with sex-as-commodity, they illuminate not simply the replacement of explicit for implicit imagery, but the exchange of one filmic body for another – whether in terms of an internal “transaction,” as in *The Cheat*, or the contemporary remediation of *Baby Face*.<sup>40</sup>

As a remake of Cecil B. DeMille’s 1915 film of the same title, *The Cheat* is inherently aligned with notions of exchange – one cast and director for another; a “double” for an original work; and a narrative that itself centres on questions of economic and sexual trade. (Certainly the scene discussed in the introduction highlights this effect, with its eerie construction of the doll-for-lover interchange.) A socialite with a gambling problem that she conceals from her husband, Elsa must clandestinely borrow money from the sinister Livingstone with the understanding that she will repay him with sexual favors. When Elsa attempts to clear the debt monetarily, Livingstone attacks and literally brands her with his crest; and in self-defense, she shoots him. The exchange motif recurs when Elsa’s husband pretends that he committed the crime, only to be cleared at his trial when she confesses.

Contributing to the troubled economies of the narrative is the filmic body itself, with its own vacillation between theatrical interior sequences and scenes taking place in exterior settings — trading internally, as it were, the decadent aestheticism of high society for nature itself. *The Cheat* insists, moreover, that Elsa/Bankhead share in this existential duality: She knowingly, if desperately, enters Livingstone's *demi-monde* and agrees to its conditions; yet an early outdoor sequence aligns her with utterly natural elements. As she stands on a pier with her husband (after her first visit to Livingstone's home), Elsa proclaims, "I'm mad about living! Things that go 'round — I love them. Ferris wheels, train wheels, roulette wheels." Gesturing exuberantly, throwing her head back, Elsa's *joie de vivre* matches the gusts of wind that blow her hair and dress, and even compete with her voice in the aural register of the soundtrack. Though Elsa's provocative dress reveals the shape of her breasts and curve of her back, the moment serves not to exhibit her body so much as the very humanity that is so antithetical to the dolls in Livingstone's cabinet. In the pre-Code tradition of what Molly Haskell has called "sensualists without guilt,"<sup>41</sup> Elsa revels in her vitality — an organic animation that is nonetheless traded, as she herself alludes, for the mechanical and material pleasures of the roulette wheel.

*The Cheat* evokes, then, a *mise en abyme* of exchanges predicated on the promise of possession: between Elsa's body and Livingstone's money; the expansive thrill of (human) nature and the confines of pleasure-seeking; and, finally, the ambiguous viewing-view of the film and the spectator's own embodied investment. In this way, the scene of Elsa's branding presents not only a narrative climax, but one in the possessive impulse of the film itself. Though Livingstone has made a doll of Elsa to mark their affair, her refusal to carry out the original terms of the agreement enrages him. Smashing the effigy, he lays claim to her body with a branding that, in fact, stands in place of rape. Yet Livingstone's perverse autonomy is undercut by the *intercutting* of exterior shots showing Elsa's oblivious husband

approaching the house; and silhouettes of Elsa and Livingstone evoke rather than exhibit the brutal act itself, thus eluding the gaze of the spectator. Emerging from the limbo of these shadows, in which she existed as neither Livingstone's doll nor the natural presence on the pier, Elsa revives her wounded form and returns her attacker's violence with her own.

Just as the trauma of Elsa's branding takes place beyond the vision of the audience, however, the enactment of her revenge remains off the screen: Elsa pulls the trigger in medium shot and watches Livingstone's collapse, while the spectator watches only her reaction. Alluding to rather than displaying this settling of accounts, *The Cheat* ultimately returns the spectator's pursuit of possession with an awareness of its impossibility. Though the contemporary viewer may exercise the prerogative of digital technology and attempt to "brand" the filmic body itself, the latter withholds the pleasure of total revelation.

Sharing *The Cheat's* understanding of sex-as-commodity, but diverging from the lushness of its pleasure-seeking, *Baby Face* is a realist drama tracing the impoverished Lily / Barbara Stanwyck's rise to wealth through a virtual career of sexual liaisons. A series of transactions characterizes *Baby Face*: the diegetic trade of sex for status; the filmic exchange of explicit for implicit imagery highlighted by Jacobs; and, furthermore, the contemporary interplay between two versions of the film, a dialogue recently enabled by the remediation of the work(s) on DVD. Indeed, *Baby Face* was from its very inception the subject of fraught negotiations. Maltby has documented the tightening of censorship restrictions in 1933 that led to the modifying of the original version of the film, most notably its ending. In the original, uncut version, amoral Lily finally marries a conquest only to learn that he has lost his fortune, and subsequently abandons him. Soon she realizes her love and returns to her husband; and though he has attempted suicide, the conclusion suggests that he will live through the crisis with a redeemed (if impoverished) Lily.

As Hays prepared to impose the strictures of the Production Code, however, the ending was revised to state that following the suicide attempt, the couple returned to the desolate steel-mill community from which Lily had escaped long-ago — here exacting what Maltby calls “a more [...] perverse form of patriarchal revenge” on her transgressions than the original punishing loss of wealth and status.<sup>42</sup>

If the dual filmic bodies of *Baby Face* stand, as Maltby suggests, as material connections between a more relaxed approach to censorship and the rigid enforcement to come with the Production Code Administration, then their current incarnations also relate the cine-historical era to the contemporary mediascape. For available in the *Forbidden Hollywood* DVD box-set is the “lost,” original version of *Baby Face*, long-languishing in archives. With the two works featured on the same disc, there is here a doubling of the cinematic entity that allows — even encourages — the spectator to compare the dialogue, images, and conclusions in such a way that would have been virtually impossible upon *Baby Face*’s release. Through this process of reincarnation through remediation, then, modern-day viewers may exchange one filmic body for another; and recalling Mulvey’s terms, such a mode of exhibition renders the film(s) open to links and associations that defy narrative linearity and exalt the pursuit of possession.

Indeed, Bolter and Grusin have described such classic films as currently “caught in the logic of hypermediacy” so prevalent in today’s visual culture, wherein their original celluloid forms cede to the now far-more accessible DVD formats, cable-channel showings, and online clips that have been edited by fans.<sup>43</sup> Climactic scenes from *Baby Face* and *Red-Headed Woman*, for instance, are available on YouTube, and so belong to what Henry Jenkins calls “a media archive [for] amateur curators” of the moving image.<sup>44</sup> It could be argued that the crank handle of early cinema has found its modern-day counterpart in the control-panel of the YouTube screen: Today, the viewer presses play, waits for the media to load, and may pause, fast-forward, and

replay (or “loop”) at will.<sup>45</sup> Certainly sites like YouTube foster an evolution from possessive spectatorship to possessive *production*, enabling fans to construct and disseminate — or, to paraphrase Jenkins, produce, select, and distribute<sup>46</sup> — images of a personal or cinephilic significance. In a variation on Livingstone’s branding of Elsa in *The Cheat*, each YouTube URL implicitly declares the fan/editor’s possession of a particular element of a given film.

There are, of course, limits to the possessive capacities of new media. In a recent article discussing the release of pre-Code films for home-viewing, Gwendolyn Audrey Foster has noted that “it is doubly ironic that so many [...] remain essentially censored by their unavailability on DVD.”<sup>47</sup> Yet for those movies that are available, their contemporary channels of exhibition cultivate an alluring intersection between past and present visual culture. Appealing to a home-viewing audience, for example, box-sets characterize the era in terms of glamour — *Forbidden Hollywood*’s sleek packaging that features images of movie posters, as well as shots of various stars’ (faceless) bodies — and, as in the case of the *Universal Backlot Series*, a more gimmicky sensationalism. In the latter’s *Pre-Code Hollywood Collection*, a page of the Production Code provides the backdrop-image for the DVD menus, and the icon of a red, “rubber-stamped” X serves as the indicator arrow. The provocative packaging even includes a copy of the Code in period typeface, concealed in a mock manila envelope. Such an overt nexus between Hollywood’s history and modern-day commercial interest exemplifies Barbara Klinger’s assertion that the idea of a “classic film” is “not born” but “made by various media, educational, and other agencies interested in revitalizing old properties within contemporary taste markets.”<sup>48</sup>

Leaving aside their current market value, as it were, the pre-Code films themselves bear a kind of *timeless* appeal. Simultaneously, the bodies reference the sensuality of their early-cinema antecedents, capture the mores of an America in flux, and presage the more explicit sexuality of later filmmaking; and their forms —

comprised of self-reflexive and suggestive camera work, coy fade-outs and dissolves — flirt with the possessive impulse that has shaded spectatorship from nickelodeons to movie theatres, and now even to computer and mobile-phone screens. Like the kinetic montages they often feature, these entities resist the constraints of a definitive chronology and exist, instead, both of and ahead of their time. To paraphrase Foster's above statement, then, it could be said that these films remain essentially *elusive* to the possessive visuality they have courted since their inception. Though today played on televisions or iPad screens, or re-edited by DVD menus and YouTube loops, the films themselves always already convey gestures of attraction that anticipate a possessive spectator and techniques of deflection that challenge his/her dominance. Undoubtedly, the historical era's strictures demanded such effects of revelation and concealment; yet once incorporated, they imbued the filmic bodies with an erotic impulse that both materialized that of the diegetic worlds and hinted at future representations of sexuality. Modes of production and exhibition have shifted since the original release of pre-Code motion pictures, but what endures is the seductive agency of their cine-subjectivities.

## NOTES

1. It should be noted that *The Cheat* was originally made in 1915 by Cecil B. DeMille, and also featured the elements of overt sensuality and Orientalism that characterized the 1931 version. For an illuminating analysis of studio-era Hollywood's use of the Orientalist aesthetic, see pages 44 – 74 of Homay King's *Lost in Translation: Orientalism, Cinema, and the Enigmatic Signifier* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

2. Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 171.

3. *Ibid.*, 166.

4. Jennifer M. Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 135.

5. Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 11.

6. *Ibid.*, 10.

7. *Ibid.*, 202 (emphasis mine).

8. Barker, *The Tactile Eye*, 134.

9. Janet Staiger, *Bad Women: Regulating Sexuality in Early American Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 8.

10. *Ibid.*, 11.

11. Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions," in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (London: BFI Publishing, 1990), 57.
12. Staiger, *Bad Women*, 11.
13. Barker, *The Tactile Eye*, 132 and 134.
14. Staiger, *Bad Women*, 106.
15. Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 44.
16. Thomas Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema, 1930 – 1934* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 2.
17. *Ibid.*, 352 and 354.
18. *Ibid.*, 2.
19. *Ibid.*, 16-19.
20. Lea Jacobs, *The Wages of Sin: Censorship and the Fallen Woman Film 1928-1942* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 20 and 23-24.
21. *Ibid.*, 41.
22. Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second*, 161.
23. *Ibid.*, 27.
24. *Ibid.*, 170.
25. *Ibid.*, 167 and 176.
26. *Ibid.*, 171.
27. *Ibid.*, 161.
28. *Ibid.*, 176.
29. Richard Maltby, "'Baby Face' or How Joe Breen Made Barbara Stanwyck Atone for Causing the Wall Street Crash," *Screen* 27:2 (1986): 37 and 31.
30. Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood*, 184-85.
31. *Ibid.*, 119.
32. In Jacobs, *The Wages of Sin*, 18.
33. Veronica Pravadelli, "Cinema and the Modern Woman," in *The Wiley-Blackwell History of American Film*, ed. Cynthia Lucia, Roy Grundmann, and Art Simon, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9780470671153.wbhaf033/full>.
34. *Ibid.*, 7.
35. Barker, *The Tactile Eye*, 135.
36. Pravadelli, "Cinema and the Modern Woman," 7.
37. Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second*, 179.
38. Pravadelli, "Cinema and the Modern Woman," 14.
39. Jacobs, *The Wages of Sin*, 70.
40. For a related discussion, see Mulvey's analysis of the "image of woman" as "commodity spectacle" in *Fetishism and Curiosity* (1996, 43).
41. Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (2nd edition) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 91.
42. Maltby, "'Baby Face'," 41 and 43.
43. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2000), 82.
44. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 275.
45. Indeed, Lev Manovich has traced the similarities between early cinema and the loop of new media: see *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001), 315-16.
46. Jenkins, *Convergence*, 275.
47. Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, "The Dark Horse," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 27:5 (2010): 388.
48. Barbara Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 94.

**A PHENOMENOLOGY OF RECIPROCAL SENSATION  
IN THE MOVING BODY EXPERIENCE  
OF MOBILE PHONE FILMS**

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The facility of recording moving images on mobile phones augurs the concomitant possibility of innovative filmmaking that finds a route to new audiences. Rather than providing evidence for a technological determinist view of new media practices, making films using mobile phones appears to grow organically in situations and locations separate from any obvious traditional media influence. This article shows how these phone films function in a formal and discursive sense, wherein the relationship of spectator and filmmaker is materially affected by the mobile phone screen's mediating but connective influence. Whilst recognising that phone films embrace filmmaking across disparate genres and styles, I interrogate how these films use storytelling and the communication of narrative to connect the spectator and filmmaker often in an intimate, one-to-one relationship. This, I will argue, can be conceived as a rhizomatic (in the Deleuzian-Guattarian sense) or a quasi-cellular interaction with screen representation. From this I develop my central argument that the phone film connects, sensorially and in ways specific to its mode of address, the body of the spectator with that of the filmmaker through the apparatus of the mobile phone camera. In this, the ontology of phone film discourse emerges within the privileging of narratives that foreground certain relations, experiences and spectatorial expression.

The notion of what I will refer to as phone films is a relatively straightforward matter to explain: I use this term here as a shorthand description of a broad range of

fiction or non-fiction films made using the in-built camera of a mobile phone as part of their production apparatus. This much is reasonably straightforward, and distinguishes phone films as a discrete category separate from the more widespread and quite different practice of viewing commercially produced films on mobile phones.

Innovative practice in non-professional filmmaking emerges against the backdrop of advances in technological developments in moving image production. That these innovations have been able to happen at all is due to a kind of push/pull development and take-up of new possibilities as technologies are tested, adapted and challenged by their users. More significantly, however, making films using mobile phones contributes to the de-professionalising and democratisation of filmmaking, and shapes new modes of media discourse through the ways in which such films are distributed and shared between filmmakers and their audiences.

The circumstances under which phone films are watched can vary greatly, affecting notions of understanding and levels of intimacy. Viewing may happen on the screen of the same mobile phone that was used to record the original images, on a different mobile screen such as a laptop computer or iPad etc., or digitally projected before a gathered audience at some form of communal screening event such as the Seoul International Extreme-Short Image and Film Festival<sup>1</sup> or Pocket Films Festival.<sup>2</sup>

In the absence of opportunities for exhibition via cinema and television, many phone filmmakers rely on film festivals, or sections within them, for the screening of their films to live audiences in real-world settings. Alternatively, any cursory viewing of online video sharing sites, such as YouTube or Vimeo, reveals that such exhibitive opportunities represent a somewhat compromised cinematic experience whilst reaching a potentially greater number of spectators. Be they distributed online or screened live to one or more viewers, phone films vary widely in nature;

from documentary recordings, fiction drama, to experimental video. Similarly, adherence or otherwise to genre conventions well established in traditional cinema since the early twentieth century, is played with or even subverted in phone films' lack of restriction with regard to being screened in theatrical cinemas or even indoors. It would be surprising if such a form of filmmaking, undertaken largely by amateur or proto-professional filmmakers, did not also refer to pre-existing film form, and so it does. The phone film may share some of the characteristics of cinematic form we are generally familiar with, or may be rooted in some kind of audio-visual experimentation. Moreover, in its novel use of innovative technologies and capitalizing on societal shifts in the ways media are shared, the phone film demands a nascent aesthetic of its own, distinct from traditional cinema viewing. My primary consideration here is not to explain the exact formal characteristics of phone films as vehicles for film texts, but to come to understand the nature of the connection between filmmaker and audience via the mobile phone.

I will avoid making value judgements about whether phone films promote notional qualities of such things as artistic merit or ethical and social value. Whilst potentially important, such a project requires more extensive attention than I can give it here. Therefore, rather than undertaking a detailed reception analysis of selected texts, I intend a more circumscribed, phenomenological analysis of certain aspects of a spectator's experience of phone films at the moment of their screening or exhibition. By this I mean interrogating how spectators engage and interact with live action phone films that evidence some kind of creative ambition on behalf of a filmmaker or makers — to express lived experience and communicate perceptions of physical sensations. The phone film's formal character will not reveal its ontological potential; neither does it substantially assist us in defining how meaning is created. Its way of connecting filmmaker to the spectator, however, is crucially important. If not then constituting what David Rodowick terms a Deleuzian "minor

cinema,"<sup>3</sup> the phone film might more accurately be called a hybrid cinema, implying "a hybrid form, mixing documentary, fiction, personal, and experimental genres, as well as different media,"<sup>4</sup> challenging the limitations of any isolated genre to represent real experience.

When and how the spectator apprehends the phone film image subtly but significantly affects its material instrumentality, with profound consequences for the nature of its reception. When a phone film is viewed on the screen of a mobile phone, this particular circumstance of spectator engagement foregrounds a nascent medium specificity: The filmmaker and spectator are connected to one another through the exchange and sharing of a prototypal filmic experience. Whilst not involved in a physically, co-present form of engagement with screen-based moving images, both of them are nonetheless engaged in a kind of participatory experience: What Laura Marks calls "a dynamic subjectivity between looker and image."<sup>5</sup> The screen image is something they share at a moment of the spectator's choosing and over which they can exercise a measure of control over duration, intimacy and privacy, and not as an event that has been externally constructed, fixed temporally and spatially. In a functional yet transformative sense, therefore, at the moment of spectator engagement with the film, the mobile phone encapsulates more than straightforward telephony and the ability to record moving images: the pocket-sized, hand-held mobile phone camera becomes a cinema projector and distributive medium, bringing together possibilities for casual or creative filmmaking and the exhibitiv potential of shared personal expression. In other words, the mobile phone camera functions, simultaneously, as a device of image capture and narrative dissemination.

What binds filmmaker, film and spectator together is sometimes an attempt to deal with aspects of mobility, both instigated and observed by the mobile phone, but the complexities of that engagement are most often contained within the urge to tell

and share stories through moving images. Thus, the phone film transitions from being a particularised kind of audio-visual media artefact or private record of the filmmaker's personal experience, to become the material component of a potentially novel or innovative discourse. Viewing conditions pertaining at the moment of spectatorial experience (to one or several people) subtly but significantly affect the material instrumentality of the phone film text, with profound consequences for the nature of its reception. Logical inferences can therefore be made about the phone film as a contemporary phenomenon of inter-personal engagement, situated within a particular social and cultural dynamic. Being a portable, intrinsically mobile moving image media, phone films are viewed outside in shared public spaces, or in temporarily personalised, individual areas of public/private space. Manifestly, phone films are mediated through the mobile phone as camera and film distribution apparatus. As part of a philosophical project, however, it is more useful to interrogate the phone film's particular persuasiveness as a new mode of creative image making and sharing between spectators and filmmakers that use representational aspects of bodily movement in its expression.

There was an almost predictable sense of endism prevalent during the late 1980s and early 1990s during the transition from analogue to digital filmmaking, perhaps stoked by adherents to Francis Fukuyama's notion of the pre-millennial (and premature) "end of history."<sup>6</sup> Anxieties emerged over the ability of narrative discourse to continue telling tales in quite the same way and to quite the same effect post, what could be termed, the digital break. On-going questions of narrative's fitness for purpose (linked to political considerations) and powers of persuasion (and its effectiveness within a literate society) nag vaguely as disruptive change attacks from all sides, including the virtual. Yet narrative continues, flourishes, assumes new forms and modes of address, and is mediated by the instrumentality of the media that deliver it to our senses.

Phone films link the filmmaker and spectator in an overtly direct relationship of individualised communication. They foreground a cellular, one-to-one interaction, in a quasi-biological or, as Gilles Deleuze reconceptualises it whilst building on the physiologically sensitive philosophy of Henri Bergson, a rhizomatic sense. The classical Deleuzeian notion of conceptualising the rhizome is of it “having no beginning or end, always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance.”<sup>7</sup> Phone films are one such example of an alliance of filmmaker with spectator, coming together to experience creative moving images and perhaps, or inevitably, to share experiences of sense-based perceptions. This gets us a little closer to the central thrust of my argument; that phone films facilitate the physical, body-centred, cellular nature of the spectator’s engagement with phone film texts and their makers.

The notion of the rhizome is useful in undertaking a narratology of phone films currently being made and shared within post-digital society, because it foregrounds the cell-to-cell relationships of shared storytelling that many filmmakers and spectators subscribe to. The emergence of such a new mode of media discourse creates opportunities for filmmaker/audience engagement with a particularised kind of meaning creation; holding up the possibility of sharing an empathic or deeper understanding of filmic narrative. I introduce the notion of narrative in the present context to indicate how the narratives carried by phone films enable stories to be told and shared between filmmaker and spectator. Told via the individuated, ergonomically pleasing hand-held mobile phone, these stories speak primarily of personal, sensory experience. Whether fictional dramas, music videos, documentary accounts of real events, or some other hybrid, faction blend of the real and the imagined, phone films often default to someone telling stories based in personal experience. As I will indicate later, such films repeatedly reference the body and sensory perception, evoking the sense of what objects feel like as we look at them, as

objects and as images. Marks uses the term “haptic visuality”<sup>8</sup> to describe this phenomena, suggesting an amalgam of tactile sensation, our learned perceptions of touching the surfaces of objects, and our inner-felt bodily apprehension of things, including moving images. Whilst Marks cautions us that “the haptic image forces the viewer to contemplate the image itself instead of being pulled into narrative.”<sup>9</sup> I feel it is important to note how narratives of tactility are discursively shared within phone films.

In presenting a rhizomatic philosophy of phone film narratives, I hope to draw out a Deleuzian-Guattarian smooth space of thought, over which to map some characteristics that might hint at an emergent medium specificity. Being such a recent media phenomenon, a single overarching aesthetic is perhaps yet to emerge, yet the ways in which phone films express narratives that often implicate the human body as a central concern are striking. In this respect, taking narrative as a privileged framework for analysis does not irrevocably curtail its scope or applicability within the present phenomenological investigation.

I take Brian Massumi at his word when he suggests to readers of *A Thousand Plateaus*, “the reader is invited to lift a dynamism out of the book entirely, and incarnate it in a foreign medium.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, consideration of the medium - a book or a film for example — does not conclusively negate how rhizomatic thinking is brought to bear in an analysis of digital film narratology. Rather, the rhizome welcomes the foreign medium, inviting trans-mediality. Therefore, it is possible to talk of rhizomatic thinking as contributing or influencing what we might eventually understand as a medium specificity of the phone film. New possibilities for narrative filmmaking, refined if not created post the digital break, indicates that Deleuze and Guattari were, in effect, future-proofing their concept of the rhizome whilst formulating it during the 1980s. This was at a time when technologically advanced companies, societies and individuals across the world were opening up

new possibilities in the ways people told audio-visual stories to one another via digital devices.<sup>11</sup>

The binomial impulse from the Russian Formalists onward has been to present oppositional pairings such as *fabula* and *sjuzhet*, story and plot, thematic and modal as necessary components of a study of narratology. Such binary thinking about narrative construction becomes ineffectual in a post-digital context in which phone films function and in which multi-valent meanings adhere to a core discursive framework. Without discounting the contribution the semiotic can make to our understanding of film narrative in general, an analytical approach avoiding structuralism, linguistic or semiotic, is required; especially so when the narrative is located in non-literary media. Thus, the rhizomatic toolbox comes to our aid.

Massumi notes that the aim at La Borde, the experimental psychiatric clinic where Guattari practiced as a psychoanalyst from the mid-1950s until his death in 1992, “was to abolish the hierarchy between doctor and patient in favour of an interactive group dynamic that would bring the experiences of both to full expression in such a way as to produce a collective critique of the power relations in society as a whole.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, the genesis of a philosophical analysis of the porous boundaries around and within writer and reader, sender and receiver, filmmaker and audience was even then being pre-vised through its practical application in a human setting. The specific mode of narrative storytelling in phone filmmaking follows this same logic of a non-hierarchical relationship between filmmaker and film spectator. Neither one rather than the other owns the narrative because it does not constitute a commodity to be easily sold, bartered or exchanged. In essence, it is a subversive form of media production.

The narrative discourse at the heart of the cell-to-cell relationship described by cell cinema derives its communicative power from the alternating current of its reciprocal dynamic. It is imbued with a democratising impulse through its function

of sharing. The domestic home viewer of a DVD film is still only permitted to receive information from the director or filmmaker. Even in such a case, the viewer is definitively placed in the position of a receiver of pre-ordained ontological truth from an extraneous authorial entity.

So, a specifically rhizomatic (or rhizomatically specific) form of analytic reason finds validity. The cellular nature of the discursive engagement within the phone film exchange reflects the rhizomatic absence of a position of origin. Phone film narratives are continually negotiated and re-negotiated at points across their discursive formation. Narrative meaning moves in and out of focus as the story is told, retold and shared. Therefore, a non-hierarchical engagement with narrative is one characteristic of phone films, where stories are accessed from many points, both in the real world and virtually. The phone filmmaker becomes part of the audience who, individually or severally, collaborates in the process of making, and so continues the process of the film's becoming. Identity is fixed for neither filmmaker nor audience. The phone film, as distinct from its pre-digital antecedent, incorporates the possibility of never reaching a state of finality or completeness. Such a creative process, as the imaginative application of phone/camera technology allows, is a shifting, indefinite phenomenon of representation and expression of the local and familiar, to the distanced and definitively unfamiliar Other.

The possibility of, or even tendency for, a given phone film's narrative having a non-linear structure reflects a digital break with the indexical. Likewise, the narrative is no longer shackled to a linear, Aristotelian progression. Instead it carries with it a latent possibility of a rhizomatic dramaturgy, characterised by diverse meanings and poetic representations entering and exiting through porous boundaries. Phone film discourse becomes the leaky system of conduits through which meaning can travel and leach out to join with receptive minds.

Accepting that phone films can be considered to fall into the rather ill-defined category of new media, having a digital or computer-mediated origin, certain models announce themselves as more or less capable of narratological analysis. Sean Cubitt suggests that “narrative is only one among several modes of organisation characteristic of new media (and) that this has an impact on certain universalist claims for narrative analysis.”<sup>13</sup> Whilst Cubitt correctly recognises the limitations in undifferentiated claims for narrative analysis, noting that it “restricts itself to a more or less strictly chronological model of temporal experience,”<sup>14</sup> his critique omits a consideration of phone film’s typically porous temporal boundaries, requiring a re-thinking of its relationship with narrative, linear or otherwise. Therefore, an inherent irrationality emerges in considering phone film narratives only as experiential phenomena locked into a fixed temporal order. Phone films, and the narratives they carry, are accessible from multifarious points of temporal entry, with narrative meaning created and exiting in similar ways.

As with narrative literature, where the process of narrative meaning construction is not completed until the text is read and understanding exists in the reader, so the spectator of a narrative phone film completes the hermeneutic circuit once the film has been viewed. When such spectatorship is subsequently shared with others in temporally and spatially separate locations, the cell cinema dynamic creates a smooth space of connected points that extend the possibilities for a collaborative construction of narrative meaning or, to again invoke Deleuzian phraseology, becoming meaning. Following this logic, the phone film’s process of immanent meaning creation is consummately rhizomatic.

More acutely than might have been the case prior to the digital turn, the becoming-narrative within the phone film can potential express shifting meanings to many audiences or spectators in temporally and spatially separate locations. Therefore, a question to ask about narrative within phone films is, therefore, not the

how of its technological existence, but the why of its philosophical truth. With the possibility of rhizomatic entering and exiting of multifarious meaning comes the possibility of fragmented, individualised and perhaps even relativized, notions of truth. While such truths that can be found in phone films may interact reflexively with a number of genre conventions, phone films do not constitute a discrete genre. Disparate narrative concerns and a typical embracing of heightened realism mitigate an unmediated adherence to genre conventions. In acknowledging his use of Leo Tolstoy's concept of infectiousness, Daniel Shaw notes that, "unlike everyday events, occurrences in narrative films are selectively arranged to 'infect' us with the requisite emotions; the conventions of the genre codify the most effective arrangements."<sup>15</sup> In their rhizomatic infectiousness, phone films extend and go beyond the boundaries of genre whilst retaining traces of its organising structure.

What often results, therefore, is creative expression through the communicating of an apprehension (and not final comprehension) of the phone film narrative as itself a creative act. There is pleasure to be had in the mere recognition of creativity as a perceived end in itself. Since this kind of creative discourse is not an equation to be calculated and balanced, we can only philosophically question the characteristically creative disruption that also lies at its heart. The becoming-narrative of cell cinema is concomitant on accommodating, even diffusing, otherness: The filmmaker becoming the spectator and the spectator becoming central within the process of narrative meaning construction.

Phone films are not broadcast to many recipients and should not be thought of as a mode of mass media engagement. Instead, they embody the potential for a particularly direct form of cell-to-cell narrowcasting, of a bi-directional transmission of narrative meaning. Phone films contain the potential to connect individuals, transnationally, within the oft-quoted global digital village, wherein their rhizomatic tendency invites narratives to morph and move freely across national and cultural

barriers. To this extent at least, the post-digital does not prescriptively delineate inclusion and exclusion of narrative possibilities within determinate boundaries. Thus, the phone film is inherently unable to pull up the drawbridge between the authorial voice and the spectator as *Other*.

The ontological truth of the spectator's engagement with phone films in their generality, however, rests on shifting foundations. The nature of a phone film's visual characteristics, and its linkage to technological developments of mobile phone equipment, mean that it expresses and reflects both contemporary visual culture and the symbolic use of domesticated apparatus. The phone film privileges the particularities of its technological form, foregrounding certain relations, experiences and spectatorial effects over, say, the deconstruction of complex meaning within its various mediations. Whilst phone films involve an aesthetic that is, of course, not homogenized or uniform across all films, and the spectatorial experience is not similar in every case, the spectator often pre-visualises the nature of their engagement with technological devices for familiar purposes. The ubiquity and familiarity users have with their personal mobile phones contributes to the ease with which they, ergonomically and psychologically, interact with the new possibilities they present. In some, perhaps indeterminable way, they contribute to feelings of identification for, and empathy with, the moving images the screen presents.

The perception of physical, bodily-sensed experience may lie at its metaphorical heart yet, as existential phenomena, the event of watching films (made) on the screen of a mobile phone speaks of a different kind of cinematic experience to that of traditional cinema, television or even computer screen. A recurring aesthetic characteristic of phone films involves the hand-held camera in describing the movement of the filmmaker whilst recording the image. It is an aesthetic of forward progression, always in passage, following a line of flight but always one that

communicates the sensation of physical experience, represented in moving images at the moment of image capture.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes of the blind man's walking stick, describing his ambit of personal (bodily) space being extended into what he calls "an area of sensitivity"<sup>16</sup> whose reach expands his immediate sensory universe. More than a metaphor, Merleau-Ponty likens this phenomenon to "providing a parallel to sight"<sup>17</sup> thus locating it firmly in the realm of the senses. The notion of extending bodily space serves as an important analogy of how a camera phone becomes an extension of the body.

Writing about the locus around which the relationship of the body, hand, eye and screen comes together, Vivian Sobchack admits to having "a carnal interest and investment in being both 'here' and 'there', in being able both to sense and to be sensible, to be both the subject and the object of desire" where "objectivity and subjectivity lose their presumed clarity."<sup>18</sup> The physicality of this empathy finds its source in identification with the body of the Other as much as with its screen representation. What Sobchack calls "mimetic sympathy"<sup>19</sup> I believe may even prefigure a sensual enhancement of how we experience films. Expanding upon sense perceptions of real events and objects in the world, the augmented tactility of many phone films focusses the filmmaker and spectator's personal experience of the image as being effectively analogous to one-another. In this, the phone film functions as a particularly democratic mode of media discourse. Similarly, the objectified apparatus of the hand-held mobile phone acts in parallel with the senses, connecting spectator to filmmaker not merely through the aural and visual senses, but through the sensation of touch. During the transformative process of film production; from the capture of real events to the reception of representational moving images of the human body by the spectator, the phone/camera transitions from being a particularised kind of audio-visual apparatus for recording a

filmmaker's personal experience, to become a material artefact for potentially innovative discourse.

Whilst a film is being shot, the mobile phone screen functions as a kind of bodily-connected, personal exhibitiv device, standing in for the eyes of the filmmaker. Layering the potential for signification onto its more prosaic uses as a mobile telephone and device for exchanging text messages, it must be remembered that the mobile phone is also a screen-based apparatus for exchanging audio-visual meaning. In this way, the screen becomes a proxy for both the camera and projector of the cinema theatre, embodied in the filmmaker. The cerebral sensations the spectator feels watching the film are not merely augmented by an inferred filmmaker, but are instigated by the actual sense of touch, of hand on screen, controlling viewing conditions and even where and when viewing takes place.

Signifying itself the pleasurable ownership of a desirable object, the phone/camera exemplifies a personalized object of empathic participation in physical experience, encouraging in the spectator a sense of capture and ownership of the image and all it contains.

Whilst perhaps possessing no prior knowledge of the narrative content of a given phone film, an individual phone film spectator can nonetheless exercise a level of control over the circumstances of their spectatorship and how they understand the narrative. They can be an active agent, influencing such factors as temporal and spatial viewing conditions, duration of the screening, aspects of picture and sound quality, and even frame size as they move their hand-held phone closer or further away. The body's actions on these factors influences how film narrative is received and cognitive meaning created. Detailed narrative content is typically suppressed at the expense of personal control, which in turn supplies its own narrative. It typically becomes an engagement with a location-unspecific social process in addition to a reception of artistic expression. Simultaneously, it shares the

formal tracery of cinematic form, whilst foregrounding auxiliary characteristics that signal a latent medium specificity.

Phone films have the potential to simultaneously quote the realist cinema of the past, and to re-situate it within a different cultural idiom or digital expression of narrative discourse. The films themselves may share a naïve realist aesthetic with commercially available cinema, but the digital technologies by which they are apprehended and experienced mitigate the creation of meaning in the same way. The immediacy of inter-personal discourse within the phone film renders the more impersonal relating of a universalised narrative by an external creator superfluous. It is as if this kind of digital media has, not an anti-narrative tendency, but effects a re-coding of cinematic realism.

Phone films thereby function both as a mode of cinematic address, involving the projection of the image to audiences in cinematic spaces such as film festivals, and as a circumscribed yet individualised moving image spectacle when viewed on mobile phones. As Nicholas Rombes puts it, "Hand-held screens have liberated not only the spectator from the theatre, but the screen as well."<sup>20</sup> Watching phone films on a mobile phone screen carries with it the promise of an enhanced encounter with the sensual, divorced from the physical distancing of theatrical projection. The screen of the taking camera phone, being in a sense inseparable from that of the viewing camera phone recreates (or procreates in a Benjamin-like reproducibility) the moving images it gathers.

In a somewhat physiological conception of the body's function in human perception, Henri Bergson looks inside himself (as we all must) to offer the following: "The truth is that my nervous system, interposed between the objects which affect my body and those which I can influence, is a mere conductor, transmitting, sending back, or inhibiting movement."<sup>21</sup>

So, for Bergson, perception cannot be sited within the body's nervous system. It is affected by, but cannot itself affect, objects in the world outside the body. Therefore, the true characteristic of perception lies elsewhere, in some other body-centred process or, as Bergson says, "while the detail of perception is moulded exactly upon that of the nerves termed sensory, perception as a whole has its true and final explanation in the tendency of the body to movement."<sup>22</sup> The process we then move through, which might therefore constitute a kind of coming to understand the world through its images, follows a trajectory from peripheral to body-centred experience. As Bergson goes on to explain, "There is, first of all, the aggregate of images; and then, in this aggregate, there are 'centres of action,' from which the interesting images appear to be reflected: thus perceptions are born and actions made ready."<sup>23</sup> Thus, perception external to the body stimulates affective states within the body, such as the sensation of pleasure at seeing an image. Yet this sensation can only exist as an affective state in our own body or, as Bergson puts it, "we cannot annihilate our body without destroying our sensations."<sup>24</sup> Without recognising the primacy of our own bodies in perceiving images, we cannot fully appreciate sensation as a personal experience. Therefore, our sensation of film images would merely be theorised rather than lived, describing the intellectual concept and not the experience. Put another way, in the isolation of individual perception we are only able to perceive images that invite a vicarious empathy with sensations experienced by the bodies of others.

Moreover, Bergson reminds us that remembered sensation can often be more powerful than immediate experience, and that the more we dwell on the memory of a sensation, the closer we feel we come to, not a representation of sensation, but to a re-playing of that experience in reality. However, Bergson also cautions us against making hasty conclusions, saying that "because the memory of a sensation prolongs itself into that very sensation, the memory was a nascent sensation."<sup>25</sup> Repeated

experience of watching a variety of films affirms our general perception of how screen images affect us sensually. Sensation comes to be regarded as more intense through bodily habit as well as memory. Repeated experience of watching films reinforces the notion in us that at times, as Bergson puts it, "it is impossible for me to say whether what I feel is a slight sensation which I experience or a slight sensation which I imagine."<sup>26</sup> We should not wonder then that questions persist over film's potential for illusion. "This is natural," Bergson continues, "because the memory-image is already partly sensation."<sup>27</sup> As with traditional cinema, the image on the mobile phone's screen is clearly there, conjuring up recollections of associated memory-images. It refers to memory of the body's sensation of remembered experience and, through that, perception of filmic events unfolding on the screen.

In a more focussed consideration of phenomenological experience, Merleau-Ponty brings us securely back to show how the physical act of seeing is contingent on objective thought about the world. He stresses that to see is "a certain manner of approaching the object, the 'gaze' in short, which is as indubitable as my own thought, as directly known by me."<sup>28</sup> With still more relevance for our perceptions of the moving image he goes on to say, "My visual body is certainly an object as far as its parts far removed from my head are concerned, but as we come nearer to the eyes, it becomes divorced from objects."<sup>29</sup> So we can infer from this that the converse will be true; that the closer the screen is to the eyes, the more the peripheral vision is filled with the moving image which also becomes divorced from external objects outside our body. Thus, the phone filmmaker, through the hand-held phone screen, establishes a channel of reference more directly aligned with that of the spectator.

Thus the permanence of one's own body, if only the classical psychology had analysed it, might have led to the body no longer conceived as an object of the

world, but as our means of communication with it, to the world no longer conceived of as a collection of determinate objects, but as the horizon latent in all our experience and itself ever-present and anterior to every determining thought.<sup>30</sup>

The intimate physical connection of the body with the mobile phone of the phone filmmaker, and the similar linkage of the cell cinema spectator with the moving image on the mobile phone screen, connects perceptually the filmmaker with spectator. By way of example, the phone film *COLORS, We The People*<sup>31</sup> by Pascal Laurent foregoes a realistic representation of time to concentrate the spectator's gaze on the movement of bodies through urban space. Similarly, in *Fear Thy Not*,<sup>32</sup> Sophie Sherman takes the spectator with her on a walk along a path beside a canal, as she continually repeats an incantatory, biblical-sounding phrase, all the while examining her free hand (her hidden one presumably holds the camera phone) prominently in the frame. The body is not merely implicated but featured in such films. A general audience observation of other visual digital genres, such as games, would reveal them as foregrounding a decorative appearance. Whilst important to consider for their socio-cultural impact, they are different rather than lesser forms of art and culture, playing up form, style, surface, artifice, and spectacle and, most importantly in the present context, of communicating a primarily ocular-centric visual sensation.

In conclusion, is it possible to mount a positive case for such an aesthetic? Phone films might indeed be considered decorative and superficial rather than media for the sagacious communication of complex meaning, but does that necessarily make them a lesser form of artistic expression and moving image culture? Could the phone film's technological reproducibility even suggest the heralding of a new poetics of contemporary media?

The digital reproducibility of identical copies of a virtual original, distinguishable only at the moment of their spectatorship as live event, certainly

asks new questions of filmmakers and audiences. This is not simply about what constitutes real experience, but what is felt and what is perceived as personal or shared sensation. Whilst continuing to avoid making crude value judgements about phone films as statements of artistic intent, I contend that the particular conditions of phone film's spectatorship indeed points toward the possibility of a new poetics of filmic expression, in which perceived bodily sensations are not merely represented on the surface of the mobile phone's screen, but embodied within the discourse the images initiate.

Much of phone film's power to persuade as an emerging phenomenon within the broader contemporary cultural discourse resides in the fact that it is not yet completely incorporated into powerful institutional structures of both a commercial and public culture nature. Within the structure of their mode of address, phone films function as potentially anti-establishment, even subversive media. Their speed and cheapness of production and distribution means that phone films and filmmakers are reflexive to contemporary events in a way that professionalised cinema and TV is not. This reflexivity can often be in tension with a potentially ephemeral downplaying of how subject matter is treated, so that the flow of moving images and sounds across the hand-held mobile phone lends their screens an appearance of elasticity, variability and transience. Images can arrive, occupy a portion of the spectator's sensory field with sound and vision, and then leave. In this way mobile phone screens designate circuits of transient production and exhibition as much as they constitute display formats. Even before we consider their choice of formal subject matter, viewing conditions are often transient and fleeting, broken into fragmented periods of inattentive or distracted watching, leaving only a residue of remembered sensations.

Phone films represent a link between temporally and spatially dispersed spectatorial environments and the mobile bodies of those engaging with the images

they contain, and can be seen as an informal network built to move film texts around. Drawing on the Deleuzian-Guattarian concept of the rhizome, the inter-cellular nature of phone film discourse is revealed through filmic sharing of narrative experience. Although predominantly an individuated form of engagement with moving images, viewing circumstances can facilitate isolated (or isolating) individuality or spark practices of congregation in pairs or more to share a small and intimate screen. Thus, the nature of audience engagement and sensation of spectacle are qualitatively affected in unanticipated ways. As with other moving image media, such as watching films on SmartPads and laptop computers, but especially so with inconsistently regulated or non-institutionalised phone film production, a consistent or standardised form of discursive environment has thus far proven impossible to design. And this becomes one of the current characteristics of engagement with phone films: Outside of a disconnected collection of film festivals and online film sharing sites, phone films find their way to audiences of individuals and groups of spectators in almost random, indeterminate ways, affecting the levels of intimacy their cell-to-cell (or cell-to-cells) connections enable.

It has been my intention to interrogate specific notions of how the human body is manifest and re-presented in phone film engagement. This, I believe, describes an enhanced encounter with the sensory and sensual, challenging the physical distancing of traditional, theatrical cinema projection. I hope to have shown that phone films implicate the mobile phone and the human gaze in forging a link between people; a bridge to the *Other* inferred by a bodily connection through vision, appealing to an immediate if mediated sensory experience. Merleau-Ponty locates such encounters firmly within phenomenological experience. Expanding this line of thought reveals the act of seeing the body's screened representation as contingent on objective thought about the body's movement within the world and between people, connecting

through vision, appealing to an immediate if mediated sensory experience. As Merleau-Ponty says, “to look at the object is to plunge oneself into it.”<sup>33</sup> To look into the image is likewise to enter into it. To empathise with the subject represents a move closer perceptually to their body, psychologically aligned with their point of view and to become, if not a mirror, then more like them.

## NOTES

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30. *Ibid.*

31. *COLORS, We the People*, dir. Pascal Laurent (2010), mobile phone, [http://www.reelport.com/index.php?id=300&L=no'%2F\\*\\*%2FXoR%2F\\*\\*%2F'8'=8&movie\\_id=36106&last\\_page=start](http://www.reelport.com/index.php?id=300&L=no'%2F**%2FXoR%2F**%2F'8'=8&movie_id=36106&last_page=start).
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**CINEMA OF THE BODY:  
THE POLITICS OF PERFORMATIVITY  
IN LARS VON TRIER'S *DOGVILLE*  
AND YORGOS LANTHIMO'S *DOGTOOTH***

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Both in Hollywood and European cinema there has been a growing tendency to simplify narrative and characters in favour of a more visual dramaturgy, rather than a text-bound one which focuses on a cause and effect narrative structure. In Hollywood this practice is evidenced in high concept, e.g., *Top Gun* (1986) and blockbuster films, e.g., *Avatar* (2009), and serves strictly commercial purposes. Narrative simplification aims at prioritising style over story, creating moments of visual excess which can be appropriated for marketing and advertising reasons. According to Justin Wyatt high concept films are the product of the synergy of the industry, resulting in objects which appropriate televisual aesthetics, as well as music video tropes. The narrative is superficial and gives way to flashy images which can be reproduced in high tech trailers, TV commercials, music videos and publicity posters.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, the minimisation of text-bound dramaturgy in contemporary European Cinema proposes a more austere type of filmmaking. Certain contemporary European filmmakers, such as Lars von Trier, Béla Tarr, Yorgos Lanthimos and many others show preference for a fragmented narrative structure which reduces the narrative to the bodies of the actors. This aesthetic places emphasis on the performance of the actors as a formal and thematic element, demonstrating a preference for a paratactic style, which does not aim at unifying all

the episodes, but opens the narrative to moments that go beyond dramaturgical consistency.

The differences with the Hollywood paradigm mentioned earlier are more than obvious, since Hollywood high concept films aim at minimising ambiguity; conversely the reduction of the narrative to moments of performative excess, which permeates the works of contemporary European filmmakers, aims at maximising ambiguity and assigning a more productive participation to the audience, a gesture which I understand to be political. I shall return to this argument later in my detailed discussion of *Dogville* (1998) and *Dogtooth* (*Kynodontas*, 2009). Before turning my attention to the specific films, it is important to provide a theoretical framework which can elucidate this performative turn.

Normally, the term performance and performativity describes the passage from text-bound theatre to performance art. However, performativity is a term which has been acknowledged and discussed by film scholars too. In particular, Gilles Deleuze's distinction between "the cinema of action" and "the cinema of the body" has been quite influential in contemporary discussions of film performance. Deleuze discusses the "cinema of the body" as a type of cinema which privileges gestures, postures and attitudes over concrete character and plot development. Deleuze's key contention is that "the cinema of the body" is performative, that is, it cannot be simply understood as the reproduction of a script. Performativity replaces narrative causality.<sup>2</sup>

Within this framework offered by Deleuze, one can define performativity in the cinema as the camera's interaction with the actors' performances in ways that the communication of content is not prioritised. The camera interacts with the performing body in space for reasons that exceed narrative coherence. In many respects, performativity refers to a process in which the act of showing an action is privileged over the action itself, and it is not accidental that Deleuze's definition of

the “cinema of the body” centres on Bertolt Brecht’s concept of *gestus* and the film practice of John Cassavetes. Brecht’s concept of *gestus* refers to a physical acting style which opposes the clichéd dramatic one according to which the actor “becomes” the character he/she embodies. For Brecht, a gestic acting minimises psychological traits and offers a simplification of character through an exposition of attitudes and postures which allow the audience to place emphasis on the social characteristics of the individual instead of the psychological ones. According to Brecht, a gestic acting aims at showing an action, that is quoting it instead of imitating it, with the view to exposing characters as the products of forces and laws that cannot be understood in the phenomenology of human relations.<sup>3</sup> Cassavetes, on the other hand, approaches the filmmaking process not as the narration of a story which strictly adheres to a pre-existing script, but as the exploration of questions, tensions and ideas that emerge throughout the filmmaking process.<sup>4</sup>

Deleuze refers to Brecht and Cassavetes so as to clarify the ways that ‘the cinema of the body’ describes a filmmaking process according to which the mimetic mirroring of identity is replaced by performative moments that fragment the body and destabilise the narrative. It is worthwhile quoting a passage from Deleuze’s argument:

It is Brecht who created the notion of *gest*, making it the essence of theatre, irreducible to the plot or the “subject”: for him, the *gest* should be social, although he recognizes that there are other kinds of *gest*. What we call *gest* in general is the link or knot of attitudes between themselves, their co-ordination with each other, in so far as they do not depend on a previous story, a pre-existing plot or an action-image. On the contrary, the *gest* is the development of attitudes themselves, and, as such, carries out a direct theatricalization of

bodies, often very discreet, because it takes place independently of any role. The greatness of Cassavetes' work is to have undone the story, plot, or action, but also space, in order to get to attitudes as to categories which put time into the body, as well as thought into life. When Cassavetes says that characters must not come from a story or plot, but that the story should be secreted by the characters, he sums up the requirement of the cinema of bodies: the character is reduced to his own bodily attitudes, and what ought to result is the gest, that is, a "spectacle," a theatricalization or dramatization which is valid for all plots. *Faces* is constructed on the attitudes of the bodies presented as faces going as far as the grimace, expressing waiting, fatigue, vertigo and depression.<sup>5</sup>

Deleuze's definition of "the cinema of the body" synopsis an interest in a film language which is not concerned with the mere duplication of a story. It is rather a film practice which is keen on registering performances, unforeseen elements and materials not firmly controlled by the narrative and the director. The effect is that the entire process generates variations from the script that transcend distinctions between filmic and meta-filmic reality, staged and real events. In this context, "the cinema of the body" refers to a self-reflexive filmmaking process which valorizes the process over the finished product. Jonathan Rosenbaum describes it as a "cinema of doubt,"<sup>6</sup> which is more interested in posing questions rather than offering answers. The filmmaker and the performers discover and explore new paths throughout the filmmaking process, while the audience is given time to think and reflect on the portrayed actions instead of passively following the storyline.

**DOGVILLE:****THE POLITICS OF PERFORMATIVITY**

A glaring example of a film which firmly belongs to the category of the “cinema of the body” is Lars von Trier’s *Dogville*. The film’s austere form and its ascetic aesthetics, as well as the references to the theatre practice of Bertolt Brecht give rise to a film style which does away with the tropes of narrative cinema, such as detailed plot, narrative causality and psychological character portrayal. *Dogville* employs a minimalist aesthetic with respect to the set and was shot in a hangar in Trollhättan, a Swedish town. The hangar is used so as to resemble a theatre space where chalk marks are used to define scenography, while the actors act realistically in a set which is far from being realistic.

What needs to be pointed out is that this austere setting combined with the film’s extensive use of voice-over narration, which replaces plot, have their effect on the representation of the individual. Characters are reported by the voice-over making them look like textual constructs. Von Trier does away with psychological portrayal, an effect that is strengthened by the set, whose minimalist scenery gives the spectator the chance to detect the interactions between individuals. Equally important is to emphasise that this is also reinforced by von Trier’s shooting style which allows the actors to work in a more physical way rather than in a dramatic realist one. A cautious analysis of his camera-work since *Breaking the Waves* (1996) can illustrate this point more clearly. The release of that film coincides with von Trier’s preference for a less polished filmmaking style and a less stylised acting which incorporates filmic and extra-filmic responses. The actors were not aware whether they were on frame or not (as Dziga Vertov would say they were shot “unawares”<sup>7</sup>) and this gave them freedom since they did not have to follow a specific plan. This shooting style reassesses the role of the script. The script is the

starting point for the exploration of gestures, attitudes and materials not necessarily scripted.

As such, the camera is not solely busy capturing material, but is also concerned with provoking reactions and gestures, which blur the boundaries between the diegetic and the extra-diegetic identity of the actors. This acting style produces an effect of interruption and not a seamless reproduction of unified characterization. Von Trier offers the actors the possibility to produce more than what lies in the script, something which is very much related to a whole shift from acting to performance. In an interview he gave me, I asked von Trier whether this *modus operandi* is deliberately interested in making the actors act out of character. Von Trier responded:

I am very interested in this. I am interested in capturing the actors when they are in and out of character. The borderline between the private individual and the character is very intriguing. Especially, when it overlaps and you cannot tell whether a reaction can be attributed to the actor or the character. That is where I try to go very often.<sup>8</sup>

The camera becomes performative and adds a sense of mobility that is not concerned solely with the simulation of actions; it is rather interested in provoking responses, attitudes and gestures that function as a meta-critique of the portrayed actions. This is a practice that can be identified in the films of Cassavetes — Deleuze's major example of a director whose films belong to the category of "the cinema of the body."<sup>9</sup>

The aforementioned comments on a film practice which aims at provoking reactions rather than simply capturing narrative material are crucial to our understanding of von Trier's use of the camera as a performative tool that

foregrounds the performance of the actors and highlights the process of creating a character by provoking uncomfortable feelings to the actor while she/he is in the process of impersonating a character. This clarification provides the impetus to reveal *Dogville's* politics of performativity and comprehend the film's focus on gestural and performative contradictions. I do not want to get bogged down into issues of content, but let me briefly summarise the film's story. *Dogville* tells the story of Grace (Nicole Kidman) a young fugitive who finds refuge in a small town in the Rocky Mountains. When Tom (Paul Bettany), a young self-appointed intellectual, meets Grace chased by a bunch of gangsters, he protects her and decides to accommodate her in Dogville. To do so, however, he has to gain permission from the people. Grace will be their chance to prove that they are committed to community values. The people accommodate her and Grace for her part, and at Tom's suggestion, volunteers to help the citizens of Dogville with any errands that need to be done. Initially, nobody accepts her services, but eventually people consent to let her do things "that they do not really need," but can make their lives better.

The people decide that Grace is entitled to stay, but when they realise that there is a large amount of money offered to anyone knowing of her whereabouts, they start abusing her in various ways. Grace is coerced to work longer hours, to accept a pay cut and she eventually becomes the victim of sexual assault on the part of the male population. In the last chapter, the citizens of Dogville decide to deliver her back to the gangsters. The "big man" (James Caan) turns out to be her father and after a brief conversation between them, we learn that the two of them had disagreed about his brutal methods. The reason that Grace left him was because of her willingness to prove that human beings are essentially 'good'. Now that her experiment has failed her father offers her the possibility of sharing his power with

her. Initially, Grace hesitates but eventually she accepts his offer and orders the gangsters to burn the town and execute its citizens.

The film has provoked various critical readings, but there have not been any discussions concerning the ways that the minimalist setting and von Trier's shooting style thematise the very theme of performativity, making the audience rethink any essentialist preconceptions of identity. I have chosen to discuss two scenes from the film which may clarify this. In the first one, which takes place in chapter eight, Grace publicly discloses the abuses she has suffered from the citizens of Dogville. Humiliated by her speech, Dogville's residents ask Tom to side either with them or with Grace. Frustrated by their response, Tom returns to Grace's house. Initially, we get to see both characters lying in bed assuming that they share an affectionate moment. When Tom explains to Grace that he has been asked to choose between her and Dogville, the camera alternates between the left and the right angle of the frame. This alternation is followed by Tom's radical change of *Haltung* (the German word for attitude and posture that Brecht employs repeatedly to show how the body's postures respond to social stimuli). Tom's soothed *Haltung* is replaced by a posture of aggression and he starts making sexual advances towards Grace. He imposes himself aggressively on top of Grace and the camera zooms out to capture the material via a high-angle shot. The camera shows the characters from a great distance and eventually zooms in bit by bit. This antithesis between distance and proximity highlights Tom's exaggerated *Haltung* and divides the character with the purpose of externalising his actions and revealing their social significance.

Tom's change of *Haltung* cannot be understood in terms of psychology. The scene produces a corporeal energy that can be observed in the character's postural behaviour and in the sudden camera movement that decreases the magnification of the image and then zooms in so as to adopt an analytical stance towards the material. Here, von Trier's representation of the body follows the Brechtian practice,

according to which the body's *Haltung* and *gestus* can reveal a set of "interpersonal" and social relations that help the audience identify the social laws motivating an individual's actions. The social law that regulates Tom's relation to Grace's body is the law of exchange-value. Tom implies that by rejecting everyone else, he acquires the right to enjoy her body. He is siding with Grace hence his attempted rape becomes a reward for his loyalty to her. However, at the level of actions, he is siding with the community by oppressing Grace, and his attempt to force himself on her ratifies this. The contrast between image and communicated speech puts this forward very strongly. Tom defends his lust for Grace, arguing that it is the ideals they share that made him choose her, whereas he is portrayed as unable to suppress his carnal passion.

In effect, a natural instinct, namely sexual desire is estranged, and calls attention to the connection between sexuality and power. Von Trier does not treat sexuality as natural, but as part of a relationship founded upon exchange value, which is heightened by Tom's use of language that alludes to an economic terminology.<sup>10</sup> It is this performative contradiction that is stressed by the camera, which shows an action and simultaneously analyses it so as to question it. This particular scene showcases how the camera's interaction with the body of the actor de-individuates an action and embeds it in a social context. At this point, the performative contradiction, or the false relationship between the character's pronouncements and his social practice is rendered visible by von Trier. Tom, the embodiment of a liberal attitude of 'openness and acceptance' adheres to Dogville's mental outlook and proceeds to impose his sexual desires on Grace following the capitalist law of making profit through exchangeability that he introduced to the town. When Grace refutes his sexual advances, Tom aligns himself plainly with Dogville and decides to deliver her to the gangsters so as to benefit from the financial reward. This performative change offers an implacable autopsy of the

“financialization of social relationships.” Of particular note is that this point is communicated mainly by means of a physical acting which highlights the contradictions between the character’s somatic attitudes and his pronouncements. The camera makes conspicuous the character’s body so as to “disembody” him and to prevent a direct equation between an action and the individual. It is rather the social gesture that is emphasised with the intention of revealing the link between the individual and the social laws that generate certain responses and actions. Throughout the film the social law that reveals the individual as alterable is the establishment of a capitalist ethic of making profit through exchangeability, which is introduced to the town by the time Grace and Dogville enter into a “reciprocal exchange.” In stressing the fact that the characters become more violent after being conditioned to the capitalist ethic of exchange value, von Trier shows the individual as the product of conflicting social forces and not as self-determined.

The view of the individual as performative is also evidenced by Grace’s portrayal and her shift from a person acting ‘good-heartedly’ to a mass-murderer. Grace as a character stresses the tension that arises when one is dedicated to enforcing values upon people not prepared to accept them. Apparently, the film’s critical reception has not really identified this idea, something that led von Trier to elaborate on it with more clarity in *Manderlay*,<sup>11</sup> which is the second part of a (still incomplete) trilogy titled “USA: Land of Opportunities” and shares thematic and formal similarities with *Dogville*. Taking up the story of Grace and her father after the end of *Dogville*, *Manderlay* is set in the early 1930s in a plantation in Alabama, within which slavery has not been abolished. Grace is shocked to hear this and insists on staying in the estate to ensure the slaves’ transition to freedom. She naively believes that the empowerment of the former slaves will end their oppression, whereas the members of the community use their democratic rights to their own advantage and eventually lead it to self-destruction. Commenting on

Grace's behaviour in *Manderlay*, von Trier stated something that applies to her attitude in *Dogville* too. As he says: "The idea of spreading your values to other places is that's what in the past used to be called a mission and is problematic."<sup>12</sup>

This standpoint is clearly articulated by *Dogville's* ending in which Grace decides that the "world would be a better place without Dogville." In the midst of a lengthy camera movement, the lighting changes and we get to see a high-angle shot of Dogville. The camera slowly zooms in and in a choreographic movement pans from right to left to capture the people of Dogville in a state of bewilderment. This movement intensifies the antithesis between the camera's mobility and the static position of the actors. The following frame shows Grace, who performs a circular movement that heightens stylisation. The tableau here focuses on the characters' change of *Haltungen*, and the uninterrupted camera movement generates contradictory processes that question any essentialist notions of identity and the moralist viewpoints advocated by the main character. When Grace comes to her final conclusion, she walks backwards in a steady and stylised movement which becomes rhetorical and prognosticates the forthcoming catastrophe. Grace's stylised movement towards her father's car becomes a gestural exposition of an attitude and a rhetorical statement that uncovers the thin boundaries between moralist reformism and violence. This rhetorical statement is intensified by the ironic voice-over which asserts that it was one's duty to reinstate order "for the sake of humanity and for the sake of other towns." What confounds matters more is that Grace legitimises violence using her standardised moralist rhetoric. The sound and image counterpoint de-individuates Grace and places emphasis on the performative contradiction of effacing a whole town "for the sake of humanity."

Action, images and the recited text are in conflict and the effect is that Grace's identity is deprived of any notion of interiority or psychological motivation. Her identity is performative and here my understanding of the term is informed by

Judith Butler's discussion of a performative act as an act that is simultaneously "dramatic" and "non-referential."<sup>13</sup> A performative act is "non-referential" because it does not describe an act deriving from an inner essence or a fixed identity. By contrast, identity emerges out of the performing of specific acts and thus it is performative, that is, subject to transformation. Butler appeals to the concept of performativity to discuss gender construction as a process that reproduces cultural stereotypes regarding gender identity. From this perspective, Butler concludes that gender identity is performative and as she says, "it is real only to the extent that it is performed."<sup>14</sup> For Butler, the revelation of the process of performativity is of political importance, because it may give one access to the very falsity of "identity normalization" and uncover processes of social construction that are not visible. Butler's view of identity as performative exposes the connection between identity and society, because a performative action follows certain social rules which negate the bourgeois understanding of the individual as static and self-determined.

Butler's analysis sets up the terms that help us understand the ways that von Trier's camera interacts with the restricted space and the actors' bodies so as to uncover them as performative constructions. The film's deconstruction of the characters' identities by means of performativity shows individuals as the outcome of conflicting forces and interests. *Dogville's* experimental form, which reduces the narrative to the bodies of the actors and does away with settings, aspires to debunk the capitalist understanding of the individual as self-determined, and to unveil the characters' dependence on broader social structures. Consequently, their changeability cannot be reduced to a change in moral attitudes. Concomitantly, von Trier's analytical observation of the characters' *Haltungen* concentrates on the primacy of social and political relationships motivating their actions and questions their moralist rhetoric implying that the moralist amelioration of the system is a simulacrum given that ethics cannot be separated from politics.

**DOGTOOTH:****PERFORMATIVITY AS EXPERIMENTATION**

In the previous section, I discussed the ways von Trier's reduction of the narrative to the bodies of the actors brings to the fore contradictions which defy the view of the individual as unified. In Yorgos Lanthimos' film *Dogtooth*, the director follows a similar practice and shifts the interest from dramatic action to performative happenings. The actors' bodies are not simply the carriers of dramatic *agon*, but the medium through which the filmmaker captivates the most ordinary aspects of human behaviour, so as to dissect them and analyse them.

*Dogtooth* tells the story of a family living in the outskirts of an unspecified town somewhere in Greece. All the characters in the story are nameless and the family consists of the father (Christos Stergioglou), the mother (Michele Valley), the older daughter (Aggeliki Papoulia), the younger daughter (Mary Tsoni,) and a son (Christos Passalis). The kids have not been outside the house's tall fence since they were born and their education is the outcome of a "home-schooling," without any influence from the world outside the house. The father keeps on warning them of the dangerous world beyond the limits of their villa and has taught them that they can only leave their house securely once their dogtooth falls. The situation is perplexed by the fact that the language system that the kids have inherited from their parents is illogical and has no representational attributes. It is a rather invented vocabulary which attributes different meanings to common everyday words. For instance, the youngsters are told that zombies are "yellow flowers," "the sea is a sofa" and keyboard is the definition for female genitalia. Christina (Anna Chalaintzidou), a security guard working in the father's factory, is the only person from the outside world who enters the house, in order to fulfil the son's sexual

desires. Her presence in the house will eventually provoke a series of events that will challenge the family's serenity.

Tired of offering her sexual services without having an orgasm, Christina offers the older daughter a headband, asking for oral sex in return. The latter's eventual discovery of sexual pleasure provokes curiosity for the world outside her house. Initially, she practices the same "game" with her sister and offers her a headband in exchange for oral sex. However, the lexical and hermeneutic boundaries offered by her family cannot satisfy her anymore and she decides to break her right dogtooth so as to explore the world outside her familiar environment.

The film's critical reception so far has focused on issues of content rather than form. Many critics have referenced the Fritzl child imprisonment case in Austria, which was discovered in 2008.<sup>15</sup> Despite the fact that the content has captured the public's and the critics' attention, I suggest that it is through a study in form that we can comprehend its political complexity.

Lanthimos' work is heavily influenced by von Trier's post-Dogme 95 cinematic practice, which I described earlier, and in particular by his preference for a minimalist aesthetic, which manipulates the actors' performances, with the view to exploring things instead of communicating unambiguous dramaturgical assertions. When viewing *Dogtooth*, one is faced with a series of problems that derive from the fact that the film does not create a coherent fictive cosmos produced by means of mimetic reproduction of a script. Without being an anti-representational avant-garde film, *Dogtooth* has a very loose and open-ended dramaturgy. The film starts showing us two sisters listening to a tape recorder and learning some new words by rote. Among the paradoxes of the language system that they inherit from their parents is the explanation that motorway stands for a strong wind and that road trip is a highly durable material used for the manufacturing of floors. The initial

audience response is that of bewilderment and even laughter given that the language spoken by the characters is not necessarily representational.

The film's blockage of linguistic communication affects its narrative to the extent that the final cut looks like a collection of happenings, which relinquish the idea of a discernible beginning, middle and end. Furthermore, there are times that the camera treats the characters as props for the *mise-en-scène*. A prominent example of this is the first sexual encounter between the son and Christina. Initially, the camera focuses on the lower parts of the characters' bodies without showing their faces. The characters start undressing in an emotionless way as if performing a task. The camera remains immobile and the sole movement in the frame derives from the actors' gestures in the diegetic space. When both characters lie in bed, Christina starts exciting the son's genitals in a mechanical way. Both characters' gestures are stylised and do not intend to reflect clear-cut feelings and attitudes. As such, the gestures are not mimetic and strip performances from emotional and rhetorical unity. From this perspective, the characters' postures and their bodily attitudes are not reproductive but explorative. Representational stability is downplayed in favour of a process that experiments with the characters' gestures and postural attitudes, so as to produce shock and disorientation in the viewer.

In the first section of this article, I discussed Brecht's concept of *gestus* and the way Deleuze analysed it so as to propose a cinema of 'attitudes and postures'. For Brecht, *gestus* was an efficient way of presenting the body, not as the reflection of a predetermined content, but as the locus of dialectical explication. Meg Mumford defines *gestus* as "socially encoded expression"<sup>16</sup> which indicates that the body is in a constant dialogue with the social environment. Thus, a character is not an individual with fixed and unchanged characteristics, but is always defined by the social context in which he/she is embedded. This short return to Brecht's theory and practice can help the reader perceive the ways Lanthimos builds upon Brecht's

predilection for a physical acting, without sharing the former's social certainties. Here it is crucial to note that Brecht's aspiration to make the familiar strange strived to help the audience achieve *Aufhebung* (dialectical enlightenment). The term *Aufhebung* refers to Brecht's willingness to distance the audience so as to unveil cognitive revelation, and truth which are predicated upon the Orthodox Marxist interpretative system. Brecht's denaturalisation of the material by means of *gestus* aimed at challenging the audience's understanding of reality so as to reveal, as David Barnett explains, that social reality is not static, but is shaped by the laws of historical materialism.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, Barnett explains that post-Brechtian performance practice retains Brecht's emphasis on a denaturalised performing style, but does not share his epistemological certainties, and thus the body is not simply reduced to a producer of concrete social gestures as it is the case in orthodox Brechtian practice.<sup>18</sup> Instead, the body becomes a provocateur of gestures that connect it with the social reality, but the reference points to decode the material on stage are no longer given.

Lanthimos, a film director with a performance art background treats the body as a potentiality in a way that the very act of performing is thematised. In a master-class he gave in Sweden Lanthimos explained that he started his career by filming theatre and dance performances. As he says:

I guess that helped me understanding (sic) the physicality of things much more. It is something I like very much. That's why I mostly work that way with the actors — more physically instead of intellectually or theoretically [...] We just do things physically. I challenge them to go to rehearsals and try this or that without explaining why.<sup>19</sup>

This physical way of working has its effect on *Dogtooth* which is like an assemblage of various happenings loosely connected with each other, in which the isolated teenagers perform various tasks, quote words that have no meaning per se, only to end up learning that the boundaries between performing an identity and being somebody are quite hazy. The film's locus dramaticus becomes a meta-performative space, in which the actors do not dramatise situations, but perform activities, which undermine identity and reveal it as a mere act. The kids are shown performing various exercises, and games that are part of their home schooling, but it is by means of these games and their quotability that they get acquainted with their sexual and violent side, which has been suppressed by their family.

A closer look at another scene may clarify things further. During a conversation between the two sisters one of them complains that she feels unwell. The younger one volunteers to examine her and while offering her medical advice (that she has obviously quoted from an unidentified source), the camera focuses on the lower part of the characters' bodies. The camera's disinterest in the characters' conversation is made conspicuous by the fact that once again we are denied access to their faces. Accordingly, the separation between voice and body is heightened and the produced frame fluctuates between being part of a narrative structure and part of a performative instance that disorganises the narrative.

The latter function of the scene draws attention to the body as an ontogenetic force and not as a vehicle that solely serves narrative requirements. The result is a physical rather than a text-based dramaturgy, which focuses on the possibilities stemming from the actors' unaffectionate performances. To paraphrase Kristin Thompson, the film generates a performative excess which aims at questioning the dominant frame of representation. Thompson employs the term narrative excess to point to the use of dramaturgical tropes which are not necessarily used to communicate story-telling material. As she explains, identifying moments of excess

in a film can open up the audience's attention to the politics of form, and the ways a film negates the dominant frame of representation. As she says:

An awareness of excess may help change the status of narrative in general for the viewer. One of the great limitations for the viewer in our culture has been the attitude that film equals narrative, and that entertainment consists wholly of an 'escapism' inherent in the plot. Such a belief limits the spectator's participation to understanding only the chain of cause and effect. The fact that we call this understanding the ability to follow the narrative is not accidental. The viewer goes along a preordained path, trying to come to the "correct" conclusions; skilful viewing may consist of being able to anticipate plot events before they occur (as with detective story, which becomes a game in guessing the identity of the criminal before the final revelation). This total absorption in narrative has some unpleasant consequences for the act of viewing.<sup>20</sup>

For Thompson, moments of excess in a film aim at disorganising the cause and effect narrative and introducing gaps in the story-telling process. These gaps reject traditional plot, character and setting; they refuse to reduce the film narrative to interpersonal interaction in dialogue and to a causal articulation of the chain of events. Whereas Thompson's understanding of excess refers mainly to a visual excess, which has been co-opted even by the Hollywood industry, Lanthimos' film engages in a dialogue with performance art so as to communicate a performative excess. The actors' performances combined with the structuring of the story as a connection of happenings loosely connected with each other simplify the fabula and place attention on the very performative process. Lanthimos' employment of performativity instead of concrete dramatic tropes aspires to reveal the tension

between language, the body and the speaking subject, so as to render the act of interpretation problematic.

Scholarship has acknowledged the ways that performative excess can disturb narrative coherency by joining together 'real' and representational images. The view of performance as "negativity,"<sup>21</sup> that is, as a means of resisting the dominant strategies of visual representation has been proposed by performance and film commentators. Among them Peggy Phelan and Elena del Rio suggest that performance art strategies become the means of resisting the reproduction of ideological certainties. They achieve this by placing emphasis on the very performativity of the communicated material and on moments of non-performing and acting.<sup>22</sup> In other words, performance and performativity are, as Britta Timm Knudsen says, bound up with a 'constructivist/productive world view' and not a reproductive one.<sup>23</sup> Then again, while the aforementioned theorists mention performance in relation to acting, it is noteworthy that performative excess can also derive from the performative use of the camera, as I mentioned earlier in my discussion of *Dogville*; this practice is something that we can identify in *Dogtooth* too.

My description of the aforementioned scenes clarifies that Lanthimos' camera is not concerned with presenting the body as a neutral reproducer of dialogue and actions. The body is seen as a potentiality, something which is directly related to a preference for thematising the very act of performing. Lanthimos employs these series of performative tricks, and his characters are continuously in search of a script in the diegetic and in the meta-level too. In his previous film, *Kinetta* (2005), he followed the same *modus operandi* and presented an austere story, in which a policeman in a Greek resort town enlists a cameraman and a hotel maid to help him resolve some crimes by means of performative re-enactments. The film's employment of long-take cinematography and slow camera movements fits exceptionally well with the actors' slow-motion re-enactment of the crimes. In the

end, the director deprives the audience of a narrative resolution of the crimes; through these performative re-enactments, the audience becomes aware of the micropolitics of everyday life in this rural part of Greece. On this basis, performance operates as a means of social discovery and Lanthimos puts forward the conjecture that an isolated incident that involves “victims and perpetrators” cannot be perceived outside a broader social context.

Similarly in *Dogtooth*, Lanthimos’ emphasis on the body — reinforced by the blockage of linguistic communication — draws the audience’s attention to the fact that what passes as “real” cannot be understood outside socially constructed representational systems. Like Brecht, the director suggests that individuals are not one-dimensional/unchanged and different social circumstances and representational systems can produce different social beings. Lanthimos’ minimisation of dramaturgy is still committed to the Brechtian employment of performance as a means of exploration rather than reproduction, but his *modus operandi* avoids the simplification of the Orthodox Brechtian practice.

## CONCLUSION:

### THE POLITICS OF PERFORMATIVITY

The examples of the films I discussed indicate that both Trier and Lanthimos engage with modernist experiments of the past, as well as with a realist film style, which builds upon the long-take documentation of the actors’ performances, inviting the actors to develop themes during the filmmaking process. Here realism does not refer to dramatic realism, that is, the causal linkage of a sequence of events, which consist of a series of coherent psychological motivations. By contrast, Trier’s and Lanthimos’ realism is more in line with a filmmaking practice which clings into

indexicality in order to incorporate the performative contingent. The films' penchant for austerity and their focus on performativity aims at destabilising the narrative, so as to refuse to offer the audience material for consumption. Evidently, both filmmakers reference modernist experiments of the past (Trier includes obvious references to Brecht's epic theatre, while Lanthimos' intentional abuse of the language system and his employment of the performers' body as a means of discovering social gestures has evident references to Brecht, as well as to 1960s Happenings).

Both filmmakers combine references to modernism with a realist use of the camera — in the Bazinian sense which refers to an aesthetics of reality that undermines the role of the script in favour of the presentation of fragments which have a material connection with their referent.<sup>24</sup> Despite the fact that Bazin's writings on realism were considered reactionary by the 1970s film theory, it is important to understand that contemporary geopolitical changes, neo-liberalism's apotheosis of mobility and the predominance of the media have changed the dominant understanding of realism. It is not accidental that present-day film students find more "realistic" narratives that might have nothing to do with the everyday material reality (such as blockbusters), rather than films which manipulate realistic conventions (e.g., long-takes and continuity editing). In this context, von Trier's and Lanthimos' performative realism can be seen as a gesture of negativity; they intend to minimise dramaturgy so as to discover — to paraphrase Giorgio Agamben — the social gestures<sup>25</sup> and the micropolitics of everyday life that have been smoothed by contemporary cinema's employment of technology as a reproductive tool. Consequently, the idea of the filmability of the performative contingent goes against structure, meaning and rationalisation — the stock in trade of capitalist mass culture. To understand this performative realism as a gesture of negativity, we need to turn our attention to the Hollywood paradigm.

There has been an ongoing discussion among film studies scholars which centres on the ways Hollywood has de-radicalised certain formal experiments initially introduced by filmmakers who worked on the margins of the industry. Thus, in recent years we witness the fact that Hollywood has reappropriated radical formal experiments, not to open up human perception and thought to new roads of discovery, but to reproduce a set of relationships as natural, as well as to celebrate the expansion of the industry. Thomas Elsaesser's discussion of *Avatar* is very much a good starting point to see how Hollywood engages with modernist experiments such as self-reflexivity, not to liberate the audience from the confines of conservatism, but to reproduce the very ideas of consumerism and to promote marketability. As he says:

As far as Hollywood is concerned, it wants audiences to interact with images, while Hollywood itself acts with the images. Which is to say, for the industry that makes them, images are instructions for actions — they trigger further moves, purchases and events — rather than pictures to contemplate or immerse yourself in, however much “immersion” might be the stated objective. In this respect, *Avatar* the film functions itself as an “avatar” in the larger system, of which it is the most successful representative. Hence my argument that when Hollywood films allegorize their own conditions of possibility, which are by necessity contradictory, they perform cognitive switches or enact a reversibility of roles: a master–slave relationship that never stabilizes itself.<sup>26</sup>

Elsaesser's comments provide the methodological framework to understand something that has been also pointed out by scholars in American cinema, that is, Hollywood's absorption of modernist and art cinema experiments aims exactly at a

new way of commodification, which strives to serve the needs of diverse audiences.<sup>27</sup> Geoff King, for instance, mentions how Hollywood blockbusters have manipulated Sergei Eisenstein's concept of dialectical montage, not to make the audience conscious of the contradictions of capitalism, but to increase the pleasures of narrative consumption. Hollywood valorises spectacle and special effects instead of narrative, so as to minimise the complexity of the stories it tells. Moments of incoherence, as King rightly observes, are not signs of complexity but they have to be seen as "a symptom of offering something to everyone."<sup>28</sup>

Minor European cinemas can resist Hollywood's ability to assimilate even the most radical experimental forms, by focusing on the roots of European art cinema and its preference for a filmmaking style which holds onto indexicality as a means of registering contingency and the plurality of the real. My understanding of the term Minor cinema derives from Deleuze's discussion of minor literature, as a form of literature which intends to subvert a dominant culture from within.<sup>29</sup> As the examples of contemporary filmmakers, like Lars von Trier, Béla Tarr, Yorgos Lanthimos, Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Costas Zapas and Benedek Fliegau, indicate, Minor cinemas benefit from returning to a performative cinematic austerity, which manipulates film performance as a means of resisting ideological and market-driven narrative certainties and clichés. Apart from the two objects I have used as case studies, contemporary films like *The Turin Horse* (*A torinói ló*, 2011), *Dealer* (2004) and *Minor Freedoms* (*Mikres eleftheries*, 2008) employ a performative corporeal realism that focuses on the productive aspects of representation, rather than the reproductive ones, so as to show the real as contingent and changeable. This type of performative realism references the modernist experiments of the past to construct an anti-commodity aesthetic, which resists reproduction and asks the audience to rethink the staginess and the in-authenticity of everyday forms of human interaction. I suspect that there is some very interesting research that needs to be

done on the interrelationship between the current economic crisis and the emergence of films, which belong to the category of “the cinema of the body,” in countries like Greece, Hungary and Romania.

## NOTES

1. See Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 18.
2. See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlison and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 191-92.
3. See Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: the Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York and London: Methuen, 1964), 57.
4. See George Kouvaros, *Where Does It Happen?: John Cassavetes and Cinema at the Breaking Point* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).
5. Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 191-92.
6. Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Movies as Politics* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 53.
7. Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. Annette Michelson, trans. Kevin O'Brien (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press: 1984), 71.
8. Interview with Lars von Trier, personal communication, 12 Nov. 2010.
9. See also Kouvaros, *Where Does It Happen?*, 134.
10. Robert Sinnerbrink also discusses the idea of exchange in the film, but while I see the act of exchange as a social law that motivates the characters' physical actions, Sinnerbrink discusses it in different terms, that is, as the 'libidinal economy of desire' that infiltrates the system. See Sinnerbrink, "Grace and Violence: Questioning Politics and Desire in Lars von Trier's *Dogville*," in *SCAN/Journal of Media Arts Culture* 4:2 (2007), [http://www.scan.net.au/scan/journal/display.php?journal\\_id=94](http://www.scan.net.au/scan/journal/display.php?journal_id=94).
11. See Katja Nicodemeus, "I am an American Woman," in *Signandsight.com*, <http://www.signandsight.com/features/465.html>.
12. Von Trier qtd. in Carsten Bramsen, *The Road to Manderlay* (2005), in *Manderlay* DVD extras.
13. Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Construction: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," in *Performance: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. Philip Auslander (London: Routledge, 2003), 106.
14. *Ibid.*
15. See Peter Bradshaw, "Dogtooth," *Guardian*, 22 Apr. 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2010/apr/22/dogtooth-review>. See also Philip French, "Dogtooth," *Observer*, 25 Apr. 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2010/apr/25/dogtooth-film-review>.
16. Meg Mumford, *Bertolt Brecht* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 53.
17. See David Barnett, "Toward a Definition of Post-Brechtian Performance: The Example of *In the Jungle of the Cities* at the Berliner Ensemble 1971," in *Modern Drama* 54:3 (2011): 340.
18. *Ibid.*, 337.
19. Yorgos Lanthimos, GIFF master class, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=tLCgibK8jI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=tLCgibK8jI).
20. Kristin Thompson, "The Concept of Cinematic Excess," in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 140.
21. Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 165.
22. See *ibid.*, 165. See also Elena Del Rio, *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance: Powers of Affection* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 17.
23. Brita Trimm Knudsen, "It's Live: Performativity and Role Playing," in *Performative Realism*, ed. Rune Gade and Anne Jerslev (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2005), 270.
24. See André Bazin, "An Aesthetic of Reality: Neorealism," in *What is Cinema?*, vol. II, ed. and trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), 21.
25. I am paraphrasing Giorgio Agamben's argument that "[i]n the cinema, a society that has lost its gestures seeks to reappropriate what it has lost while simultaneously recording that loss." Giorgio Agamben, "Notes on Gesture," in *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 1978), 137.

26. Thomas Elsaesser, "James Cameron's *Avatar*: Access for All," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 9:3 (2011): 261.
27. Warren Buckland and Thomas Elsaesser, *Studying Contemporary American Film: A Guide to Movie Analysis*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 78.
28. Geoff King, *Spectacular Narratives: Hollywood in the Age of the Blockbuster* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2000), 105.
29. See Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 19.

**THE BODY OF IL DUCE:  
THE MYTH OF THE POLITICAL PHYSICALITY  
OF MUSSOLINI IN MARCO BELLOCCHIO'S *VINCERE***

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Stare sul corpo significa cercare un'intensità che si valorizza nel rimanere lì più a lungo possibile. Il che prevede una tensione e una capacità degli attori superiore.

— Marco Bellocchio

**1. REMARKS ON THE BODY AND ON ACTING  
IN MARCO BELLOCCHIO'S CINEMA**

Marco Bellocchio's cinema is a cinema of the body. The characters in his films not only break the rules to which their bodies are subjected to, they also use their body as a means to express their agonizing emotions and as a way to undermine the presumed harmony of narration. The actors' bodies have a problematic relationship with space, time, sounds, movements and images;<sup>1</sup> they are bodies that are trapped in pauses, contractions, and in interior and exterior conflicts. In short, Bellocchio's cinema is inhabited by interpreters whose physical potentialities are exalted almost to the limit, ready to become witnesses of a discomfort which is often irreconcilable with reality. One could call it a cinema in which the body, which has its own autonomous dimension, breaks down the mechanism of mimesis that is at the basis of the relationship between actor and character. Bellocchio devotes a great part of

his poetic and stylistic work to the uncontrollable and irreducible force of the body because it enables him to bring forward the most obscure and hidden nature of the human soul. If actor and character belong to the narrative dimension of the film, then the body, as third element, becomes the vehicle of the visible which bears witness to that “suspension of meaning”<sup>2</sup> that characterizes the entire filmography of Bellocchio.

In the European author films of the 1960s, influenced first by Italian Neorealism and subsequently by the Nouvelle Vague, a precise idea of actor prevails, that of a body that is part of a wide and elusive reality. The new actors and stars of these years embody the tensions and uncertainties of a humanity in crisis, victim of uncontrollable events: the characters are often lost in the incomprehensible vastness of reality in which they move; they are nothing but melancholic shadows. Their bodies become images of an otherness that takes various forms. In the cinema of Jean-Luc Godard these bodies are the true substance of which films are made; think of the meaningful gestures (indebted to cinematographic memory, from Jean Gabin to Humphrey Bogart and Robert Mitchum) of Jean-Paul Belmondo in *Breathless* (*À bout de souffle*, 1960) which are “pure performance of a visual sign”<sup>3</sup> or of the sensual and sublime body of Brigitte Bardot which in *Contempt* (*Le Mépris*, 1964) becomes an inaccessible object, a body that assumes the modern form of a colorful spot inside the frame. In the films of Marco Ferreri, *The Ape Woman* (*La donna scimmia*, 1964) and *The Seed of Man* (*Il seme dell'uomo*, 1969), it is the flesh of the actor rather than the body that undergoes a grotesque (often animalistic) transformation. In *Dillinger Is Dead* (*Dillinger è morto*, 1970) the main character cancels his body and personality by becoming a serial object (pop), showing how banal human existence really is. Also the characters in Michelangelo Antonioni's films tend to abstraction: they are shadows living in a world destroyed by technology (*Red Desert* [*Deserto rosso*, 1964]), or painful appearances in a mysterious landscape (*L'avventura* [1960], *La notte* [1961],

*L'eclisse* [1962]), a panorama which draws the body into itself, expressing the void, the pain and suffering of the living. By putting the principles of classical representation into crisis, these author films have restored the value of the body as a mysterious uncontrollable and symbolic object.

In his films Bellocchio goes even a step further. One could say that his cinema is one in which the physical feeling of the body becomes central thanks to an *intensive* use of bodily gestures. *Fists in the Pocket* (*I pugni in tasca*, 1965) is maybe the film which, more than any other, demonstrates the possibilities offered by this kind of representation of the body. The brutish and at times monstrous physicality of the protagonist Ale (Lou Castel) — continuously suspended between inertia and aggressiveness — constantly refers to a symbolic reality, to a world that shines through the mimic movements of a body that is “forced” to be immobile. The absence of action intensifies the revolutionary importance of Ale’s gestures and turns his energy into something explosive (as happens at the end of the film). In this way, the fragile balance between the character and its mask is put into question. This crisis, which is an essential dimension of Bellocchio’s style, helps him to reveal the power struggle between individuals and institutions (*In the Name of the Father* [*Nel nome del padre*, 1972] e *Victory March* [*Marcia trionfale*, 1976]), between men and women (*Devil in the Flesh* [*Il diavolo in corpo*, 1986]), between past and present (*Il gabbiano* [1977]), or even between the living and the dead (*The Eyes, the Mouth* [*Gli occhi la bocca*, 1982], *My Mother’s Smile* [*L’ora di religione*, 2002]). In his film *Vincere* (2009), this specific use of the body not only helps to unmask the artificiality of Benito Mussolini’s political image; it is also a means to reveal this man’s most dangerous, mysterious and dark character traits; a man who thanks to the media (including cinema) has transformed himself into an actor whose body has become the incarnation of a myth. The tragic end of this famous figure who has dominated the Italian public scene for almost twenty years, coincides — as almost always

happens in Bellocchio's films — with his unmasking. Once the mask is removed, the only thing that remains is the horror, the vacuum.

## 2. THE MEDIA METAMORPHOSIS OF THE BODY: IL DUCE

Fascist aesthetics — using mass media such as radio, *cinegiornali* and posters — has always depicted Mussolini as a living myth; as the personified expression of the will of a nation which is necessarily embodied in his body: thanks to his bodily gestures (whirling eyes, constricting jaws, protruding lower lip, spread legs and hands on hips)<sup>4</sup> and the tone of his voice Mussolini is able to attract people's attention, to obtain their respect and to arouse the enthusiasm of the crowds. The physical dimension is therefore an integral part of his political fortune, especially in the period of his ascent to power. According to the historian Sergio Luzzatto, "the modern process of the politicization of the naked life explains both the importance and the diversity of the meanings taken on by the body of Mussolini, even before it became the body of il Duce."<sup>5</sup> In post WWI Italy, Mussolini is the absolute protagonist of a political physicality, until then unknown: the violent and destructive attacks against opponents, the cruel and armed struggles, the kidnappings, the ambushes and murders become instruments of political struggle. They are all bodily acts that "hold together the two spheres of life, that of violence and the sacred."<sup>6</sup>

As the perfect incarnation of that tendency proper to the totalitarianism of the twentieth century (for which the physicality of the leader is the very essence of his authority) and by exploiting an innate, personnel, communicative capacity, il Duce remains for many years "the sovereign of both the political and socio-cultural scene in Italy, a sort of protagonist without rivals, omnipresent and almighty, a figure

capable of covering all roles, in a very long solo performance taking place in the most various places.”<sup>7</sup> In the 1920s, the period of his ascent to and consolidation of power, Mussolini incarnates the fascist ideal of manhood and modern masculinity (the serial film character Maciste, omnipresent in the collective imagination, functions as a symbolic archetype): he indistinctly takes on the role of farmer, soldier, aviator and motorcyclist. These multiple metamorphoses were not only the outcome of a wise, continuous media campaign, but also “of the mitopoetic vocation of the Italians.”<sup>8</sup> Mussolini did not only embody Power, he also recited it, exhibiting himself, and having a direct impact on collective sensitivity. In these years his gestures are perfectly reproducible, imitable and close to the common man. They constitute an important factor in the consolidation of the national imaginary. In the 1930s, together with the emergence of a more imperialist and belligerent rhetoric, the body of *il Duce* changes, transforming itself into a fetish, which should not be touched, but only looked at. The identifications with the common man are gradually eliminated to enforce the sacral, symbolic and absolute character of Mussolini’s own personal image.<sup>9</sup> *Il Duce* can no longer be imitated because his body has become a sacral object. Nevertheless, even in this process of gradual abstraction, his body remains at the center of mediatic representation.

### 3. BEHIND THE MASK (OF THE ACTOR), THE HORROR: “VINCERE”

In 2009, Marco Bellocchio made the film *Vincere*, which tells the tormented relationship between Benito Mussolini (played by Filippo Timi) and Ida Dalser (Giovanna Mezzogiorno), the mother of his first, but illegitimate child Benito Albino (Filippo Timi). Ida, who is at the center of the narrative, desperately falls in love with Mussolini and she ends up annihilating herself and everything around her in

the name of this same love: she loses her possessions, her social identity, her family, etc. The film is easily recognizable as a historical melodrama. In fact, all the main elements of this genre are present: a heroine ready to sacrifice herself in the name of love for a man who first seduces her and then abandons her; historical events which influence and intermingle with the tormented amorous tale; a tragic end in which death is almost welcomed as a catharsis. Although Ida Dalser is the main character of the film, the character of Mussolini is a central element of the *mise-en-scène*. Timi and Bellocchio wanted to tell the political parable of il Duce, from the Great War to the fall of Fascism in July 1943 through a particular emphasis on Mussolini's use of his body in the media. During interviews, Timi has declared more than once that one of the major challenges in the construction of his character was that of having to create an unknown, more intimate portrait of Mussolini, which was quite different from the media image of il Duce, known to the larger public and consolidated by history. *In reality*, the recitation of Timi is the result of a constant *contrast* between the historical image of Mussolini (which Timi himself has taken as a paradigm) and his attempt to go beyond that very same image. The original touch of the film consists in not having solved this discrepancy and by making it visible by way of some important stylistic choices that reveal the most intimate and perverse side of Mussolini's character, which turns out to have the face of horror.

#### 4. THE BODY AS A MYTH OF MODERNITY

In the first scene of the film — the one in which Mussolini is presented as a relative unknown trade unionist militant of the Socialist Party — Timi makes the character immediately recognizable to the spectator: by pronouncing the phrase “it is ten past five in the afternoon. I challenge God: I will give him five minutes to strike me by

lightning. If he won't then this will prove that he does not exist," the actor takes on the stylistic features of Mussolini's way of "performing" (fixed gaze, firm voice, the emphasis of a repetitive gesture, using in this case the right arm). Timi is framed in medium close shot, followed by another medium close shot of Ida Dalsler (Mezzogiorno), a silent spectator and listener among many others. Then follows a subjective shot of Ida, then several medium long shots (framed from various points of view) before returning to a close-up of a self-satisfied Mussolini. This sequence is followed by a shot/reverse between him and Ida, just before Mussolini escapes the crowded room. It is only after this sequence that the title "VINCERE" appears in large headlines. Immediately afterwards follows an assembling of (film) images of Milan in 1914, portrayed as a modern metropolis launched towards the future, a city open to the futuristic myths of speed, power and industrialization. From the very onset Timi and Bellocchio portray a character which is the exact incarnation of these myths as is evidenced by the expressiveness of his body and the strength of his movements.

After the scene in which Mussolini is wounded and arrested during a demonstration by the Socialist Party, a scene which highlights Mussolini's ability to transform a political event into a physical confrontation, there is another, even more important sequence (maybe one of the most important ones of the entire film), namely the long sequence of the first night of sex between Mussolini and Ida Dalsler. The two lie on the bed, their bodies are entwined in sexual intercourse, but the whole scene is shot almost in the dark, so much that one can barely see the face of the two lovers, while the sweat on their skin is clearly visible. At a certain point, the camera of Bellocchio focuses on the face of Mussolini: a particular use of the light on the face of the actor (the photography is of Daniele Cipri), illuminates the orbits of Mussolini's eyes, transforming the face of the future Duce in a mask of horror, in a funeral, devilish or hellish figure.



Then the scene continues, with a new shot/reverse sequence (this time imaginary) between Mussolini and some repertoire images (accompanied by emphatic music) on the events in Sarajevo, i.e., the wicks which will ablaze Europe, leading to the outburst of the First World War. While Mussolini, completely naked, gets up from the bed and crosses Ida's dark apartment, the caption with the word "WAR!" appears repeatedly, almost obsessively, on the screen. The long sequence ends with Mussolini standing on the balcony, then follows another shot/reverse (once again imaginary) between Mussolini and the crowd which will acclaim him when in the morning of June 10, 1940 he announces Italy's entry into war at the flank of Nazi Germany. After having consumed the sexual act, during which Mussolini's diabolical nature is revealed, the naked body of the future Duce, shows itself in all its somber beauty, almost as a "virgin" to the adoring crowd and to History (Ida covers his body only belatedly with a blanket). This signs the beginning of that typical modern correlation (enhanced by the editing of the film) between the incarnation of a new Caesar, an *homo novus*, and the destiny of the whole of Italy.

## 5. CINEMA AS SELF-REPRESENTATION

It is only from this moment on that Mussolini's body starts to transform itself into a media subject. The cinema of war invades the film, both in the form of documentation (showing and telling the audience what is happening in the trenches) and fiction (even the comedians participate in the climate of strong patriotism), revealing its nature of representative art of the masses. The power of cinema manifests itself to Mussolini in an almost "sacral" context. The future Duce lies wounded in a small war hospital set up for emergency in a church. While he is lying there, images are projected on the central nave of the church which for the occasion was covered by a large white blanket. The projected film is Giulio Antamoro's *Christus* (1916), a powerful and ambitious fresco of the life of Jesus in the form of a *tableau vivant*. The wounded victims are looking fascinated at the moving images. They are the unwitting viewers of a new secular rite, that of cinematic experience. Using again the shot/reverse technique, Bellocchio tries to "isolate" Mussolini and to create a dramatic match between his suffering and that of Christ on the cross. The gaze of the character identifies itself with that of Jesus and his martyrdom becomes a metaphor for the pain to which Mussolini's body must be exposed in order to take on the role of the new, modern messiah.



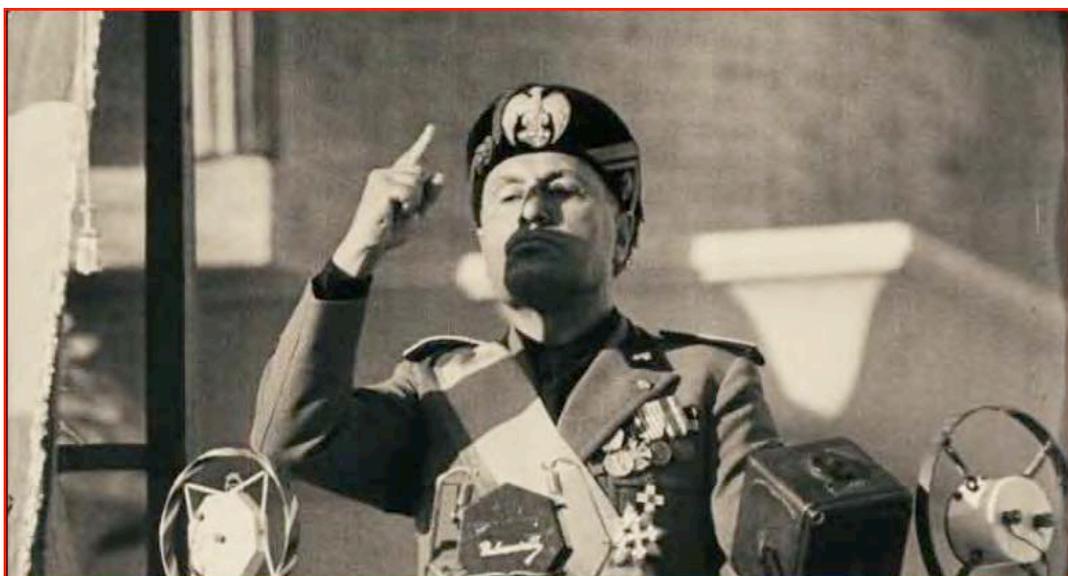
The sacred symbology (that does not stop here but is expanded by creating a parallelism between the tears of Mary and those of Rachel, who is jealous of Ida's

presence) of the sacrifice, martyrdom, of the courage to defy death for an ideal (in this case for war, afterwards for the conquest of power) once again takes on a *physical* character, enforced by the power of the film images. It is precisely through them that Mussolini will build a new, personal mythology<sup>10</sup> characterized by violence, physicality, movements and the sacred. Cinema becomes for Mussolini a tool for self-representation, a seductive means to impose his presence throughout the country, a way to create the *mitopoeiesi* without which his political fortune would probably have been much more modest. Ida understands this very well when she, while living together with her son in a small town in the province of Trento, enters into a movie theater where some images of a *cinogiornale* in which Mussolini appears, are projected. The spectators are all standing and performing the Roman greeting, they are all priests of the new fascist rituals, worshippers of the new layman messiah. In the same scene Bellocchio superimposes the small figure of Ida (on the foreground) on that of Mussolini (giant, in the background): she has her back to him because she knows that what is being projected behind her is only an image, used to hide the folly of a selfish and violent man who is prepared to do everything. But she is the only one.



## 6. THE FINAL REVELATION

At this point, Filippo Timi disappears. This choice is dictated by the fact that the *mise-en-scène* must leave space to the character of Ida and her tormented life story characterized by the forced separation from her son, Benito Albino, and her internment into a psychiatric center. Ida, as she herself tells to the psychiatrist, “must become a ghost, she must disappear, she has to be canceled.” But this is not the only reason. Timi disappears because from this moment on Mussolini has become a mere image which can be reproduced an infinite number of times. His body has become completely aestheticized and does not longer require the physical presence of an actor in order to appear in its impenetrable monumentality. This vacuum is filled by the many petrified images of history. On Christmas eve Benito Albino smashes one of them on the ground, it is a head of marble representing Mussolini. It is just one of the many images of which both the religious and public buildings of Italy at that time were full.



Timi reappears at the end of the film and his body becomes the means by which Bellocchio unmasks the true nature of Mussolini's image. The actor changes from role: he is no longer *il Duce*, but his illegitimate son Benito Albino, son of Ida, a student during the late 1930s. Together with his fellow students he sees the images of a mass-meeting of *il Duce* and he is asked to imitate him. In this scene, Timi reveals his own way of acting, thus activating an all-powerful mechanism of alienation. If he at the beginning of the film seeks to identify himself with his character, at the end of the film the mimesis between actor and character is totally gone: through the deliberate use of an overloaded pantomime, Timi discloses the mechanism of interpretation to the viewer, undermining the impression of reality. But by revealing this mechanism, Timi, at the same time, also unveils the fake nature of the character which he has been interpreting: the gestures and physical movements of *il Duce*, as well as his entire physical presence on the stage of history, are nothing but fake tools, instruments used by an extraordinary actor (*il Duce*) to obfuscate reality and to deceive an entire nation.





In one of the final sequences of *Vincere* Bellocchio interrupts this fake dialectic between Mussolini and the crowd by placing the image of Benito Albino between them (during Mussolini's famous speech on Italy's entry into war). The son, suffering from marasmus, is interned in a psychiatric center and spends his days imitating obsessively the gestures of il Duce. In the shot/reverse between Mussolini and the people (repertoire images), Bellocchio inserts a close-up of Benito, a fierce and dark mask of horror and madness which Timi personifies through a violent and monstrous mimicry, at the limits of expressionism. The face is tense and disfigured, but behind this mask is the force of a body which (unwittingly) has broken the mechanism of power, forcing History to face the horror and the void. The final image of the film, preceded by those that document the death and destruction of war, is that of a torso which is crushed by a press. The end of Mussolini. The end of his image. The end of an entire world. Bellocchio does not show the dead body of il Duce (which will be martyred and maligned after his execution by the partisans) because it has become invisible. Just like death.

## 7. CONCLUSION

*Vincere* is a film in which the actor through an intensive use of gestures tries to reveal the artificiality of a mediatic (and cinematographic) image of the modern era. In this film Bellocchio undermines the character of Mussolini, first as an icon, then as an historical figure by showing how an actor may use his own body in a progressive dissociation: on the one hand Timic incorporates the conventional political mask of the powerful and charismatic Duce, on the other hand (especially near the end of the film) he becomes the incarnation of the madman Mussolini who is obsessed by power. Bellocchio has thus never abandoned his project, already undertaken in the 1960s with *Fists in the Pocket*, to break up the mechanisms that govern the representation of classical cinema, in order to open the doors of the visible: in *Vincere* the revolt against preconceived rules and oppressive forms of power are transformed into a monumental speech on the non-sense of History.

## NOTES

1. Antonio Scandola, "Stare sul corpo: la visione dell'attore," in *Marco Bellocchio: il cinema e i film*, ed. Adriano Aprà (Venezia: Marsilio, 2005), 92-105.

2. Sandro Bernardi, *Marco Bellocchio* (Milano: Il Castoro, 1998).

3. Cristina Jandelli, *Breve storia del divismo cinematografico* (Venezia: Marsilio, 2007), 155.

4. "A seconda delle circostanze, la gesticolazione si fonda su alcuni fondamentali movimenti delle braccia, delle mani, del pugno che vengono mossi sempre più freneticamente in rapporto all'aumento dell'emozione che si intende produrre nell'uditorio. I movimenti sono quasi sempre netti [...]. Altro elemento importante è il gesto che aumenta d'intensità, spezza il discorso, produce l'applauso prima ancora che si sappia che cosa Mussolini intende dire». Gian Piero Brunetta, *Il cinema italiano di regime* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2009), 106. «Depending on the circumstances, the gesticulation is based on some fundamental movements of the arms, the hands and fists that are moved ever more frantically in relation to the stirring up of the emotions that one aims to produce in the audience. The movements are almost always precise [...]. Another important element is the gesture that increases in intensity, breaks the speech, produces applause even before one knows what Mussolini intends to say." (translation mine).

5. Sergio Luzzatto, *Il corpo del duce* (Torino: Einaudi, 1998), 6.

6. Ibid.

7. Gian Piero Brunetta, *Il cinema italiano di regime: Da "La canzone dell'amore" a "Osessione". 1929-1945* (Roma: Editori Laterza, 2009), 101.

8. "Emuli degli innamorati di Sthendal, uomini e donne dell'Italia fascista hanno dapprima immaginato l'oggetto del loro amore, adoperandosi poi affinché il duce vero corrispondesse alla loro immagine ideale." Luzzatto, *Il corpo del duce*, 21. "Like the lovers of Sthendal, men and women of fascist Italy first imagined the object of their love and then tried to find a correspondence between the real duce real and their ideal image." (translation mine).

9. "Al pari di altri sistemi totalitari del Novecento, il fascismo ha variamente elaborato il sogno di garantire al corpo del capo carismatico la durabilità di un monumento, cioè di un oggetto inanimato, indistinguibile per natura da un corpo imbalsamato." Luzzatto, *Il corpo del duce*, 30. "Like other totalitarian systems of the Twentieth century, fascism has variously worked out the dream to give the body of the charismatic leader the durability of a monument, i.e., of an inanimate object, indistinguishable from an embalmed body." (translation mine).

10. Virgilio Fantuzzi has pointed out that a constant element of Bellocchio's films and of his being an "author" is the debunking of old myths, followed by the construction of new ones: "L'uso dei simboli, la cura dei dettagli, la ricerca di un punto di convergenza tra significante e significato, la convinzione che l'atteggiamento del corpo esprime l'interiorità della persona sono elementi comuni che legano la figura del regista a quello che, nella liturgia vera e propria, è il ruolo del cerimoniere, intendendo per cerimoniere non chi si limita ad applicare regole fissate una volta per sempre, ma chi 'inventa' riti nuovi, adatti alle circostanze che si presentano sempre diverse. Bellocchio distrugge vecchi riti per costruirne di nuovi. Lo fa con consapevolezza e determinazione." Fantuzzi, *Marco Bellocchio: tra sacralità e dissacrazione*, in Marco Bellocchio, ed. Adiano Aprà (Venice: Edizione Marsilio, 2005), 90. "[T]he use of symbols, the attention for details, the search for a point of convergence between signifier and signified, the belief that the attitude of the body expresses the inner life of the person are common elements that bind the film director to, what in true liturgy, is the role of a master of ceremonies, intending by master of ceremonies non the person who merely applies rules laid down once and for all, but the figure who 'invents' new rites, which are adapted to various circumstances. Bellocchio destroys old rites to build new ones. He does so with awareness and determination." (translation mine).

**EIJA-LIISA AHTILA:**  
**THE PALPABLE EVENT**

Andrew Conio (University of Wolverhampton)

Melodrama as a genre sits uncomfortably within the contemporary art world, which along its length and breadth (except only in the most conservative or outdated institutions) is thoroughly Foucauldian, including the fey Foucauldianism of the commercial sector. The Foucauldian critique asks whose interests are being served, what epistemological, political and social systems are being confirmed, indeed instantiated, by the discourses being articulated and their forms of expression? Armed with these critiques we ask whose interests are served through the presentation of such tropes as the virtuous victim or heroic retribution or if not the tropes then the pure sensation and intensity of the form. And further ask if through intensities melodrama conceals a legitimation of violent state power by moralising its actions.

Ahtila's drawing from this problematic art form at least appears anachronistic and it is therefore most telling that it is defended by leading women writers, artists and educators who share an interest in *artists' film and video*.<sup>1</sup> Maeve Connolly brings attention to the potential of storytelling to speak of the woman, in a way that "knits together the economic, familial and fantastical in the recalling of cinema that is strongly informed by a critique of narrative form."<sup>2</sup> This critique of sterility and abstraction is part of "a critical tradition of feminist artists"<sup>3</sup> which defends the integrity of storytelling capable of portraying an individual's struggle and personal victory — or indeed failure. A struggle that is embedded in affective and symbolic webs of connection that ripple through embodied experience and, as such, act as

counter-weights to the grand gestures of patriarchal culture. This, as Philbrick relays, is a melodrama of bodies that “signify boundaries of selfhood in flux, and family milieus of interchanging relations and identities.”<sup>4</sup>

Philbrick also notes how Ahtila’s videos both echo something of the earliest radical political intentions of the first melodramatic critiques of the *Ancien Régime* and can also be situated in relation to the Hollywood melodramas of the 1940s and 1950s, which “became a lens through which the critical community investigated culture at large, examining issues of gender, representation and voice.”<sup>5</sup> However, following the work of Kaja Silverman<sup>6</sup> and Laura Mulvey,<sup>7</sup> it is clear that women were invariably “hystericised,” “blank,” and their subjectivity erased in these classic Hollywood films. By contrast, Ahtila’s melodramatic form has become a vehicle to express woman’s resistance to overbearing male authority and resistance to patriarchal discourse:

In these films, the physical and/or mental malady of a suffering heroine confounds the (presumed) greater expertise of a (male) ministering medic. The protagonist’s “hysterical body” defies definition by the man, becoming instead “an unreadable text,” even to the woman herself.<sup>8</sup>

This is all well and good but Ahtila’s narrative is too fluid an affair to be represented on the single screen. The widely accepted reading of Ahtila’s work is that her use of multiple screens and fragmented multilayered narratives, of unstable subject positions and multiple assemblages of enunciation (the hysteric/ the spirit/ the psychoanalyst/ the statement/ the irrational), produces an embodied experience in which the internally externalised, dispersed, fragmented and socially constructed subject finds its form.

## NARRATIVE

The features of this reading need to be disassembled. We start with narrative. Maria Walsh draws our attention to how narrative can be redeemed from the formalist critique of its operation. For her, *radical film theory* tended towards a deconstruction of the imaginary identifications of the dream/screen, a critique that “occluded content in favour of abstraction and/or a cognitive approach to narrative patterns.”<sup>9</sup> Structuralist/materialist filmmaking and radical film theory, sewn together by Lacanian film theory and structuralism,<sup>10</sup> sought to wrestle the viewer away from the closures and passivities of the dream/screen which led to the viewer being “hypnotically seduced by the narratives of cause and effect that terminate in closure and to be without the capacity to deviate and perform his/her own wanderings and digressions.”<sup>11</sup> However, this led to a privileging of the modes of construction and reception of film at the expense of content.

Against “literalism,” Walsh seeks to reclaim narrative as a transformative and deconstructive potential in its own right. In the first place, a multiplicitous narrative is, in and of itself, capable of delivering the alienated and critical effects much lauded by the deconstructionists. Walsh prompts us to bear in mind that the idea of the viewer lulled into a state of unconscious delirium by the seductions and immobilisation of the dream/screen is not necessarily an accurate reflection of the viewer’s rather obviously active mode of reception as he or she abstains or invests, distances from or melds with, registers or misses, and in turn remembers and reviews (critically or affirmatively) what has taken place on the screen. Secondly, in an age where the *modus operandi* of the Society of Control,<sup>12</sup> where consumerism and spectacle is used to enforce specific and highly alienating narratives (the “survival of the fittest”), the potential of narrative to tell stories that need to be told (of the dispossessed, the migrant, and so on) perhaps becomes more urgent, and, most

importantly, new narrative forms allow for the creation of “new narratives on the part of the viewer.”<sup>13</sup>

This implicit anti-structuralism echoes a Deleuzian approach that, regardless of the art form, does not regard negation as a primary ontological value, but regards negation/reduction/abstraction as various tropes to be used in fashioning a plane of composition:

Critical distance is not a meter, it is a rhythm. But the rhythm, precisely, is caught up in a becoming that sweeps up the distances between characters, making them rhythmic characters that are themselves more or less distant, more or less combinable (intervals).<sup>14</sup>

The structuralist or materialist filmmaker’s (unacknowledged) plane of composition contains within it, then, only the illusion of a type of transcendence through specific discourses (Althusser/Lacan) and processes (dialectics/negation), and through this eludes what it really is. Indeed, if these discourses and processes are used as self-authoring techniques the Deleuzian response is that: “There is only a single plane in the sense that art includes no other plane than that of aesthetic composition: in fact, the technical plane is necessarily covered up or absorbed by the aesthetic plane of composition.”<sup>15</sup>

For Deleuze negation is a power of affirmation, “it expresses affirmation and becoming active as the power of affirmation”<sup>16</sup> or as we see it in *Ahitla* a form of refraction, one of intense potential and not something that can be hypostatized as a principle sufficient unto itself. Structuralist/materialist film criticism has always sought to cast itself in the role of the legislator, determining the *true* and legitimate values pertaining to its form. But for Deleuze, “the point of critique is not justification but a different way of feeling: another sensibility.”<sup>17</sup> Walsh cites Murray

Smith (1996) who disputes the claims made for the lodestone of radical film criticism, the “critical spectator”:

There is [...] something intrinsically self-defeating in the idea of “producing” a critical spectator. The project is self-defeating because the means by which the result is arrived at negates the difference between it and its supposed opposite, the naïve or incredulous spectator. The estranging text becomes simply a miniature “ideological apparatus,” eliciting a different set of ideological answers, but still through a process of interpellation.<sup>18</sup>

If critical detachment is seen as a component of the plane of consistency, rather than being true to origins, materials or effects, then film-making's pleasures and effects can be more fully understood. Structuralist/materialist filmmaking sought to distance itself in equal measure from both the cinema and the gallery systems, which were considered naïve to its own uneasy alliance between the values of post-structuralist critiques and empiricism. However, this left these schools without theoretical tools capable of accounting for their own creativity resulting in the avant-garde lacking a language of expression and imagination, of flows and transformation, that might describe what they did, which was to experiment and invent:

The value of art [...] consists in liberating what was present in art from its beginnings, but was hidden underneath aims and objects, even if aesthetic, and underneath recordings or axiomatics: the pure process that never ceases to reach fulfillment as it proceeds — art as “experimentation.”<sup>19</sup>

However, there is a risk here of creating a simplistic opposition between “literalists” (Maria Walsh) — or to use a less demeaning term, “formalists,” or perhaps better

still, “practitioners of the ‘already thought and perceived’<sup>20</sup> — conceived as bad, and narratologists or filmmakers of affect, creativity and the imagination, considered good. All simplistic hierarchies and binaries require disassembling, a point supported by Catherine Fowler’s view that there is a continuity between the work of Maya Deren and Ahtila insofar as they share many of the same intentions (to undercut linearity and progression), and both strive to achieve depth through a “verticality” (a poetics of felt experience) and a shared concern with “what is occurring” and “what it feels like and what it means.”<sup>21</sup> Deren and Ahtila use different semiologies (of the cinema and installation) to implicate the viewer, break the confinement of time and space, disassemble the subject and most importantly elaborate a poetics of their respective languages.

However, it is not possible to argue that contemporary artist filmmakers are inheritors of a tradition because in the first place the self-proclaimed aim of structuralist/materialist filmmakers was to create a space for themselves outside of both the gallery and cinema and, secondly, there is no evidence that the likes of Douglas Gordon, Gillian Wearing, and Mark Wallinger associated themselves with either the theory or the practice. The attempts by A. L. Rees, David Curtis, Malcolm Le Grice et al. to champion experimental film and video and to find precursors for contemporary artists’ filmmaking practices in various “histories”<sup>22</sup> in the creation of an orthodoxy has the flavour of Nietzschean resentment.

Notwithstanding this, Ahtila knowingly uses some of the best features of deconstructive filmmaking, and the theoretical tools bequeathed by radical film theory are directly admissible.<sup>23</sup> The most explicit forms of this in Ahtila’s films include direct statements to camera made by the characters, which breaks up the immersive affect; the breaks and ruptures to flow that characterise her work, and the layering of seemingly incompatible languages (of fantasy, archive reportage discourse, first-person narration, disjunctive sound effects and so on). Of

considerable interest is Peggy Gales' note that "the material properties of film and the mechanics of cinema are exposed here in spatial terms."<sup>24</sup> However, it is the installation space which, by alerting the viewer to the work's own formal and structural qualities, purports at one and the same time both to instantiate the active critical viewer and to tell the story through a language of matter and its expressive potential: affect. Waves of identification and discomfort, and most importantly the pulsations of resolution and dispersal, provide the underlying rhythms by which the viewer is contracted into the piece.

The central claim here is as follows: the installation format conflates the viewer and the characters as they oscillate between their internal conflicts and the external perpetrations that are not simply brought to bear on their positions but also determine the content and form of what they say and what they do. The viewer oscillates between screens and images unable to resolve the heterogeneity of semiologies into which he or she is immersed, as well as the divergent subject and speaking positions. The viewer, like the character, cannot in fact take it all in. In a Deleuzian sense then, Ahtila layers irreconcilable "assemblages of enunciation" (the priest, the State, the psychiatrist the child) that cannot be resolved either by the character or the viewer in the adoption of a viewing position, or a narrative that subsumes all of the parts. For example, whilst Ahtila uses an "existential" language of extreme contraction, of ontological absurdity and collapse of meaning similar to Beckett's it is used as only one trope amongst others, and does not function as the master discourse.

Bergson dismisses the hypostatisation of negation by explaining that there is no great empty nothing behind being, no primordial non-being, there are only contingent relationships and multiplicities. As Deleuze explains:

When we ask “why is there something rather than nothing?” or “why is there order rather than disorder?” or “why is there this rather than that (when that was equally possible)?” we fall into the same error: we mistake the more for the less, we behave as though nonbeing existed before being, disorder before order and the possible before existence. As though being came to fill in a void, order to organise a preceding disorder, the real to realise a primary possibility.<sup>25</sup>

Ahtila shows that it is possible to place negation on the surface as a text<sup>26</sup> amongst other texts that have equal claims for truth. In this way, the language of the abyss can become something else and the hidden meanings (especially the implicit ontological and epistemological paradigms) open to transformation. A transformation activated in terms of both Ahtila’s form and content.

The claim not only of Ahtila’s work but also of the installation format more generally is that the viewer is forced to make choices and in this way is active and empowered and may become, at least in part, the protagonist. As Jane Philbrick observes:

Ahtila’s video installations and, less effectively, her split-image films require active viewer participation to synthesize the simultaneous multiplicity of images and sound. Blurring boundaries of narration and spectatorship, Ahtila forces the viewer to make choices. To make a choice is an act of will, a moral act.<sup>27</sup>

There is something compelling in this, when the viewer is free to choose when to enter and leave, which screen to watch, which element is most compelling: the whole polyphony of attention is to a considerable extent given over to the viewer, and to a certain extent the artwork itself is contingent on the viewer’s actions. The

viewer can review the decisions/predilections/presuppositions which motivate her choices. Although expressed in another language, this sounds virtually identical to the critique of passivity that, in part, motivated the first experimental filmmakers such as Maya Deren — *Meshes in the Afternoon* (1943).

However, the idea that the gallery is less prone to illusionism, passivity and linearity is not without its critics. Marc Augé argues that multiple viewing positions and the lack of a central and authorized narrative construct, far from offering a mode of critical detachment, are little more than a repetition of the logics of supermodernity. He is worth quoting in full:

The world that surrounds the artist and the period in which he lives reach him only as mediated forms that are themselves effects, aspects and driving forces of the global system. That system serves as its own ideology; it functions like a set of instructions for use; it quite literally screens the reality for which it is substituting itself or rather whose place it is taking. The unease and disarray of artists confronted with this situation are also our own, and they tend to exacerbate those problems, and we may well wonder what we have to learn from them.<sup>28</sup>

It is also possible to argue that the public arena of the cinema — which entailed rubbing shoulders with all classes and engaging in a ritualised communal experience of a shared popular culture — is now being replaced by a quasi-sanctified experience of forms of viewing accessible only to a specific class of self-selecting aesthetes, acculturated in the reading of multiple images, fragmented narratives and certain modes of legibility and metaphoricality. This is, however, not a reading that Jessica Morgan would support; for her the art gallery experience can “educate an audience in developing the skills necessary to scrutinize film, a

theoretical framework, perhaps for future experience.”<sup>29</sup> For his part, Peter Osborne argues that “the form of collective here is very far from the cinematic masses of Kracauer’s picture palaces; it is a privatized, serial, small group affair.”<sup>30</sup> A criticism mirrored by Catherine Elwes who writes that far from creating a critical viewer, the viewer is offered a grander level of elevation:

In fact, dispensing with the television set, and replacing it with pure cinemascope illusionism elevates video and film to a kind of electronic mural painting in the grand manner, enveloped in the silence of the rarefied quasi-cathedrals of art that both commercial and public galleries have turned into. The ritualized, communal proletarian experience — the eating, drinking, smoking and necking that accompanied the theatrical display of cinema — is also lost.<sup>31</sup>

Is it the case that the potential critical space of the art gallery has been subsumed by the logics of late capital and turned into another forum for satisfying distraction? Or is it possible that, with the demise of the public space, the gallery has become a new public space, wherein the audience becomes part of a considered and critical public united in a shared engagement with specific practices? Elwes thinks the latter:

Whilst many commentators have bemoaned the privatization of the media and decline of the public sphere, others note that publicly funded museums and galleries offer some respite (however illusory) from commercialization, constituting a kind of “sacred space” or a space for public scrutiny and even self-scrutiny.<sup>32</sup>

Osborne slides a blade into the complacencies of installation thinking. In choosing the following from Walter Benjamin as the epigram to his essay “Distracted

Reception: Time, Art and Technology,” his strategy of reading art through society and society through art, seeing both as part of the same logic, could not be clearer:

The sort of distraction that is provided by art represents a covert measure of the extent to which it has become possible to perform new tasks of apperception [...]. *Reception in distraction [...] [is] the sort of reception which is increasingly noticeable in all areas of art and is a symptom of profound changes in apperception.*<sup>33</sup>

Osborne follows Benjamin’s template in discerning that the structures through which we see and know the world and each other, the structures of consciousness, are the same structures with which the artist formulates his dialectical encounter with meaning. Thus, for Osborne, two essential facets of our age are entwined in the installation form, a (Bergsonian) multiple subjectively embedded in a palimpsest of durations and a social dialectic of attention and distraction, accordingly; “viewed through the prism of film and its successors, the metaphysical meaning of contemporary art appears in its articulation of time and subjectivity.”<sup>34</sup>

However, he takes Bergson’s critique of the spatialisation of time — “the trespassing of the idea of space upon the field of pure consciousness” — to imply that it is actual space that is isolated from cinema to make it into a subjective affair. But Osborne has here misread Bergson, for whom duration is not only subjective: *life* itself is comprised of multiple durations and only the human thinks of its duration as a privileged position from which to detemporalise other temporal processes — famously, to think duration is to think “beyond the human condition.”<sup>35</sup> From this misconception, Osborne suggests that the installation re-spatialises and in so doing re-socialises the cinematic image by literally making it into an embodied physical space and this, in turn, reintroduces the social into the

purely subjective durational experience of cinema. The aspect of the social which is incorporated in this way (here Osborne employs Jonathan Crary) is,

an ongoing crisis of attentiveness, in which the changing configurations of capitalism continually push attention and distraction to new limits and thresholds, with an endless sequence of new products, sources of stimulation, and streams of information, and then respond with new methods of managing and regulating perception.<sup>36</sup>

For Osborne then, this does not create a less immersed spectatorship capable of critical detachment, instead, the artwork is merely replicating an already existing dialectic between the subjectivism of individual experience and the wider logic of attraction and distraction as the viewer simply moves off, moves around, grazes and checks the time on his Moby. As Osborne says: "The ideology of 'contemplative immersion' in, or 'absorption' by, the artwork continues to regulate its reception, but distraction is deeply implicated in the demand for this special kind of attention."<sup>37</sup>

We might say that despite being wrong (about Bergson) Osborn is still right. Indeed, Morgan acknowledges these dangers when she identifies works which offer new strategies to undermine the conventionalization of the 'immersive/distracted' viewing experience, such as the works of Jeroen de Rijke and Willem de Rooij, *Untitled* (2001), which have both start and end times and screens are used in such a way as to disrupt both the phenomenological theatricality of the minimalist gallery space and the demands of the image. Whilst these works adhere to the long tradition in film and fine art of "question[ing] the museum and viewing experience and the act of seeing itself,"<sup>38</sup> they also offer a precise critique of the logic of attention/distracted, which according to Osborne conflates both the viewer with

the modernist *flâneur* and the consumerist logic of the windows of the Arcade with Microsoft windows.

The question that seems to emerge from this short review of contemporary debates around narrative, the legacy of structuralist materialist filmmaking and the installation form, is whether, in fact, other concepts provide a stronger measure of the work and can push forward the debates about form and content, cinema and installation, and also reconceive the Benjaminist isomorphism (presented by Osborne) between the film installations and the logics of society. There are two further reasons for this strategy: first, the subject of *Where is Where?* is self-consciously *viewing as* an event and an investigation of an 'Event' as a specific occurrence in history; and second, Ahtila's practice is highly theorised both by herself and others, which leads Meike Bal to argue that her works can be called theoretical objects.<sup>39</sup>

Being such a senior figure in the world of cultural theory and criticism, it should come as no surprise that Meike Bal has provided the most sagacious and interesting account of artworks as theoretical objects. She looks in detail at the complex multilayered questioning performed by Ahtila's work and how this can act as a "kind of model for the new language of criticism — in other words, I will take this work as a 'theoretical object'."<sup>40</sup> Bal looks upon Ahtila as a model for thinking through the bonds between *art* and life, psychosis, subjectivity, and events, and at how this is formulated in an "affective encounter" in the artwork. There are two further strategies contained in Bal's "new language of criticism," first, to bridge the gap between the intellect and affect; second, to pursue an art not of representation or the pleasures of identification, but of "commitment."

However, with Deleuze we can think more intensively than even Meike Bal's powerful and insightful approach. For the artist unimpeded by the disciplinary aesthetics of various vulgar Marxisms, structuralisms or materialisms, Deleuze's

value comes from the creativity of his concepts and the poetry of his expression. Here Tom Conley draws out the essential Deleuze: "Thinking takes place in the interstices of visibility and discourse. When we think we cause lighting bolts to flash and 'flicker within words and make us hear cries in visible things'."<sup>41</sup>

We ask then: do Ahtila's works flicker to this type of thinking, where analysis and poetry are the same thing?

### SKETCH > WHERE IS WHERE?

The hour-long video installation *Where is Where?*, installed at the Parasol Unit, 26 February – 25 April 2010, comprised of six floor-to-ceiling screens, four of which formed the dramatic focus of the work. The two other screens were in seamlessly adjoined rooms, one showing an animation and the other archive footage of dead bodies of victims of the 1956 Meftah massacre of 40 Algerians who were dragged from their beds and killed by French soldiers. In what was effectively a box of images the viewers were provided with a few small *poufs* as seating scattered around the room. There was no position from which all four screens could be viewed at once. In fact such was the scale and proximity of the screens only two could be viewed comfortably at the same time. Since I can neither add nor subtract anything, it seems appropriate to reproduce here the full synopsis written by Ahtila herself:

The theme of *Where Is Where?* is colonialism and the presence of two different cultures. Its starting point is a real event that took place in Algeria at the end of the 1950s. At that time, Algeria was still under French rule and was involved in a long struggle for independence from the mother country. The situation was

extremely violent, both because of recurrent assassination attempts by the resistance movement and because of the French government's harsh countermeasures. As one consequence of and reaction to the barbarous acts committed by the French, two Algerian boys killed their friend, a French boy of the same age.

Although the film's starting points are based in reality, at the heart of the story is the relationship this event has with today's situation. The narrative starts from the present moment, which is gradually interwoven with what the boys did and the events in Algeria. Thus, the murder committed by the boys is seen, on the one hand, in the light of the current world situation and, on the other hand, in a way that attempts to put the conflicts between western and Arab cultures into historical perspective. The events are, nevertheless, approached from the viewpoint of an individual person and filtered through her.

The story has three main characters: Adel and Ismael, the Arab boys who committed the murder, and a European poet, a woman of about 40. The story opens with Death entering the woman's house. The experience of death is compared to finding oneself in a new country and to a calling into question of existence and identity. The woman starts, with the aid of words from her profession of poet, to clarify what happened, while also running through elements involved in the event, such as the different religions, guilt and sameness, and a search for what they have in common. Gradually the focus shifts from the woman's world to the boys' reality. The murder is taken out of the time of its occurrence and brought into the present day. A mist clears from the back garden of the house to reveal a boat that has appeared in the swimming pool, in it sit Adel and Ismael. The poet is shifted to the background, and what the boys say and the inevitability of what they did — with its causes and consequences — take centre stage.

The events in the film take place in a constructed, fictive event reality within the film and in a theatre-like, self-referential set comprised of stages within stages giving way to further stages and thresholds. The point of this is both simply to inject life into the narrative, and to investigate the way the different levels of the fictive narrative function together. The film's narrative mode is thus experiential; it attempts to provide information not just in a traditionally direct way with the aid of what happens on the screen, but also by intensifying the impact of the images and sounds. The aim is for the expressive elements in the moving image to work not just as subordinate to the story, but so that they will carry independent, sensory information (for example, a scene with Sufi dancers, landscapes in different countries, or singing scenes). The idea of this is to bring looseness, a personalness and emotionality to the story, and to break down traditional chronology, but without losing track of the plot. The idea of the actors' presence also operates along the same lines: for example, in the dialogue between Death and the Poet, in addition to the information given by the words, the focus is on what happens in the face and body and the invisible exchanges of affect.<sup>42</sup>

### **AHTILA – THE EVENT**

According to Deleuze, the Event is not fixed, ever. Not until the last word has been said on the subject, which is impossible, can a final meaning be discerned. All of life is a perpetual becoming, always in the middle, and is it impossible to fix becoming to a permanent present. Accordingly, the events of 1956 in Algeria can never be finally determined — a series of questions are left unanswered. Why did these boys kill another? What was France doing in Algeria? What, following Frantz Fanon,

whose *The Wretched of the Earth* provides theoretical context and some of the prose, shapes the consciousness of the colonised and coloniser? What do these events say to us today, and what does today say about the past? This does not imply a permanent state of relativism or vague indeterminacy; rather, these are the events in relation to which we attempt to bring clarity out of obscurity, but in a way that prevents clarity from obscuring the nature of the Event:

With every event, there is indeed the present moment of its actualization, the moment in which the event is embodied in a state of affairs, an individual, or a person, the moment we designate by saying "*here the moment has come.*" The future and the past of the event are evaluated only with respect to this definitive present.<sup>43</sup>

This is not a film that pretends that a single story can be told, as neither the actual events of the time, the presented events of the story, nor the event of the viewing are offered by way of a linear narrative, stable present or single subject position. The film has a leading protagonist and whilst her drama is the motivating force of the installation, she is the figure of contemporary generalised European consciousness (France, Finland and Algeria are conflated), and the drama unfolds through the events shown on the screens (archive footage, dramatic re-reconstructions, and Ahtila's hallmark fantasies), rather than through her individual subjectivity. We do watch what she sees through her eyes yet, in a delicate balancing act, through the installations parodic, graphic, and comic stylizations we never fully identify with her struggle and are bequeathed a critical distance. In this regard, Ahtila's signature "affectless subject" strongly militates against the tropes of psychodrama and imaginary identification, however; "the affect-less appearance and performance at the moments of heightened psychotic content do not deprive this work of affect."<sup>44</sup>

Rather than an individual story then, this installation reads as a presentation of an event of European consciousness that Alison Butler describes as “both a historically specific and isolated occurrence and an iteration of a process that continues on a global scale today.”<sup>45</sup> In *Where is Where?* the characters are seemingly caught up within a world that is happening around and through them, and whilst their experience occasionally drives the drama forward, this is only one of many diagetic and extra-diagetic forces that propel the work. They are, to borrow a phrase from Deleuze’s *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*<sup>46</sup> “figures” (particularly Death), rather than actors, and their worlds are not governed by what they say or do but by the events in which they are immersed. If we accept that there are no grounds for conceiving a binary dualism between subject and object there is no need to use Alison Butler’s articulation of two modes of perception “exteroception and proprioception.”<sup>47</sup> Instead, this work shows how singularities traverse stratifications as affects and percepts, images and refrains; each knowing nothing of the distinctions between subject and object or self and other.

There is no sense of the past as finished and detached from the present, as doors in suburban Helsinki open onto rooms in Algerian villages, as Algerian boys are found in the Poet’s pool. All distinctions between space and place are lost when archive footage, re-enacted scenarios from 1956 and present day scenes from Scandinavian forests are presented as pre-individual singularities and placed in conjunctive and disjunctive relations, which traverse the subject’s emotions and perceptions. As this installation presents a tragedy that continues to occupy a profound place in French and Algerian life, Deleuze’s framing of the wound appears germane:

“My wound existed before me, I was born to embody it.” It is a question of attaining this will that the event creates in us; of becoming the quasi-cause of

what is produced within us, the Operator; of producing surfaces and linings in which the event is reflected, finds itself again as incorporeal and manifests in us the neutral splendour which it possesses in itself in its impersonal and pre-individual nature, beyond the general and the particular, the collective and the private.<sup>48</sup>

The essential feature of the installation is not that it presents neither an unsolvable riddle nor an open and fragmented narrative that is sufficient to itself, but that it creates, both formally and thematically, something approximating the structure of the Event. The past, as the actual past shown in archive footage, and the historical events, are dramatised, particularly the invasion of villages and homes by French soldiers as well as the murder of the pied-noir by the two Algerian boys, which is represented in rather stylized form (using perhaps a Brechtian device of extenuating unreality to induce critical distance). In this way the event-structure of the past is not so much reconceived, or recapitulated, as re-instantiated in the experience of the installation. Moreover, the “critical viewer vs immersive environment” question is potentially resolved insofar as an immersive experience of the work provokes a type of thinking-through of its inherent affective, perceptual and cognitive strategies. This resolution is perhaps more that theoretically complete when we discern how the installation is animated by the dynamics of Aion and Chronos.

## AION AND CHRONOS

Aion and Chronos are amongst Deleuze’s key concepts; they are borrowed from the Stoics and put to work most fully in one of his most originaive texts *The Logic of Sense*. In brief, he argues that there are two sides to time. A corporeal time of matter

and bodies (Chronos) and an incorporeal time of sense and infinite speed (Aion).

This is Deleuze's neatest encapsulation:

Time must be grasped twice, in two complementary though mutually exclusive fashions. First it must be grasped entirely as the living present in bodies, which act and are acted upon. Second, it must be grasped entirely as an entity infinitely divisible into past and future.<sup>49</sup>

### **Chronos**

As is well known, across his entire corpus Deleuze is determined to undo the conventional idea of the present as a "here and now" seen as a type of phenomenological fullness of experience of being present to ones' self in, and of, the world. By contrast the present of Chronos is thick, it is extended backwards and forwards in time and we exist amongst an abundance of multiple thicknesses, some of which are vast:

in accordance with Chronos only the present exists in time [...] whatever is future or past [...] belongs to a more vast present which has a greater extension or duration. There is always a more vast present which absorbs the past and the future [...]. Chronos is the regulated movement of vast and profound presents [...].<sup>50</sup>

An example of the thickness of the present, to make things simpler than they merit, is the Enclosure Acts, which exist in material and conscious experiences of divisions in contemporary society that are projected far into the future in our thoughts of the world yet to come. We should note that when Deleuze talks of materiality's this includes "matter" but also ideas, systems, rules and language. If we think of the

American Revolution or the Holocaust it is impossible to say that the past has ceased to be, as they still exist in material and immaterial forces and processes. And of these multiple corporeal durations we may think of vast geological time stretching back through eons, the shooting of JFK taking us back decades and 9/11 already existing far into the future.

Chronos, then, “measures the movement of bodies and depends on the matter which limits and fills it out,”<sup>51</sup> and we are compelled by our corporality as it animates and forces us to live but is uncapturable, unknowable and indefinable.

The key to understanding Chronos is that Deleuze does not accept time as distinct from space and movement. All of these durations take place through the movements and actions of bodies that are quantitative (not qualitative) contractions and affectivities of being. Each of these thick presents (industries, species, collectivities and so forth), encapsulate orders of vibrations and transmissions of movements, each having its own arrhythmic pulse.

According to Deleuze, these pulsations interweave, cause frequencies and create individuations, haecceities, knowledges and transversal partial hybrid becomings. In short, instead of spatialised time, (the clock ticking) “Chronos is the number of movement,”<sup>52</sup> and things, people, and bodies move in an infinite number of directions. It is a movement through, within and across all finitudes and infinitudes and at the same time, which create indeterminate determinate *blocs of becoming*.

### **Aion**

It may appear that Chronos is conceptually abundant and by itself provides the grounds for overturning traditional conceptualizations of time.

Chronos, however, is only one half of Deleuze's remodelling of time, our understanding of which is incomplete without addressing the concept of Aion:

[Chronos] measures the movement of bodies and depends on the matter which limits and fills it out; the other [Aion] is a pure straight line at the surface, incorporeal, unlimited, an empty form of time, independent of all matter.<sup>53</sup>

The relationship between Aion and Chronos is paradoxical: they have different laws, are “labyrinths,” “each one is complete and excludes the other,”<sup>54</sup> yet they interact with each other. Neither Chronos nor Aion can be grasped without the other. They are neither opposites, dialectically opposed nor parallels: they are two sides of the same thing. In the manner of his theorisation of the continuity of the actual and virtual, both are objective.

Aion is the present instant divided into the future and past *ad infinitum*, “it is the instant without thickness and without extension, which subdivides each present into past and future”;<sup>55</sup> the infinite divisibility of the instant. As time moves forward there is never a pure moment of the instant “now,” there is only an instantaneous passing from past to future. Hence, what exists in Aion is “always and at the same time something which has just happened and something about to happen; never something happening.”<sup>56</sup> Aion is the time of the past and future with no present. Past and present have no real existence. A pure moment of an actual present would be the end of becoming which is impossible. This is one of the conundrums of living; on those occasions when we attempt to capture a stilled or stable subjectivity, a self that *is*, we find subjectivity is always becoming in a world that is equally in process.

Lacan’s subject famously oscillates; Deleuze’s oscillations are equal in intensity, but his subject’s displacements and deferrals are ontological rather than psychoanalytical. In place of the threat of castration, that Lacan for all his refinements never finally rescinds, we find that the threat has nothing to do with the

familial order. One threat of Chronos is that of the “becoming mad” of the depths, the feeling that outside of the present matrices of multiple becomings there lies an infinity of other durations we cannot possibly subsume under an identity, even the identity of the Lack. The second threat is the threat of Aion divided instantly into past and future, which annuls the possibility of presence across the infinite speed of surfaces.

Chronos is not only the folded present and past, it is also multiple, as heterogenic durations exist at once and are not at all subsumable under/by/within a single spatialised time. The durations within the installation are pulses, some diminutions, as fragments of houses or vistas are weaved within the plot, and others are *staccatos* as the videos beat to the rhythms of armed conflict and the trauma of occupation. Sometimes these pulsations express the slowness of the corporeal modifications that Chronos is heir to, as quarries reveal geological stratifications and historical scenes are made to seem timeless when shot in contemporary landscapes. Chronos is the measured and actualised time, a qualitative pulsation of matter flux that is represented by journeys across oceans, through war-torn villages, through the sense of embodied and palpable places; and yet the viewer experiences a particular amount of time, for a particular duration, such as the rhythms of the instruments of interrogation — when one of the boys is questioned — or the very different rhythms when the priestess talks to the poet. These palpitations are set in relation to other times, such as the time of Death’s embrace, and the present day need for witnessing and remembrance.<sup>57</sup> In this way, Chronos is shown to be movement within and across the represented stratifications, and in the experience of the work itself, work and viewer are folded in a palimpsest of durations. But these pulsations also belong to Aion, which enables sense, including the sense of “to make sense of,” to be re-expressed in new ways, to be understood differently. To express this more or less simply; the corporeal events in Algeria happened, are palpable (in

Land, and Laws, and institutions), but what they express, their sense, is the incorporeal surface of Aion. It is the sense of the event, in its backwards and forwardness, its complex heterogenic, multifaceted meanings and expressions that are the subjects of this work and made equally palpable, not least in the words spoken by the poet:

in time's both directions, [...] Face adrift, the two sides extending across each other. Held aloft upon time, will it hold? With the tiniest little breaths, Before the beginning, renewed, comes to meet you, through it, back with it, to the left, to the right, forwards, backwards, to those habits, to the beginning of something nameless, to a birth, a birth that could be my beginning, too.

It is in the time of Aion that we find the "reality of the virtual"<sup>58</sup> (the effects on French post-colonial consciousness) that existed in the acts themselves and that are now actualized. Aion is the surface that allows for different senses to emerge through the inclusive disjunctions that these narratives and aesthetic strategies provoke. It is these dynamics, which catch the viewer between interstices (rather than the dynamics of personal expression, melodrama and empathy), and emotionality that lie behind Ahtila's status as an artist of affect. Philbrick (as quoted earlier) rightly says that Ahtila is an artist of affect:

Part of a generation of Nordic artists Kim Levin identifies as "aim[ing] for a visceral and sensory, rather than a cerebral response ... what Gilles Deleuze once called 'the logic of sensation'."<sup>59</sup>

The inference is that this is not an aestheticisation of the political but an establishment of a sensible polity.

The installation thus creates new becomings out of fragments, out of the elided and repressed, and most importantly out of the idea — so central to Ahtila's work — that these states are without anchor in Oedipus or normative subjectivity, but nor are they the disarrangements of the psychotic; they issue rather from a transformative and creative way of being in the world. Ahtila does not refer to schizoanalysis, but Deleuze and Guattari's wresting of the schizoid from the clutches of Oedipus is germane because the *dérèglement* of the schizoid owes nothing to the family and everything to forging new "machinic" connections below the irrational cauterisations ("facts") and sclerosis (molar identity) of our age:

There is no such thing as either man or nature now, only a process that produces the one within the other [...]. Producing-machines, desiring machines everywhere, schizophrenic machines, all the species of life; the self and the non-self, outside and inside, no longer have any meaning whatsoever.<sup>60</sup>

This is a work that fundamentally disaffirms where thresholds are assigned in Western thought. Thresholds are commonly understood as existing within processes (air passes through the mouth and past the epiglottis into the lungs) and between things (windowless monads). In *Where is Where?* thresholds are certainly like this, but they are also radically and fundamentally recomposed. The screen acts as a threshold to another world, not a singular world, as in Algeria or the therapist's office, but instead acts as pure threshold, without origin or order. The thresholds here are those between Mediterranean landscapes and the priest's chapel, between the doctor's surgery and the scene of the massacre. This has the flavour of the cinematic montage which enables any place whatever to be combined with another any place whatever, to create a new whole; but in Ahtila's works thresholds are dynamic places of change and ambiguity when placed between the virtual and

actual or reality and fiction — resulting in heterogenic rhythms which are most telling when the thresholds are the exchanges and interplays between the depths of Chronos and the surfaces of Aion. If four images are played at once, in a sequence that is irregularly regular, and the viewers' perception is only one perception amongst many others (the different perceptions of subjects and cameras, refracting simultaneous yet differing points of view), then the thresholds are not so much borders as indefinable entrances and exists, indeterminacies: "the only way to get outside the dualisms, to be between, to pass between, the intermezzo."<sup>61</sup> For Taru Elfving there is something of the feminine in this: "The feminine is repressed as the condition of the logic of the same and therefore can only be discovered in the gaps and silences, as incomprehensible excess that disrupts the binary logic and opens it to change."<sup>62</sup>

However, it must be stressed that in common with all Ahtila's works *Where is Where?* is structured around a dynamic not of pure deterritorialisations or of chance and indeterminacy but of careful planes, sections and orientations. These orientations frame certain specific ideas that the work sets out to achieve: the invagination of past and present, the nation state as a historical relation of violence and oppression (Bal), the idea of a subject as both a political and historical effect, and a potential for framing the (non-human and human) forces that transcend subjectivity and populate the world.

It is more accurate to say that Ahtila assembles not fragments but 'blocs of becoming' (the Strindbergian bleakness, a subjugated people, melodrama's moral framework) that emerge out of this extraordinary palate of molecular effects and indeterminacies. There are two features to these blocs of becoming; on the one hand they are multiplicities, insofar as their function is entirely dependent on the work they do, what they actualise through the zone of indistinction that exists between multiplicities, and yet they also need to draw into themselves an essential fabric, a

certain conatus that simply, intuitively, endures by opening up spaces where virtual possibilities can be actualized: “Each individual is a contraction of the world, a connection with all of the world. But it is individual through the way it connects by forgetting different perspectives on the world, by the way it selects a world.”<sup>63</sup>

As we have discussed, this self-differentiation of pure difference is identical to its relative speed or slowness. Indeed, Ahtila’s installation is carefully constructed around two central durations, the duration of the Scandinavian poet and of the different speeds of events in Algeria. When these are brought into contrapuntal relations — they appear to be in one space, and in one time, using a single assemblage of enunciation — distances are resolved, as they become one melodic refrain on a plane of composition.

When the Algerian boys are found in the pool of the poet’s house, instead of showing history as a linear process consisting of transitions from one stage of life to another, a break is inserted, and through this rupture, history as one of the processes vital to subjectivation is undone. In being both extracted from narrative continuity and abstracted from the grid of intelligibility that history inflicts, the boys are thereby placed in the “out of timeness” that normally signifies the breakdown or the dissolution of self. However, instead of symbols of disintegration, the two boys become a figure of a new possibility for consciousness and, by virtue of this, of our understanding of the potential to create new subjectivities or new socialities or, at its furthest reaches, “a new earth” or “a people yet to come.”

Our suggestion regarding Ahtila is that she creates a series of refrains and new expressions of being by using already coded and clichéd materials. This is perhaps in keeping with Deleuze and Guattari’s circumspection about the idea of a pure ecstatic abandonment of self. If taken to its fullest extent, this absolute deterritorialisation, they caution, can be a form of suicide. They warn that it is better to work with strata, to find places within and between. Sure, create “diabolical

packs” or become, in the language of *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, an “anomalous.” But if art is to act as a transformative social agent it may more usefully do so by working *with strata*, as Ahtila does, using already coded materials and engaging with the actual social and political forces of this world, right here, right now.

## CONCLUSION

In using the installation form as an arena to explore the material, formal and structural qualities of medium, Ahtila’s work explores with some precision and alacrity the concerns of experimental film and video, not least how film creates meaning and stages new relations between viewer and screen. Ahtila does this by employing the familiar devices of rupture, layering impossible languages and by exposing the works’ formal and structural qualities, but, they are strategies, rather than ends in themselves, aligned to serve an altogether different purpose, one that thinks also through affective, perceptual and cognitive strategies.

This paper argues that *Where is Where?* moves the debates and practices of experimental and deconstructive film and video far beyond the introspective issues of screen, spectatorship and installation in the process of capturing both a specific event and the Event structure of time, which is an extraordinarily ambitious claim made principally through employing conceptual tools originally developed by Gilles Deleuze and rarely used in relation to artist’s film and video. We might expect the more familiar Deleuzian cinema concepts of Time and Movement Image, the Crystal or Affection Image to be profitably employed in relation to Ahtila’s work; instead other of his principal concepts, Aion and Chronos, are exploited to capture what is so remarkable about these works.

The central argument is that *Where is Where?* thinks intensively through sense, multiple durations, the materiality of Chronos, and the infinite divisibility of the instant in Aion to create a palpable sense of the Event. In a detailed analysis of structure, forms, images and spectatorship, we claim that the event structure of life, the installation as an Event and the conceptual apparatus are consubstantial. As we have already mentioned, “with every event, there is indeed the present moment of its actualisation, the moment in which the event is embodied in a state of affairs, individual or a person.” The paper argues that “this moment has come” twice; the Event of the French invasion of Algeria folded into the present so as to be still palpable in French and European consciousness and come again in the staging of the Event in the video Installation.

## NOTES

1. Defined by Kate Mondloch as post-1990 works of art in which artists have “made claims upon cinema” within the institutional context of the visual arts. The writers to which this paper refers are either artists, writers who make significant contributions to this field, lecturer’s in Art Schools or, more likely, combinations of all. Mondloch, “Placing Artists’ Cinema,” *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 52 (2010).

2. Maeve Connolly, *The Place of Artists’ Cinema Space, Site and Screen* (Bristol: Intellect, 2009), 93.

3. Ibid.

4. Jane Philbrick, “Subcutaneous Melodrama: The Work of Eija-Liisa Ahtila,” *A Journal of Performance and Art - PAJ* 74 25:2 (2003): 34.

5. Ibid.

6. Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

7. Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16:3 (1975): 6-18.

8. Philbrick, “Subcutaneous Melodrama,” 32-47.

9. Maria Walsh, “Cinema in the Gallery – Discontinuity and potential Space in Salla Tykkä’s Trilogy,” *Senses of Cinema* 28 (2003), [http://sensesofcinema.com/2003/28/salla\\_tykka\\_trilogy](http://sensesofcinema.com/2003/28/salla_tykka_trilogy).

10. Walsh does not refer to Lacan and Althusserian structuralism but they lurk behind her arguments, she talks instead of a “deconstructionist mode” of cinema represented by Douglas Gordon’s *24 Hour Psycho* (1993) and Pierre Huyghe’s *Remake* (1995).

11. Walsh, “Cinema in the Gallery,” 2.

12. Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on Societies of Control,” *October* 59 (1992): 3-7.

13. Walsh, “Cinema in the Gallery,” 1.

14. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 320

15. Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (London: Verso, 1994), 195-6.

16. Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (London: Continuum, 1986), 65.

17. Ibid., 88.

18. Murray Smith, “The Logic and Legacy of Brechtianism,” in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, ed. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 139.

19. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Schizophrenia and Capitalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 370-71.
20. A phrase misappropriated from Ronald Bogue, *Deleuze on Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2003), 175.
21. Catherine Fowler, "Room for Experiment: Gallery Films and Vertical Time from Maya Deren to Eija Liisa Ahtila," *Screen* 45:4 (2005): 331
22. David Curtis, *Video and film works in A History of Artists' Film and Video in Britain* (London: BFI, 2006). Al Rees, *A History of Experimental Film and Video* (London: BFI, 1999). *A Century of Artists' Film in Britain*, film and video program, London, Tate Britain, 2004. *Nothing Special: Artists' Video, Media and Reality*, exhibition, Liverpool, FACT, 2003. *Expanded Cinema Activating the Space of Reception*, symposium, London, Tate Modern, 2009.
23. Catherine Fowler, "Room for Experiment," 324-43.
24. Peggy Gale, review of *Into the Light: The Projected Image in American Art 1964-1977*, Whitney Museum of American Art, *Filmwaves* 1:17 (2002): 9-11.
25. Deleuze, *Essays: Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 18.
26. This requires some clarification. There is no suggestion of "intertextuality" or Derridean deconstruction at work here, because for Deleuze texts are merely "small cog[s] in an extra-textual practice [...] it is a question of seeing to what use it has in the extra-textual practice that prolongs the text." Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, trans. R. Howard (London: Penguin, 1973), 186-87.
27. Philbrick, "Subcutaneous Melodrama," 45.
28. Marc Augé, *Non-places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 1995), 110-11.
29. Jessica Morgan and Gregor Muir, *Time Zones* (London: Varilux, 2004), 23.
30. Peter Osborne, "Distracted Reception: Time, Art and Technology," in *Time Zones*, ed. Jessica Morgan and Gregor Muir (London: Varilux, 2004), 73.
31. Catherine Elwes, *Video Art: A Guided Tour* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), 153.
32. Ibid.
33. Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 268.
34. Osborne, "Distracted Reception," 70.
35. Henri Bergson, *Duration and Simultaneity: Bergson and the Einsteinian Universe*, trans. Leon Jacobsen, ed. Robin Durie (New York: Clinamen Press, 1999).
36. Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999): 14.
37. Osborne, "Distracted Reception," 68.
38. Morgan and Muir, *Time Zones*, 23.
39. Mieke Bal, "What If?: The Language of Affect," in *In(ter)discipline: New Languages for Criticism*, ed. Gillian Beer, Malcolm Bowie, and Beate Perrey (Oxford: Legenda, 2007), 6.
40. Ibid.
41. Tom Conley, "Folds and Folding," in *Gilles Deleuze: Key Concepts*, ed. Charles J. Stivale (Chesham: Acumen, 2005), 174 (trans. modified).
42. Eija-Liisa Ahtila, "Synopsis." In *Where is Where?*, edited by Ziba Ardan de Weck (London: Parasol unit/Koenig Books, 2010), .
43. Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 172.
44. Bal, "What If?", 12.
45. Alison Butler, "This Must Be the Place," in *Where is Where?*, ed. Ziba Ardan de Weck (London: Parasol unit/Koenig Books, 2010), 90.
46. Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (London: Continuum, 2003).
47. Exteroception and proprioception are the "perception of external stimuli, through the sense, and the body's perception of itself, its position and movement." Butler, "This Must Be the Place," 91.
48. Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 169.
49. Ibid., 7.
50. Ibid., 189.
51. Ibid., 73.
52. Deleuze and Richard Pinhas, "Cours Vincennes: On Music," <http://www.webdeleuze.com/php/texte.php?cle=5&groupe=Anti+Oedipe+et+Mille+Plateaux&langue=2>.
53. Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 73.
54. Ibid., 72.
55. Ibid., 188.
56. Ibid., 73.

57. Taru Elfving, "The Viewer Interrupted: The Address and Witnessing as Modes of Dialogue," paper presented at *Contemporary Visual Culture Hayward Conversations #3*, The Hayward Gallery, 23 Oct. 2009.

58. Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 177.

59. Philbrick, "Subcutaneous Melodrama," 32.

60. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 2.

61. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 276-77.

62. Elfving, "The Girl in Space-Time. Encounters with and within Eija-Liisa Ahtila's Video Installations," in Conference Proceedings for *Affective Rethinking: Embodiment in Feminist Media Studies*, ed. Anu Koivunen and Susanna Paasonen (Turku: University of Turku in association with the Finnish Society for Cinema Studies, 2000), 5, [http://www.hum.utu.fi/oppiaineet/mediatutkimus/tutkimus/proceedings\\_pienennetty.pdf](http://www.hum.utu.fi/oppiaineet/mediatutkimus/tutkimus/proceedings_pienennetty.pdf).

63. James Williams, *Gilles Deleuze's Difference and Repetition: A Critical Introduction and Guide* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 23.

**UPSIDE-DOWN CINEMA:  
(DIS)SIMULATION OF THE BODY  
IN THE FILM EXPERIENCE**

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"You see, madness, as you know, is like gravity.

All it takes is a little push!"

— The Joker, in *The Dark Knight*

Watching a film is an experience of a relationship between bodies in space. Orthogonally oriented in front of the screen, there is the spectator's body, sitting almost motionless (s/he can move his/her head and eyes relatively freely), physically passive, although mentally and emotionally very active. On the screen — in a space that begins with its surface but extends with a perceptual and emotional depth — is displayed a series of landscapes, objects and bodies, above all those of the characters. The point is that, even though different in nature, the fictional world of the character and the real world of the viewer both have the same basic orientation: head up, feet down, as in ordinary everyday life. The space in which the fictional character's body moves seems to be bound by the same laws that govern the real world (and not only for *realistic* subject matter) — above all, by the law of gravity, the very force that controls the relationship between body and space. The character walks along a street that is *under* his feet; a car runs along a road that passes *under* its wheels; a superhero soars *upwards*; in the face in the close-up, the forehead is *above* the chin, and the nose is *under* the eyes... In short, we see bodies

and environments as we see them outside the film theatre, on a plane that is orthogonal to our vision and that offers an orientation that can be called “natural” because it is “common,” “usual,” “habitual,” “ordinary,” “normal” and readable without any effort, and because it obeys the laws of nature.

The power of cinema, of course, is that it can disregard physical laws. Cinema may count on “fantasy” or “artistic license”: in some cases, the character may even walk *on* the walls or the ceiling, his face may appear on the screen upside down. How does this exceptional case affect the spectator’s experience? What if the “standard” bodily orientation of the film experience were upturned? What if the spectator’s head-up-feet-down orientation related with the upside-down character’s body orientation? This article analyses a series of upside-down images (especially of the character’s face) in different genres of narrative films. Even though this is not a very frequent occurrence in narrative cinema — we will also see why it is avoided — it can however be found throughout cinema history, with different aims and specific stylistic presentations. The fundamental argument is that the upside-down image provides the spectator a controversial experience that comprises a dual and oxymoronic dynamic: a *disembodying phase* (i.e., the “upside-downing”) and a *re-embodying phase* (the “upturning”). In the disembodying phase, the narrative situations and formal solutions used in the film aim to perturb the spectator’s usual perception and to elicit the pleasure of experiencing such an unusual and thrilling condition of perception. In the re-embodying phase, the film restores the ordinary condition of perception in order to not demand the spectator a prolonged cognitive and perceptual effort. However, this process implies that the final “straighten up” image and the initial “upright” image are different and express different psychological meanings.

The theoretical framework of this study embraces phenomenology and psychology. In particular, the analysis stems from the contribution of Maurice

Merleau-Ponty to the phenomenology of perception and relies on a Gestaltic approach to the film experience. The phenomenon of retinal inversion and adaptation to upside-down spectacles attracted psychologists at the turn of the XIX century<sup>1</sup> and found a renewed interest in the 1960s.<sup>2</sup> More recently, both cognitive psychology and neurocognitive research investigated the psychic conditions and the neural correlates of upside-down vision.<sup>3</sup>

However, film theory has not yet approached the upside-down image systematically. This exploration could be even more relevant if conducted in the paradigm of *embodied cognition*. As Varela, Thompson and Rosch stated, the term "embodied" highlights two points: "first, that cognition depends upon the kinds of experience that comes from having a body with various sensorimotor capacities, and second, that these individual sensorimotor capacities are themselves embedded in a more encompassing biological, psychological, and cultural context."<sup>4</sup> I will argue that the upside-down image establishes a conflicting relationship between the body and the eye, which (in the disembodying phase) interfere with each other, until the re-embodiment comes into play as a factor of re-organization and re-orientation. Although the human perception, when confronted with an upside-down image, adapts to the inverted image and re-establishes an orientation automatically, the film provides a perceptual and cognitive adaption *on behalf* of the spectator.

## INVERTED RETINAL INVERSION

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, in the chapter on "Space," Maurice Merleau-Ponty recounts psychologists George Stratton and Max Wertheimer's experiments on vision without inversion of the retinal image in order to demonstrate that the human sense of space is formed *before* our eyes and that our relation to space is

bodily and not primarily reflective. "Space is not the setting (real or logical) in which things are arranged, but the means whereby the position of things becomes possible."<sup>5</sup> The best way to demonstrate this insight is by analysing an "exceptional case" (i.e., vision without retinal inversion) in which what we normally perceive through our ordinary experience is deconstructed and re-formed.

In one of the reported experiments, Stratton asked a subject to wear special glasses that correct the retinal images and *invert* the physiological *retinal inversion*, so that images are cast on the retina as if the whole field of view had been rotated about the line of sight through an angle of 180°. The experiment lasted a week, and during this period, the subject's vision changed. During the first day, the landscape appears unreal and upside down; this is due to the conflict between tactile and visual perception. Yet progressively vision becomes less unreal. The next day, in fact, "the landscape was no longer inverted, but the body is felt to be in an abnormal position." From the third day on, "the body progressively rights itself, and finally seems to occupy a normal position." In other words, what Merleau-Ponty aims to demonstrate is that human perception is capable of adapting to a new, inverted visual orientation, to the extent that the latter becomes "normal." "The new visual appearances which, at the beginning, stood out against a background of previous space, develop round themselves [...] with no effort at all, a horizon with a general orientation corresponding to their own." So much so that, when the glasses are removed at the end of the experiment, "objects appear not inverted, it is true, but 'queer,' and motor reactions are reversed."<sup>6</sup> The insight moment of the experiment, therefore, is when the glasses are removed and the initial "normal" situation is restored: the new "image of the world" brings into question the old image; the new upright image does not correspond to the "old" upright image, since the reversal has disturbed and re-formed our sense of upright and upside down.

Can we apply this theoretical framework to the analysis of the upside-down film experience? Since the film experience does not share all the features of the non-mediated experience, some preliminary remarks are required, concerning the specificity of the film experience as a *sui generis* form of relational experience between bodies. The first consideration relates to the psychophysical condition of the beholder, in particular the particular kind of *passive activity* in which s/he is involved; the second addresses the role of the camera and the point of view as factors *mediating* that relationship. Both these clarifications are functional to a full understanding of the complex dynamic that creates a conflict between the spectator's and the character's bodily orientations and that leads narrative cinema to resolve it. As stated above, rather than rashly embracing *embodiment* as a general description of the film experience, my fundamental hypothesis is that narrative cinema provides a *re-embodiment* of an experience that is inevitably *disembodied*.

### **Passive Activity**

As Merleau-Ponty clarifies, the progressive *bodily righting* reached by the subject in Stratton's experiment is achieved "particularly when the subject is active."<sup>7</sup> As the visual field is inverted, the

mass of sensations which is the world of touch has meanwhile stayed "the right way"; it can no longer coincide with the visual world so that the subject has two irreconcilable representations of his body, one given to him by his tactile sensations, and by those "visual images" which he has managed to retain from the period preceding the experiment; the other, that of his present vision which shows him his body "head downwards."<sup>8</sup>

The resolution of the conflict between tactile/motor sensations and visual images “is the more successfully achieved in proportion as the subject is more active.” The fact that the subject uses his/her body to move into space assists with the progressive *righting* of perception. In other words, “it is the experience of movement guided by sight which teaches the subject to harmonize the visual and tactile data: he becomes aware, for instance, that the movement needed to reach his legs, hitherto a movement ‘downwards’, makes its appearance in the new visual spectacle as one which was previously ‘upwards.’” By contrast, when the subject “is lying motionless on a couch, the body still presents itself against the background of the former space, and, as far as the unseen parts of the body are concerned, right and left preserve their former localization to the end of the experiment.”<sup>9</sup>

An obstacle to the application of Merleau-Ponty’s reflections to the film experience may be the (relatively) passive condition of the spectator’s body, which sits almost motionless in front of the “virtual” space of the screen, on which are depicted movements and gestures of foreign bodies, not of his/her own. How can the conflict between motor sensations and visual images be resolved if motor sensations exclusively depend on visual images, and the spectator’s body is inactive and unable to counterbalance this effect?

What I am implicitly arguing is that the film experience cannot be considered as completely *embodied*. It is true that relatively recent discoveries in neurocognitive research on the so-called “bimodal” neurons<sup>10</sup> provided scientific evidences that, in particular conditions, human beings are internally *active* during the mere observation of actions and emotions executed and expresses by other subjects. By expanding the hypothesis of *embodied simulation*<sup>11</sup> to the film experience, it can be hypothesized that, although the spectator’s physical body remains still ‘in front of’ the screen, s/he internally simulates the (intentional) actions and emotions that are represented on screen, “as if” actually doing that action and feeling that emotion.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, my

argument is that the perceptual-cognitive process performed by the spectator, when confronted with an upside-down image, seems to interfere with a low-level and neuro-physiological simulation. Indeed, the disorientation of the perceptual patterns hamper the activation of the “mirror mechanism.” The upside-down image causes a sort of displacement or *disembodiment* of perception; it creates a gap that needs to be filled up. As Merlau-Ponty suggests, even in the film experience, tactile and visual perception are potentially in constant conflict. The conflict can be resolved by the spectator on a cognitive level (through a perceptual adaptation), or by the film itself on an expressive level (i.e. what I call *re-embodiment*).

### Centre of Gravity

As Rudolf Arnheim argued in 1932, films are viewed in the *absence of the nonvisual world of the senses*, such that “Our eyes are not a mechanism functioning independently of the rest of the body. [...] Our sense of equilibrium when we are watching a film is dependent on what the eyes report and does not as in real life receive kinaesthetic stimulation.”<sup>13</sup> On closer inspection, this “deficiency” of the *disembodied eye*, that is, the *relativity* of the spatial framework, may even be seen as an advantage for the artistic purpose of the film. As Arnheim wrote:

One of the factors that determine the difference between looking at a motion picture and looking at reality is the absence of the sense of balance and other kinesthetic experiences. In everyday life we always know whether we are looking straight ahead or up or down; we know whether our body is at rest or in motion, and in what kind of motion. But [...] the spectator cannot tell from what angle a film shot has been taken. Hence, unless the subject matter tells him otherwise, he assumes that the camera was at rest and that it was shooting straight.<sup>14</sup>

In the film experience, since there is nothing to suggest to the spectator what the camera angle is or whether it is upside down, "The absence of any feeling of the force of gravity also makes a worm's-eye view particularly compelling."<sup>15</sup>

Arnheim's words help to focus on a second aspect, closely connected to the previous: the problem of the constitution or pre-constitution of a system of reference points for orientation. The interference between *recognition* and *perception* — the conflict between the spectator's assumptions and the "real" orientation in the fictional world — seems to be very problematic if related to an embodied conception of the spectator.

As Merleau-Ponty states,

"Inverted" or "upright," in themselves, obviously have no meaning. The reply will run: after putting on the glasses the visual field appears inverted in relation to the tactile and bodily field, or the ordinary visual field, which, by nominal definition, we say are "upright." [...] we have as yet only sensory fields which are not collections of sensations placed before us, sometimes "head to the top," sometimes "head downwards," but systems of appearances varyingly orientated during the course of the experiment.<sup>16</sup>

The French philosopher challenges both empiricist and intellectualistic psychology. The first "treats the perception of space as the reception, within ourselves, of a real space, and the phenomenal orientation of objects as reflecting their orientation in the world"; for the second, "the 'upright' and the 'inverted' are relationships dependent upon the fixed points chosen." Merleau-Ponty chooses a "third spatiality" and affirms the need for "an absolute within the sphere of the relative," a space that "survives (the) complete disorganization" of "top" and "down." The philosopher is

not offering a *relativist* account of orientation, but rather an *embodied* perspective of human perception.<sup>17</sup>

The “correction” of the field (i.e., the “*new normal*” orientation) is understandable only if one conceives of the body as “the subject of space,” which is “geared onto the world”: “The perceptual field corrects itself and at the conclusion of the experiment I identify without any concept because I live in it, because I am borne wholly into the new spectacle and, so to speak, transfer my centre of gravity into it.” Rather than “a process of thought,” bodily orientation is something pre-cognitively *lived*. It is an experience in which the body is a *centre of gravity*, a point of reference relative to which a relationship is established, and this relationship is between the body and the world, between the subject and the environment in which it moves. Grounded in the body is a *primordial level* of space, an “already constituted” space that represents the general system of orientation in respect to which we can identify the *sense* of “up” and “down.”<sup>18</sup>

Wertheimer’s experiment on repositioning the orientation parameters (i.e. high and low) while the subject sees the image of a room oriented obliquely through a mirror, suggests a solution that is consistent with a notion of the spectator’s body as *active*. “My body is wherever there is something to be done.” It is, phenomenologically, a lived-body (*Leib*), and, in fact, “The reflected room miraculously calls up a subject capable of living in it.” As Merleau-Ponty states,

This virtual body ousts the real one to such an extent that the subject no longer has the feeling of being in the world where he actually is, and that instead of his real legs and arms, he feels that he has the legs and arms he would need to walk and act in the reflected room: he inhabits the spectacle.<sup>19</sup>

The conditions in which the “inhabitation of the spectacle” may happen are of great interest:

my body is geared onto the world when my perception presents me with a spectacle as varied and as clearly articulated as possible, and when my motor intentions, as they unfold, receive the responses they expect from the world. This maximum sharpness of perception and action points clearly to a perceptual ground, a basis of my life, a general setting in which my body can co-exist with the world.<sup>20</sup>

“Clarity” and “sharpness” describe an experience based on the fundamental principle of Gestalt psychology of perception: *Prägnanz*,<sup>21</sup> i.e., the idea that we tend to order our experience in a manner that is regular, orderly, symmetric, and simple. In brief, the *relationist* (rather than *relativist*) Merleau-Pontyan account of perception implies a *primordial sense* of perception and orientation that is constructed based on *Prägnanz*.

This enables us to reflect on the nature of film perception. In order for bodies and events to be readily perceived and understood by the spectator, they are depicted on screen using a recognizable and comprehensible spatial orientation. Given our Merleau-Pontyan assumptions, we can theorize that the “standard” head-up-feet-down bodily orientation offered by narrative cinema is such not merely for its being the “common,” “usual,” “habitual,” “ordinary” orientation but rather for its being a *good* orientation, one that not merely obeys the laws of nature but rather obeys the principle of *Prägnanz*. The film experience has to be well balanced, centred, not easily thrown off balance, because the spectator’s body is “geared into the world” and the relationship between the body and the world is “already constituted” in that way, at a preliminary spatial level, and *that way* is a *good* one.

For example, if we look at an upside-down face for long enough, that unrecognizable face becomes an entity in its own right — more than a mere *inversion of an image*, it becomes an *image of inversion*: “the face takes on an utterly unnatural aspect, its expressions become terrifying, and the eyelashes and eyebrows assume an air of materiality such as I have never seen in them. For the first time I really see the inverted face as if this were its ‘natural’ position.” This shows that “To invert an object is to deprive it of its significance.” The gaze meets the face “at certain angle, and otherwise fails to recognize it.” It is, fundamentally, a matter of recognition. “This is why each object has its ‘top’ and its ‘bottom’ which indicate ... its ‘natural’ position, the one which it ‘should’ occupy.”<sup>22</sup>

### **The Third Body**

At this point, a final theoretical clarification has to be done. In fact, in the film experience, it is not the actual spectator’s body that moves in the (filmic) world and touches the (filmic) objects. This means that the spectator’s body cannot be considered the actual “centre of gravity” and that the balance in the orientation depends exclusively on the fact that cinema offers a good orientation — it obeys, so to speak, the law of gravity, which is valid in both the character’s and the spectator’s world and which, ideally, connects and merges the two spaces (the darkness in the movie theatre reduces distance and creates this spatial continuity). In other words, even though the bodily orientation system of the character and that of the spectator are independent of each other, they are psychologically and physically related. But this also means that upright orientations can be overturned at any time. The cinema can orientate his/her body at its own discretion, upright or upside down (other oblique angles are generally not used). In all these cases, the problem is not whether the character obeys “filmic” gravity. Cinema can invalidate this *sui generis* kind of law of gravity. Film as a representational medium is potentially non-gravitational in

any case (whereas the spectator's orientation is necessarily grounded in his/her lived-body) and can represent the character in an "extra-ordinary" orientation without a diegetic or physical motivation. This is the point: as the good orientation is broken, and as the point of reference is lost, we realize that our body can be the only point of reference. When the implicit "filmic gravitational pact" is suspended or invalidated, the spectator seeks a new point of reference and finds his/her own body. As Edmund Husserl argued in his "upturn of Copernican doctrine," bodies can only move *in relation to* each other and to the Earth. When the other is missing or the Earth is not under our feet, our body becomes a *basis-body* [*Boden-Körper*], relative to which our positions and movements — and those of other bodies — are oriented.<sup>23</sup> In the film experience, "We define and comprehend movement — and repose — in terms of our own bodily positions, through the sense of inner coordinates rather than in terms of what is merely seen."<sup>24</sup> However, when a conflict occurs between the character's and the spectator's orientation, the spectator feels the need to be reoriented to the usual axes of perception (and this need becomes even stronger when the figures on the screen are human bodies and, in particular, faces shown in close-up).

By expanding Merleau-Pontyan reflections on the upside-down vision to the film, I argue that the upside-down image offers the spectator a primordial space in which the system of reference is preliminarily established based on good orientation. Yet things are complicated because the system is governed by a "third party": the camera, with its "positions" (i.e., the point of view), its "discourse" (the montage), and its "gestures" (the movements). Through these means, cinema regulates the relationship between the spectator's body and the character's body. The "bodily machine" of cinema is a virtual entity that, as it were, replaces the eyes and the body of the spectators in the act of seeing and touching the (filmic) world. This implies the mediation of a third *quasi-body* — the "film-body" — which as

Vivian Sobchack argued, “uses ‘lived modes’ of perceptual and sensory experience (seeing, movement, and hearing the most dominant) as ‘sign-vehicles’ of representation.”<sup>25</sup> More precisely,

The moving camera is not only a mechanical instrument, an object of visual and kinetic perception; it is also a subject that sees and moves and expresses perception. It participates in the consciousness of its own animate intentional, and embodied existence in the world.<sup>26</sup>

Through these “conscious lived modes,” the camera both creates and resolves the conflict between the eye and the body. In the following, I will analyse a series of upside-down images in narrative cinema with the aim of demonstrating how in films the interference between the thrill of bodily disorientation and the cognitive need for clarity and intelligibility can be offered to spectators in a vast range of ways, depending on the incidence of the ‘bodily nature’ of the filmic formal solutions.

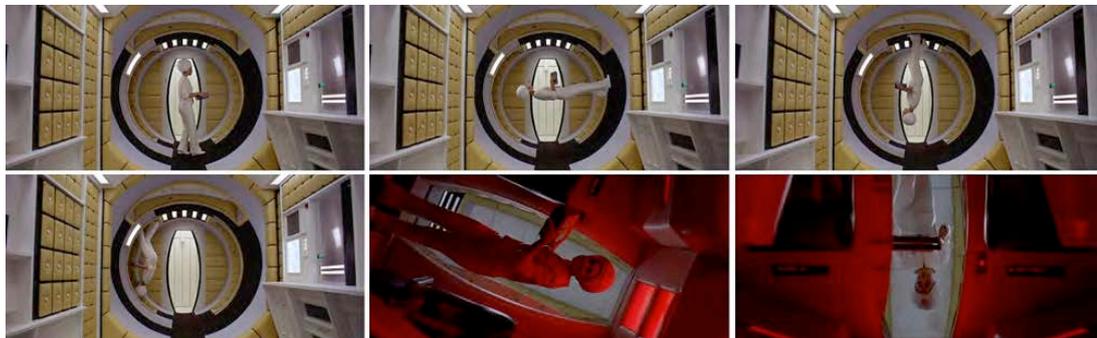
### STATIC-CAMERA UPSIDE-DOWNING



#### Dancing on the Ceiling

Consider a case where the frame remains static and the character moves in the environment in a way that violates the law of gravity. In *Royal Wedding* (1951), Tom

Bowen (Fred Astaire) is in love with a beautiful woman and starts dancing on the walls and the ceiling (it is interesting to note that he rotates around the space). Here we have a subversion of the physical laws that, until that moment, seemed to govern the movement of bodies internally in the film space; the viewer's natural perceptual habit is thus disturbed. Suddenly, the character does not obey the law of gravity that have governed the space in which he moved. The audience need to reformulate their judgments of the validity of those laws. Viewers immediately adjust their perceptual and cognitive patterns to adapt to the new state of affairs. It is less difficult here than in other cases, since we are in a musical, a genre that sometimes has the license to stray into the realms of fantasy. Moreover, the large shot size allows the movement to be fully contextualized. The film expresses and communicates to the spectator the character's state of happiness, light-heartedness and gaiety on both a motor and an emotional level. This solution works because it thematizes the contrast between the fixedness of the external world (the frame remains static with the room in a "standard" orientation) and the variability of the internal world (as the character's anti-gravitational movement express his emotions).



### A Squared Sphere

In some of the indoor sequences of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), the upside-down image is justified by the setting in outer space, namely in an environment where the

force of gravity is naturally absent or severely weakened. Initially, the film context obeys artificial micro-gravity induced by the rotation of the spacecraft: the character remains upright. Suddenly, however, something happens. In the first appearance of an upside-down image, the Aries 1B Moon Shuttle's hostess prepares the dinner for the pilots and enters the cockpit walking on a circular surface: all of a sudden, there is no floor, no wall, and no ceiling (as in *Royal Wedding*, the effect was achieved by building the room set inside a revolving steel barrel and mounting the camera and operator to the floor so they would rotate along with the room).

The relationship between the character's "circular" orientation frame and the viewer's "squared," four-sided orientation frame frees itself from the implicit "gravitational pact." This is simply achieved by the choice of static shot, which continues to obey *a* law of gravity that applies to the audience (the spectator is "kept still") but not to the characters. As Annette Michelson noted in a famous article on Kubrick's film, "The system of pre-supposition sustaining our spatial sense [...] are here suspended and revised";<sup>27</sup> "one rediscovers, through the shock of recognition, one's own body living in *its* space. One feels suspended, the mind not quite able to 'touch ground';"<sup>28</sup> "one becomes conscious of the modes of consciousness."<sup>29</sup> So, what happens here in the audience is what had happened with the dance on the ceiling in *Royal Wedding*, but based on different premises and in a different way. Indeed, the viewer soon accepted that upending bodies is entirely justified in the world of film, but s/he has to face the disorientation. In a gravity-free environment, the notions of up and down or horizontal and vertical lose meaning for the character, but not for the spectator, since the represented three-dimensional space depends on the point of view offered by the camera. As Annette Michelson's comments suggest, there is a cognitive element at work, a natural disposition to restore the "standard" orientation and clearly comprehend the situation in spatial terms. In narrative cinema, the spectator is prepared to experience *unbalance*, on

condition that this is only an exception to the norm, and that the norm is rapidly restored: the general situation must be balanced and “good” oriented.



### Cinematic Dictatorship

Let us return to the atmosphere, yet not quite down to Earth. A classic case that helps us to understand this dynamic is the humorous dialogue between the Jewish barber and the Tomainian officer Schultz on the aeroplane in the opening sequence of *The Great Dictator* (1940). Schultz feels faint and the plane turns upside down. The two characters initially have an upside-down conversation; then, after a simple editing cut, the camera turns upside down and shows the scene with normalized orientation axes.

The gag exploits both these “capsized” images for comic effect, as in the first shot the barber looks *down* and sees the sun and, in the second, the clock escapes from his pocket and slips *up*, while the water comes out of the bottle *upwards* by itself. Beyond its humorous dimension, this example highlights how perception and cognition can trip over each other, as typified in optical illusions: even if the viewer

*knows* that s/he is observing the situation in a certain way, s/he continues to perceive it in a way that conflicts with that knowledge. In restoring the upside-down body to its normal orientation, the film has resolved the conflict on behalf of the viewer. The interesting fact is the comic effect of the cinematic representation of this cognitive dynamic: in being surprised by the “strange” gravity he is experiencing, the barber-Chaplin behaves as if he were upright. And in fact, even if *physically* upright, he is *perceptually* upside down. Looking closer, we see that, in doing this, cinema generates another, inverse, interference: we perceive the characters as upright, but we must try to infer that they are upside down.

The expressive and comical element that makes this strategy interesting is that a state of affairs inferred (but not perceived) as upside down is, however, different from the ordinary, upright state of affairs, as if perceived without any cognitive effort. It is a perceptual and conceptual shift from upright as “double upside down” to *downside up*, an “inverted normality.” In fact, the *downside-up* image is impossible in physical terms (yet possible in perceptual terms), since the camera has moved to the other side of the plane and the characters have swapped position, but the aeroplane continues to fly to the right, whereas it should go to the left. Continuity of direction of movement prevails over correctness of orientation.

Only at the end of the sequence does the force of gravity return to assert itself. In fact, the picture is oriented again like the aeroplane — upside down — and the barber slips into the void *below* him. The plane crashes *down*, but with no physical consequences for anyone, of course!

In *The Great Dictator*, therefore, the “ordinary” orientation is restored by the film itself through the editing process: the counter-overturning is implicit and extraneous to the narrative, but it is explicit as a *static* “act of language.” The spectator needs just a moment to contextualize the orientation of the characters in space (through the alternation of close/ medium shots and long shots) and so to

grasp the comic effect of the gag. The film has only *represented* the “normalization,” rather than offered to spectators in a way that can be fully *experienced*. This *disembodied* strategy is less effective and less interesting than that in which the camera *movement* cause a perturbation of the equilibrium that can be more ‘directly’ felt by the spectator.

### MOVING-CAMERA UPSIDE-DOWNING

The shot of *2001* that follows the abovementioned one, for example, proposes a *dynamic* pattern. This time, a slow camera rotation reproduces the micro-gravity rotation. Whereas in the previous shot it is as if the spectator is “kept still” or “stopped” in his/her position in a space that is rotating, in the second shot the camera simulates the actual rotational movements of the spacecraft, until the hostess orientation is “normalized.”



### A Preventive Move

Let us consider a sequence in the crime-comedy *A Fish Called Wanda* (1988). The dialogue between Otto and Archie, the lawyer, is represented with an apparently “classic” shot/reverse-shot dynamic. After the quarrel inside the building, we see Archie upright, with his back against a brick wall, while finally apologizing to Otto. Suddenly there is a rapid 180-degree rotation of the camera on its axis, combined with an enlargement of the shot. We now see the whole situation: Archie is upside down hanging out of the window, and Otto is holding his legs, in a state of affairs quite different from that initially suggested.

The editing cut here is also an “ellipse” that has hidden part of the events (in which Otto takes Archie and pulls him out of the window). The actual position of the character is hidden in the cut and in the initial narrow, decontextualized frame, which shows only part of the facts and of the space. These elements are *partial* (in the sense of both “incomplete” and “partisan” — gestaltically, the disruption of the figure-ground relationship is used as an artistic device). The rotational movement does not imply an intention to hide the language of film, but rather to flaunt and explicitly reveal the deception. The main purpose is the surprise effect, and this is achieved through a *preventive* normalization of perception that implies a delay in the correct interpretation of the character’s orientation by part of the spectator.



### The Right Place for Drama

Another interesting case is in *Cape Fear* (1991), when Max Cady phones Danielle, attorney Bowden's daughter, to lure her into a trap. After a slow pan of his room, a close-up shows Cady on the phone, with hair hanging down (he is hanging from a door frame to train his abs). Suddenly there is a rapid, full anticlockwise camera rotation (as in *A Fish Called Wanda*, but this time without enlargement of the field, since the spatial continuity offered by the pan and the bathroom visible in the background are enough to contextualize the upside-down position from the beginning). The inversion is thus explicitly artefactual, but it is not intended to hide anything. Cady's initial upside-down position embodies his own inner reversal, his thirst for revenge, his madness. The reversal or normalization of perception through which spectators see Cady upright (despite his being upside down — this is what I call *downside-upness*) allows them to better experience the character's mental instability.



### **Bat's-eye-shot**

Although other examples could be taken into consideration, I want to explore one final case from *The Dark Knight* (2008). In a crucial scene, a classic shot/reverse-shot dynamic is used in a very particular way. Batman has been captured by the Joker and is balanced on a ledge of a Gotham skyscraper. He manages to free himself from his rival's clutches and throw him into the void. The Joker's fall is shown with a bird's-eye shot (Batman's point of view: thus a *bat's-eye* shot, if you will). As we know, Batman's morality forbids him from killing: instead, he launches one of his cables and hooks the Joker. A low-angle shot immediately follows the high-angle shot: Batman starts to pull his opponent up. The Joker is hanging by his feet, upside down. Initially, Batman is upright, the Joker is upside down, and both are represented as such. Almost immediately, the Joker starts to rotate slowly anticlockwise, until he reaches an upright position. The film has normalized the orientation axes by returning them to the usual upright perception, according to the orientation of the seated spectator. In this way, s/he can experience the dialogue in the 'conventional', manner. This allows us to grasp the psychological and communicative intent of the representation: as with Cady, the Joker's face is even more effective *downside up* than upside down in expressing his antagonistic, inverted morality, his madness.

But we have to look deeper. That rotation is hiding something curious. Unlike *The Great Dictator*, in *The Dark Knight* there is no simple editing cut that perceptually normalizes the axes of orientation, nor is the rotation intended to show off the nature of cinematic language or to obtain a comic or surprise effect. When we watch the sequence, it *seems* first that the shot is static and that the Joker rotates. The viewer is inclined to think that, once he has hooked him with his cable, Batman is also straightening his rival up. As Rudolf Arnheim stated in 1932,

if something moves in the picture this motion is at first seen as a movement of the thing itself and not as the result of a movement of the camera gliding past a stationary object. [...] It is, however, possible to make clear which movement is relative and which absolute by the nature and behaviour of the objects shown in the picture.<sup>30</sup>

In *The Dark Knight*, the shot size (close-up) is calculated to exclude this possibility. It takes a while for the spectator to see that the Joker's long hair, his coat-tail, his pocket watch — just like in *The Great Dictator!* — are hanging *upwards*, contrary to the law of gravity. Therefore, this is not a "fictional" movement on the part of the Joker but an artefactual "move" of the film itself. It is not an internal transformation, but rather an external normalization whose subtle workings are, at least temporarily, concealed. This deliberate deception is achieved through a very precise formal strategy aimed at delaying the viewer's correct interpretation of the situation. Above all, we notice the speed of the rotational movement: it is *slow*. In contrast with the rapid and abrupt rotation of the camera in *Cape Fear* and *A Fish Called Wanda*, the camera here moves slowly and silently, softly and stealthily. The aim is to disguise its artefactual nature and to pass it off, at least for a moment, as fictional. The film has the deliberate intention of *dissimulating* its artefactual nature through an anthropomorphic simulation of the ways in which the character's body moves. As Vivian Sobchack stated in this regard, "the moving camera is originally perceived by us in experience as an 'other' who is animate, conscious, and experiences and intends towards the world or toward its own conscious activity as we do."<sup>31</sup> This statement seems to perfectly fit an embodied and empathetic account of the film experience in respect to the movement of the camera as a "*quasi-lived-body*." As Sobchack asserts,

the motility of the camera is prereflectively understood as always of a human consciousness as it is situated in and inhabits the words [...] such understanding arises because camera movement echoes the essential motility of our own consciousness as it is embodied in the world and able to accomplish and express the tasks and projects of living.<sup>32</sup>

Embodiment, in these scenes of *The Dark Knight*, works as a factor of implication and concealing that uses bodily appearances with the aim to *lie* to perception and *open* a cognitive gap. The camera movement appears to be 'transparent' and "invisible," that is — accordingly with Sobchack's (and Merleau-Ponty's) vocabulary — directed to an *intentional object* (Joker rotation), while actually being an *intentional act* in itself.<sup>33</sup> This (delayed) shift from *perception of perception* to *perception of expression* is possible thanks to the capability of the film's body to incarnate the expressive quality of human movement (i.e., slowness). Hence, it is *embodied simulation* that allows *dissimulation*.

## DOWNSIDE UP

Let us summarize our analysis of the cinematic use of upside-down images.

Both *Royal Wedding* and *2001: A Space Odyssey* use static shots and non-gravitational rotational movements of characters to disorient the spectator's bodily orientation. This is justified emotionally in the first case, diegetically in the second.

Both *A Fish Called Wanda* and *Cape Fear* use rapid rotational camera movements presented as explicitly artefactual that cannot be misinterpreted in any way. In the first case, the character is upside down but initially is "mendaciously" presented as upright though a close-up. The combination of rapid camera rotation and extension

of the visual field reveals the real situation, creating a surprise effect. In the second case, the character is upside down and presented as such — the purpose of the camera rotation is not for surprise but rather to present Cady's upside-down morality to dramatic effect.

In both *A Fish Called Wanda* and *The Great Dictator*, the means used to obtain the comic effect is the montage (and not the rotation). Whereas in the latter film the montage actually consists of a spatial edit, in the former it also involves a temporal cut (the rotation/enlargement reveals the real situation and creates the surprise).

Whereas in *A Fish Called Wanda* and *Cape Fear* the camera rotation is rapid and explicitly artefactual, in *The Dark Knight* the camera movement is slow, and this slowness has a different expressive result. *The Dark Knight* is a particular case, since it uses *slow* rotational camera movements to temporarily conceal its artefactual nature and to defer the point when viewers understand what is actually happening.

The editing, the shot size, the point of view, and the camera movement are specific means through which cinema (de)regulates the relation between the spectator's and the character's bodily orientations. That the frame is still and head-up-feet-down oriented lends stability and balance, even if the character's frame is moving counter to the law of gravity (*Royal Wedding*) or in a zero-gravity or artificial-gravity environment (the first part of the sequence in *2001: A Space Odyssey*). The editing may complicate the situation, as it offers upside-down images and leaves it up to the spectator to interpret if they are upright or upside down (*The Great Dictator*). When this "cinematic act" is not hidden in the editing cut but explicitly depicted, as in the case of rapid rotation (*A Fish Called Wanda* and *Cape Fear*), the orientation system changes suddenly and causes a different emotional effect.

All these cases can be viewed as the representation of the various stage of Stratton's experiment reported by Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception*. As

we have seen, in *The Great Dictator*, the editing *uprights an upside-down* image. The cinema has materialized the perceptual work performed by the human *embodied* mind. The film does the work on behalf of the spectator: it *normalizes* the perceptual relational orientation system, often by “*upside-downing*” an *already upside-down* body or face. Phenomenologically, something in the appearance of this upright image has changed after the “*upside-downing*”; restored normality is not quite the same as normality — it is a *downside-up* image. *Downside-upness* is not equivalent to *uprightness*. The *downside-up* process consists of a sort of objectification of the deep meaning of images. Through the “*overturned overturn*,” the character’s inner state is effectively communicated, and the moral and symbolic meanings of their physical position are fully articulated, thus engaging the spectator on various levels. The same happens in *A Fish Called Wanda*, where the spectator sees an upside-down body turned upright and experiences comic surprise. But the fact that Archie is *initially* represented as upright even though he is actually upside-down supports the Merleau-Pontyan idea that the space is constructed in relational rather than in imposed, absolute terms. The opposite happens in *Cape Fear*, where a downside-up body is turned back upright with the expressive aim of showing the character’s ‘subverted’ intentions.

In all these occurrences, the result of the ‘double inversion’ corresponds to a “normalization” of the disturbed balance, although it produces an image that inevitably differs from the initial one. This *downside-up* image corresponds to the moment when the subject of Stratton’s experiment is adapted to the inverted visual orientation. Nevertheless, what is lacking in the film experience in respect of Stratton’s experiments is not only the actual physical activity of the spectator (which may help him/her to better coordinate the sensation of his/her own body in the environment) but also the time for that inverted world to become a “normal” (double inverted) one. Every upside-down image lasts no more than a few seconds

on the screen. Narrative cinema offers a *representation* of the downside-up image and the process of double inversion, but it does not provide an *experience* of that process.

The cases I have considered are, in fact, only exceptions, since mainstream narrative films generally obey the internal or fictional physical laws, in particular that of gravity. Upside-down images are used sparingly, since a film needs to make itself generally intelligible to its spectators, who would not enjoy continuously having to make the effort to restore the usual patterns of perception, or deliberately thinking and inferring how the upside-down image would be when upright. It is true that we initially enjoy seeing the world inverted. The use of upside-downing aims to take the sense of dizziness that the character is experiencing, and to recreate it in the viewer. Even so, it cannot last for more than a few seconds. Upside-downing is, in fact, limited in quantity and duration, since prolonged exposure to such a perceptual reversal would convey a proprioceptive "disorientation" to the spectator that may impair his/her pleasure in the film experience. If a film persists too often or for too long with an upside-down image, or if it does not intend to hide the artifice behind it, its linguistic and artefactual nature becomes explicit, with a consequent dilution of illusionary power. This is avoided in (both classic and postmodern) mainstream cinema, which, to be coherent and to offer a canonical and intelligible experience, can only *represent* this process, rather than offer the spectator a *full experience* of it. Upside-downing inevitably leads to a dilution of illusionary power, leaving the spectator both conscious of the artefactual nature of cinema and self-conscious of his/her sensorimotor, perceptual, and cognitive activity.

*The Dark Knight* seems to offer something different; its approach sheds light on one aspect of the transition of styles in cinematic representation, eloquent signs of a more general relationship between the subject and the world. The spectator has lost his/her point of reference, s/he may count only on his/her "basis-body," and yet

the world is upside down. This example suggests that, in order to face this disorientation, this *disembodiment*, and to restore a comprehensible and recognizable relationship with the world, language assumes bodily form to perform a *re-embodiment* in which the film *dissimulates* its artificiality and *simulates* pseudo-human bodily qualitative features (i.e., slowness). "This is what happens when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object," as the Joker says.

## NOTES

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5. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 2002), 284.

6. *Ibid.*, 285.

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9. *Ibid.*, .

10. See Giacomo Rizzolatti and Corrado Sinigaglia, *Mirrors in the Brain: How Our Minds Share Actions and Emotions* (Cambridge, MA: Oxford University Press, 2008).

11. The notion of *embodied simulation* has been proposed by neurophysiologist Vittorio Gallese as a kind of simulation that uses a pre-existing body-model in the brain and therefore involves a non-propositional form of self-representation. See Vittorio Gallese, "The 'Shared Manifold' Hypothesis: from Mirror Neurons to Empathy," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 8 (2001): 33-50. Gallese, "The Roots of Empathy: the Shared Manifold Hypothesis and the Neural Basis of Intersubjectivity," *Psychopathology* 36 (2003): 171-80. Gallese, "Embodied Simulation: From Neurons to Phenomenal Experience," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 4 (2005): 23-48. Gallese, "Mirror Neurons, Embodied Simulation, and the Neural Basis of Social Identification," *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 19 (2009): 519-36. Gallese, "Motor Abstraction: A Neuroscientific Account of How Action Goals and Intentions Are Mapped and Understood," *Psychological Research* 4 (2009): 486-98.

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15. *Ibid.*, 104.
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17. *Ibid.*, 288 and 289.
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19. *Ibid.*, 291.
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26. Vivian Sobchack, "Toward Inhabited Space: The Semiotic Structure of Camera Movement in the Cinema." *Semiotica* 41 (1/4) (1982), 327.
27. Michelson, "Bodies in Space," 60.
28. *Ibid.*, 58.
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30. Arnheim, *Film as Art*, 32.
31. Sobchack, "Toward Inhabited Space," 324.
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## **EMBODYING MOVIES: EMBODIED SIMULATION AND FILM STUDIES**

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Film is an art, thus expressing one of the most distinctive features of what makes us human. Film is a possible target of investigation for cognitive neuroscience, and for a variety of very good reasons. First, because like all forms of art it exemplifies a mediated form of intersubjectivity where the film is the mediator between the film's creator and film's viewers.<sup>1</sup> Second, because watching a movie exemplifies a type of perception whose relationship with "natural" perception is still hotly debated. Third, because like other kinds of artistic expression, film enables us to study one of the many possible fictional worlds we inhabit, thus tapping into the crucial problem of the relationship between the "real" and the "virtual," between the prosaic world we inhabit in our daily occupations and the imaginary worlds of artistic fiction.

"How can cinema have so powerful a 'reality effect' when it is so manifestly unreal?" We would like to start by reinstating Steven Shaviro's<sup>2</sup> question against the background of the new take cognitive neuroscience proposes on embodiment and applying it to film studies. This "reality effect" represents one of the most challenging issues within the debate of film since its origins. Recent studies within cognitive film theory, visual psychology and neuroscience bring out strong evidence of a continuity between perceiving scenes in movies and in the world, as the dynamics of attention, spatial cognition and action are very similar in direct

experience and mediated experience. We can count on a huge literature on this topic.<sup>3</sup> Thanks to new technologies like fMRI, eye-tracking or other statistical analyses, we can widen the field of our cognitive approach to film theory,<sup>4</sup> also considering that usually neuroscientists base some of their experiments on filmed scenes.<sup>5</sup>

Since we are interested in tapping into such a debate from a motor perspective, our analysis will be based on Embodied Simulation (ES) theory<sup>6</sup>. ES has been proposed to constitute a basic functional mechanism of humans' brain, by means of which actions, emotions and sensations of others are mapped onto the observer's own sensory-motor and visceromotor neural representations. Such theory was triggered by the discovery of mirror neurons in the macaque monkey brain.<sup>7</sup> Mirror neurons are motor neurons that typically discharge both when a motor act is executed and when it is observed being performed by someone else. The functional properties of mirror neurons (mirror mechanism, MM) characterize a parieto-premotor cortical network. Thus, observing an action causes in the observer the activation of the same neural mechanism that is triggered by executing that action oneself.

After two decades of research it is established that a similar MM is also present in the human brain<sup>8</sup>. The MM for actions in humans is somatotopically organized; the parieto-premotor cortical regions normally active when we execute mouth-, hand-, and foot-related acts are also activated when observing the same motor acts executed by others. Watching someone grasping a beer mug, biting an apple, or kicking a football activates the same cortical regions normally activated when actually executing the same actions. Further brain imaging studies showed that the MM also applies to emotions and sensations. Witnessing someone else expressing a given emotion like disgust or pain, or undergoing a given sensation like touch activates some of the visceromotor (e.g., anterior insula) and sensory-motor (e.g.,

SII, ventral premotor cortex) brain areas activated when one experiences the same emotion or sensation, respectively.<sup>9</sup> Such shared activations ground an apparently external stimulus (someone else's emotion or sensation) in our personal experiential acquaintance with the same emotion or sensation.<sup>10</sup>

Summing up, according to ES theory our brain-body system re-uses part of its neural resources to map others' behavior. When witnessing actions performed by others, we simulate them by activating our own motor system. Similarly, by activating other cortical regions we re-use our affective and sensory-motor neural circuits to map the emotional and somato-sensory experiences of others. By means of ES we have a direct access to the world of others. The MM, though, constitutes only one instantiation of ES.

Object perception provides us with another example of ES in the action domain. Seeing a manipulable object selectively recruits the same motor resources typically employed during the planning and execution of actions targeting the same object. Several single neuron recording studies in monkeys and electrophysiological and brain imaging studies in humans demonstrated that neuronal populations in the premotor and posterior parietal cortex — canonical neurons — selectively activate both when grasping an object and merely perceiving it.<sup>11</sup> The sight of a manipulable object, such as a key (see below), evokes a motor activation in the observer's brain even in the absence of any overt motor behavior. Furthermore, when looking at an object the activation of grasping-related motor neural circuits can be affected by the same spatial constraints governing the execution of actual grasping actions. The power of an handled mug to afford a suitable grip has been shown to depend on its actual reachability, even when people do not act upon it, nor intend to do so.<sup>12</sup> Strikingly, spatial constraints affect the ES of one's own potential actions even when observing someone else who is about to act upon the object.<sup>13</sup> The perception of an object, through ES, can be nothing but a preliminary form of action, which

regardless of whether we actually interact with the object or not, gives it to us as something present-at-hand (*zu-handen*, in Heidegger's terms<sup>14</sup>). This suggests that ES constitutively shapes the content of perception, characterizing the perceived object in terms of motor acts it may afford — even in the absence of any effective movement.

A further instantiation of ES concerns the way the brain-body system maps the space surrounding our body, peri-personal space.<sup>15</sup> Posterior parietal and premotor neurons, both in humans and monkeys, integrate visual and auditory information about objects within peri-personal space by mapping it onto the motor programs required to interact with those objects within that space. As envisaged by Merleau-Ponty, “my body appears to me as an attitude directed towards a certain existing or possible task. And indeed its spatiality is not, like that of external objects or like that of ‘spatial sensations’, a spatiality of position, but a spatiality of situation.”<sup>16</sup> The defining properties of peri-personal space consist in its being multisensory (i.e., based on the integration of visual, tactile, auditory and proprioceptive information), body-centered (encoded not in retinal, but in somatic coordinates), and motor in nature. Peri-personal space and its range can be construed, again quoting Merleau-Ponty, as “the varying range of our aims and our gestures.”<sup>17</sup>

As in the case of object perception, the ES-based action dependence of peri-personal space does not involve the effective execution of movements, but it is revealed by the potentialities for action shaping the content of our perception of objects within reach even when we are not actually acting upon them.

As recently shown by the Italian philosopher Mauro Carbone,<sup>18</sup> Merleau-Ponty developed a theory of the perceiving body able to testify to the phenomenal truth of movement produced by the discontinuous images of cinema, by means of the movement projection performed by the observer. To paraphrase Merleau-Ponty, “If we now consider the film as a perceptual object, we can apply what we have just

said about perception in general to the perception of a film.”<sup>19</sup> In the following sections we show the relevance of ES for film studies.

## 2. WAITING FOR ES

In the last twenty years we have been witnessing an increasing idea of continuity between the film and the viewer: we perceive the movie as well as we perceive the real world and both the movie and the world contact us primarily at an embodied level and then gradually at a “less wild” level of communication.<sup>20</sup> Biocultural film studies emphasize this kind of access to film, stressing how we can experience movies by means of a brain-body system evolved in a totally different environment.<sup>21</sup> As Deleuze said, “cinema not only puts movement in the image, it also puts movement in the mind [...] I don’t believe that linguistics and psychoanalysis offer a great deal to the cinema. On the contrary, the biology of the brain does.”<sup>22</sup> We should thus get back to the brain-body to grasp our primordial contact with the film and test the plausibility of some film theories.

Deleuze made great use of brain metaphors, making sometimes difficult to understand the real meaning of terms like, for instance, “cinematic synapses”.<sup>23</sup> Martha Blassnigg gave us a good description of the usage of these metaphors within a French culture inspired by Henri Bergson’s *Matter and Memory*, noticing that the analogy between the screen and the brain was put forward by Edgar Morin too, many years before Deleuze — who never cites him in his two cinema books.<sup>24</sup> As Blassnigg writes, “Deleuze makes clear that the brain in a comparison with the screen is not to be understood as a purely cognitive faculty, and he foregrounds the importance of the involved emotive qualities.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, Deleuze’s brain metaphors mark the passage toward a physical approach to film studies that after

the publication of his cinema books put — more or less consciously — the Grand Theory rooted in semiotics and psychoanalysis in a difficult position, foreseeing the advent of a biocultural approach to cinema.

Bioculturalism actually seems to be the right way not only to challenge the Grand Theory, but also to update some insights from cognitive and phenomenological film studies, that have had the extraordinary merit of placing our brain-body system at the heart of film debate, even though demonstrating some resistances in considering the impact of cognitive neuroscience on such a debate. Nonetheless we would like to underline that we do not share the rigid condemnation of semiotics and psychoanalysis, nor of semiotic and psychoanalytic film theory; we know that the best contemporary semiotics and psychoanalysis — as well as the best semiotic and psychoanalytic film theory — are perfectly aware of the need to cope with the contribution of cognitive science and neuroscience.

According to Shaviro, the cinematic apparatus is a new mode of embodiment and “there is no structuring lack, no primordial division, but a continuity between the physiological and affective responses of my own body and the appearances and disappearances, the mutations and the perdurances, of the bodies and images on the screen.”<sup>26</sup>

This continuity is strictly tied to the mode of presence of cinema, i.e., to the impression we are inside the diegetic world, we experience the movie from a sensory-motor perspective and we behave “as if” we were experiencing a real life situation. Indeed Shaviro stresses that such a continuity is mainly detectable at the physiological and affective level, heightening the relevance of our pre-cognitive approach to film, the physicality of such experience and the priority of film affect.<sup>27</sup> Many years after the publication of his book, Shaviro reinforced his positions: “what I was groping towards, bit unable to express fully, was the idea that the cognitive — far from being opposed to the visceral or bodily — grows out of the visceral and is

an elaboration of it.”<sup>28</sup> The “as if” component of our film experience implies two intertwined sides: one rooted in our brain-body and the other developing through our cognitive processes. From this point of view, Ghazanfar and Shepherd’s experiments with monkeys at the movies are very convincing.<sup>29</sup>

The interaction between the film as a lived body and its viewer<sup>30</sup> can go so far as to consider the movie as the crossroad of three different bodies: the body of the spectator, the body of the film, and the body of the filmmaker. MacDougall wrote that images we make are “in a sense mirrors of our bodies, replicating the whole of the body’s activity, with its physical movements, its shifting attention, and its conflicting impulses toward order and disorder. [...] Corporeal images are not just the images of our bodies; they are also images of the body behind the camera and its relations with the world.”<sup>31</sup> The debated idea according to which the movie could be considered like a lived body has been convincingly discussed in Sobchack’s works, as she considers — referring to Umberto Eco — the “lived modes” of perceptual and sensory experience used by the cinema as “sign-vehicles of representation”.<sup>32</sup> However, there is a huge number of scholars considering the film as a lived entity, mainly because it moves.<sup>33</sup> From our perspective, this kind of vitality is detectable as we think of the relationship between the movie and the viewer, since motion pictures, because of their own essence, entail a body able to decipher their movement by simulating it internally. Merleau-Ponty wrote that we can understand the movement only through the movement, that is, thanks to our own body “possibilités motrices”.<sup>34</sup>

Filmmakers would be supposed to create, layer by layer, a living object sharing perceptual and cognitive structures with its viewer and they have to calibrate it according to a significantly different level of empathy. What is at stake is the embodied cognition of a new spatio-temporal dimension, and the only way to make it work is to establish a continuity between our embodied reality and our embodied

visions. The body becomes the starting point both for the filmmaker and for the viewer, recalling what Münsterberg suggested about the way our body adjusts itself in order to guarantee “the fullest possible impression.”<sup>35</sup> As Grodal writes, basically Münsterberg “showed how the film experience might be described as a cued simulation of key mental and bodily functions,”<sup>36</sup> stressing how important our brain-body responses are in order to behave correctly in this new spatio-temporal dimension. Jan Patočka put it very similarly, when he said that “the original spatial perspective within which we locate ourselves receives its orientation from the possibilities of our corporeal activity.”<sup>37</sup>

We posit that ES, considered within this perspective, plays a crucial role not only at the receptive level, but also at the creative one, and this is the reason why filmmakers are generally interested much more than scholars in this new field of research, since they become aware of the basis of their “filmic cognition,” made mostly of gestures, actions, intentions and emotions inscribed in a space-time shaped by film style, camera movements and montage.

Psychological research on visual properties, visual space and film has demonstrated the existence of a strong continuity between perceptual experience in film and the real world, revealing the importance of the body in shaping the film space and in “spatializing” objects and characters.<sup>38</sup> We can posit that this is due to the fact that our brain serves primarily one purpose, moving us around, a crucial activity for our conceptual life too, if we agree with Turner saying that “the basic stories we know best are small stories of events in space,” or that our “image schemas are skeletal patterns that recur in our sensory and motor experience,” or again, referring to Eve Sweetser, that “the mind is a body moving through space.”<sup>39</sup>

Although we mainly empathize with characters, it is self-evident, as Barker pointed out, that we respond to whole cinematic structures — textural, spatial and temporal — that resonate with our own textural, spatial and temporal structures.<sup>40</sup>

The PECMA flow (perception, emotion, cognition and motor action) put forward by Grodal refers basically to this kind of approach, grounding it on the general functional architecture of the brain.

### 3. ES AND ITS RELEVANCE FOR FILM STUDIES

Our point is that ES provides neurobiological grounding to this kind of interpersonal understanding involving the viewer's body, the film as a lived body and the filmmaker's body as well: this is why in making an experiment on film style we should also film the cameraman and his kinematics.<sup>41</sup> These kinds of relations are marked by our bodily involvement, to be considered at the implicit and pre-reflective level of intercorporeality ES conceives of.<sup>42</sup> This is the first contact, without which we cannot have any access to higher cognitive levels, making clear that the intersubjectivity movies enhance relies on internal non-linguistic representations, where the term representation "refers to a particular type of content, generated by the relations that our situated and interacting brain-body system instantiates with the world of others."<sup>43</sup>

ES sheds new light on many insights film theorists, psychologists and even physicians have put forward in XX century. Think of the early experiments made in 1920 by two French physicians, Edouard Toulouse and Raoul Mourgue.<sup>44</sup> Their work, entitled "Les réactions respiratoires au cours de projections cinématographiques," aimed to show how strongly the movies affect the audience and how close the relationship between the movie and its viewer is. As Moussinac wrote five years after these experiments, "les docteurs Toulouse and Mourgue établissent que, étant scientifiquement démontré que la perception du mouvement fait naître l'ébauche du mouvement correspondant, il se produirait à l'écran un phénomène du même genre

que la suggestion hypnotique pratiquée après avoir mis le sujet dans une attitude donnée.”<sup>45</sup> Moussinac blends physiology and hypnosis but he suggests interpretations corroborated in recent years thanks to the discovery of MMs in humans.

The physical effect of film was brought out by Benjamin, who wrote about the tactile (*Taktisch*) quality of film,<sup>46</sup> and strongly condemned by Duhamel, who described in his 1930 *Scène de la vie future* film movement and rapidity as a means of impairing not only comprehension but also any form of participation<sup>47</sup> — and Benjamin will refer to him in his *The Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility*. The same effect characterized, to some extent naively, primitive and pre-narrative movies, in which the central role played by the human body within the frame elicited this kind of mirror effect. Such a matter will be also discussed in the works of Soviet filmmakers like Kuleshov, Pudovkin, Vertov and Eisenstein both in their films and writings, where by means of a process of trial and error they were committed in bridging film language and human brain processing. The physical effect will be incorporated in the transparency of classical Hollywood montage, that to some extent tried to externalize our cognitive processes, then challenged by the so-called modern cinema, aiming to break the sensory-motor relationship between the viewer and the movie by changing the normal “affordances” a movie entailed. Nowadays we see how new technologies try to enhance a multisensory relation based on new forms of immersion and physical involvement.

The central question is: How and at which level does the movie engage the viewer? Kracauer, perfectly in line with our assumption, would answer that the moving image engages the viewer “physiologically before he is in a position to respond intellectually” and it elicits “a ‘resonance effect’ provoking in the spectator such kinesthetic responses as muscular reflexes, motor impulses, or the like. In any case, objective movement acts as a physiological stimulus.”<sup>48</sup> This is very close to

Michotte's concept of "mouvement incipient," by means of which "*je sens ce que l'autre fait*"<sup>49</sup> — that is roughly the Italian title of Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia's *Mirrors in the Brain: So quel che fai*.

The ES perspective may represent the basic link facilitating the convergence of high and low-level theories wished by Joseph and Barbara Anderson at the beginning of the "post-theory" era.<sup>50</sup> ES can better explain the activity of the viewer as a "cinesthetic subject,"<sup>51</sup> allowing us to cope with our subcognitive responses to film in a different and more elegant manner. ES can also shed new light on the "mode of presence" of cinema.<sup>52</sup> Since ES is characterized by the capacity to share meaning of actions, basic motor intentions, feelings and emotions, it is clear how relevant could be its role in the experience of many "action-packed" movies able to elicit subcognitive or cognitively impenetrable responses,<sup>53</sup> or in the studies on film immersion based on the perception of viewer's presence in the diegetic world or on self-location in a virtual world.<sup>54</sup>

ES updates and enhances simulation theories, by showing that the tracking process is shaped by motor programs and somato-sensory and interoceptive "representations" in bodily format activated in the observer.<sup>55</sup> ES generates the Feeling of the Body that constitutes "a crucial ingredient of our relationship with fictional narratives."<sup>56</sup> The Feeling of the Body consists of the activation within the observer of non-linguistic "representations" of the body-states associated with the observed actions, emotions, and sensations, as if he or she were performing a similar action or experiencing a similar emotion or sensation. The Feeling of the Body, according to this hypothesis, would enable a direct access to the world of others by means of the ES-mediated capacity to share the meaning of actions, basic motor intentions, feelings, and emotions with others, thus grounding our identification with and connectedness to others. Intersubjectivity should thus be viewed first and foremost as intercorporeality. Simulation appears more and more essential to the

understanding of how we represent ourselves through art, and MMs could be recognized as the first agents of this kind of embodied cognition.<sup>57</sup> Also simulation theories, conceived within the range of action of ES, play a role in our understanding of the nature of what we feel and we believe in aesthetic experience and obviously in film experience.

The embodied side of the “as if” response in relation to fiction relies on this kind of simulation and allows us to reconsider the debate on the impression of reality films elicit and on the real nature of our reactions.<sup>58</sup> Coleridge’s well-known “willing suspension of disbelief,” that has had a powerful afterlife in film studies, has gone through a big crisis in the period we are referring to: we read new proposals about the necessity for the viewer actively constructing disbelief in order to cope with what Richard Gerrig described as “anomalous suspense,”<sup>59</sup> or about the necessity of emphatically applying our disbeliefs in order to inhibit the default “realistic” answer of our perceptual system.<sup>60</sup> Some interesting contributions have tried to update such a concept, rethinking it within a Winnicottian perspective, or trying to give it a more scientific basis.<sup>61</sup> The central question is still the reality effect: why, being aware of our condition of spectators inside a dark movie theatre, are we victims of the anomalous suspense a movie elicits? And why do we experience the same feeling even when we see this movie for the second or third time? David Bordwell tries to answer such a question in a very intriguing way: “a great deal of what contributes to suspense in films derives from low-level, modular processes. They are cognitively impenetrable, and that creates a firewall between them and what we remember from previous viewing.”<sup>62</sup> According to Bordwell, the resonance effect that, for instance, mirror neurons are able to create in the viewer would play a key role in this kind of pre-cognitive contact, and as we know movies are well suited to produce mirroring processes.<sup>63</sup> Bordwell’s “firewall hypothesis” is in line with recent researches on the vestibular system in film, according to which “though it is

true that we can, to some extent, use our cognition to unwire our experience of a film (by using belief/ disbelief mechanism, for instance), and switch to a mere intellectual (high order) experience, there are, however, limits to how much control we can exert over the low level sensory experience offered by a film.”<sup>64</sup>

However, such classical theories as Radford’s paradox of emotional response to fiction, or the so-called “pretend theory” and “thought theory” are challenged by the new insights cognitive neuroscience puts forward and particularly by ES. ES posits an on-line relation between the observer and the observed, anticipating, complementing and giving a neural basis to Currie’s off-line running of our mental processes. His Simulation Hypothesis has had a huge impact on cognitive film studies, although it neglects the physical impact of film on the viewer. We are not alone in wishing for an intervention by Currie in this debate, maybe focusing on the contribution of MMs.<sup>65</sup> Currie says that one reason we can run our mental states off-line is to engage with fictional world,<sup>66</sup> but we have already observed how important it is to complement such an interpretation with a study of our bodily representation of this fictional world. Referring to our sensory-derived experience of the world, to the way we “manipulate” it with our brain, and to Sue Cataldi’s work on embodiment, Rutherford focuses on the meaningful relation the film viewer establishes with filmic environment and what such environment offers,<sup>67</sup> sharing actions and intentions.

All the literature on embodied, tactile, visceral, haptic and “full resonance-like” aspects of film is strongly animated by the idea that there is a true link between us and the movies, and — through ES — we can grasp the truth of this getting back to our brain-body system and the way it engages with the real world. Scholars like Shaviro, Sobchack, Barker, Marks and others can subscribe that “what we take to be true in a situation depends on our embodied understanding of the situation”:<sup>68</sup> given the film as a situation, this is true for our “embodied visions” as well. The

reality status of film has its base here, via the affordances this fictional world offers to our brain-body and this is also the reason why neuroscientists like Damasio insist in comparing the movie to consciousness, affirming that whoever invented cinema might have thought, more or less consciously, of the function of the brain.<sup>69</sup>

Obviously ES does not deceive us, nor weaken the “as if” component; on the contrary it can to some extent strengthen such a component, over-riding both the suspension of disbelief and the dynamics of the so-called “segregation of the spaces.” In other words, in aesthetic experience we are temporarily free from our real life occupations and we have the chance to liberate new energies to cope with a dimension paradoxically more vivid than reality. We can describe this attitude, more than as a suspension of disbelief, as a “liberated ES,” keeping us at a safe distance from the film and at the same time increasing the intensity of our relation to it.<sup>70</sup> When watching a movie, our embodied simulation becomes *liberated* because it is freed from the burden of modeling our actual presence in daily life. We find ourselves situated at a *safe distance* from what is being narrated on the screen and this magnifies our receptivity. Through an immersive state in which our attention is entirely focused on the narrated filmic world, we can fully deploy our simulative resources, letting our defensive guard against daily reality slip for a while.

Another important element of liberated simulation consists in the fact that when we watch a movie, we do it almost completely still. While sitting in a movie theater our interactions with the world are almost exclusively mediated by a simulative perception of the events, actions, and emotions portrayed in the movie. A sort of emotional transfer takes place between actors and spectators that, being forced to inaction, are more open to feelings and emotions.<sup>71</sup> When watching a movie we not only entirely focus our attention on it, but our stillness simultaneously enables us to deploy fully our embodied simulation resources at the service of our

immersive relationship with the narrated characters.<sup>72</sup> Also this would be a good way to describe the difference between a mental state relying on our “aesthetic attitude” and another relying on “ordinary” consciousness.<sup>73</sup>

#### 4. Sharing behaviors

Movies are basically action-based and action-packed. The movement normally implies a story developed in space and time and a goal to be reached. What we assume is that this kind of elementary structure contacts us at a pre-verbal level rooted in ES. In other words we must share attitudes and behaviors with what happens on the screen in order to enter that space. Both our beliefs and our ability to infer the meaning of the action we stare at depend on the “we-centric space”<sup>74</sup> enabled by the activation of the shared brain circuits characterizing ES. When we watch a movie we are compelled to privilege the space in front of us, moving in the direction our eyes look at.<sup>75</sup>

At its very beginning cinema embodied a form of modernity shaped by sensation and by a new ability to empathize with a virtual and self-moving environment. In the early phase of film, the body had a huge importance as a stimulus, and many movies within the so-called “cinema of attractions” were animated by the desire to address directly the audience by means of the body, emphasizing gestures, facial expressions, or recurring to some stylistic solutions such as for instance eye-contact. Referring to James Mark Baldwin’s social psychology, Auerbach describes early cinema as the “very scene of corporeal self-objectification.”<sup>76</sup>



The human body was an element of continuity capable of filling the emptiness of narrative structures and film style, and of making the viewer able to move through a new spatial dimension felt to be part of our peri-personal space, according to Lumière's main goal: placing the world within one's reach (*zu-handen*). As Singer puts it, cinema was grounded in "a *neurological* conception of modernity"<sup>77</sup>, that is, in a strong tendency to sensationalism that we can also detect nowadays in many 3D or CGI (Computer Generated Imagery) movies.<sup>78</sup>

The main goal is to affect the viewer with a new kind of moving image, considering it within a sensory-motor perspective. In one of his early writings, referring to Lipps, Eisenstein wrote that "because emotional perception is achieved through the motor reproduction of the movements of the actor by the perceiver, this kind of reproduction can only be caused by movement that adheres to the methods that it normally adheres to in nature."<sup>79</sup> Eisenstein seems to be very close to the ES perspective, but he also sees that film art cannot stop at the body level: the filmmaker has to shift the affect from the body to the language (body) of film, transferring the principles of biomechanics from the actor's body to film's body, becoming a sort of "psycho-engineer" (*psicho-inžener*)<sup>80</sup> who considers the montage as the universal method for "vitalizing human qualities."<sup>81</sup>

Viewers' film experience can vary depending on the quality of film inputs: the acting represents a first stage of embodiment that allows the audience to be on-line not only in respect to its viewing processes, but also to action and tactility. The

acting body is the first form of embodiment, and film style arises from a negotiation with it. Film style could be the result of a fragmentation of our corporeal relation to the world (Soviet montage), a simulation of body's movements, displayed emotions and sensations within the movie as a "fully realized world"<sup>82</sup> (classical Hollywood film), or a neutralization of the action capable of immobilizing the character within his environment, contrasting the transparency of film language and offering a metareflection on film (modern cinema).

These cases, characterizing the abovementioned different phases of film history entail various sets of spectators' beliefs rooted in different cognitive and pre-cognitive domains. In the vast majority of cases the viewer feels the camera as her own body — capable of walking and making gestures —, and the movie as a sort of strange out-of-body experience: according to Barker, "when viewers and films share certain attitudes, tasks, or situations, they will move in similar ways."<sup>83</sup>

Sharing attitudes and behaviors means grasping the action potentiality of a movie, on which much part of its make-believe cues relies. ES could represent an interesting way of reconsidering the history of film style on a motor and interoceptive basis, considering it both from the filmmaker's perspective and from the viewer's one. When a movie gives up its goal-orientation or its action potential, as in the case of 1960s new waves, we have to share other attitudes, wondering about director's hidden intentions and feeling a bit excluded from its environment. The degrees of ES could be an index useful to evaluate our cognition in film experience, and to test the "saliency" of a film sequence<sup>84</sup> and the limits of our beliefs.

In the final part of our paper we analyze two important sequences of two very different movies: one from Hitchcock's *Notorious* (1946) and one from Antonioni's *Il grido* (1957), two good examples of identification and disidentification with character's actions, motor intentions, feelings and emotions. These two sequences

are characterized by the same stylistic solution – a false point-of-view (FPOV) shot – one that causes totally different embodied attitudes.

#### 4.1. *Notorious*: To Grasp or Not to Grasp

According to Truffaut, “*Notorious* is the very quintessence of Hitchcock,” while Krohn entitled the chapter on it “Writing with the camera.”<sup>85</sup> From our perspective *Notorious* is a brilliant example of the classical period and a good model to test the value of an ES approach to film analysis. In the last part of *The Movement-Image*, Deleuze describes Hitchcock as the father of a new kind of image, the relation-image: “each image in its frame, by its frame, must exhibit a mental relation.” This relation is to some extent encoded by the camera movement: “The characters can eat, perceive, experience, but they cannot testify the relations which determine them. These are merely the movements of the camera, and their movements towards the camera.”<sup>86</sup> According to Deleuze, Hitchcock incorporates the viewer’s responses into film style and language, and he is interested in triggering those responses by means of the camera behavior more than by means of the characters’ psychology. In other words Hitchcock aims to contact the viewer at a pre-cognitive level exploiting the potentiality of camera movements, and promoting an embodied approach capable of enhancing the suspense effect: before sharing the experiences of the characters, the viewer shares the experiences of the camera.

The well-known sequence of the key in *Notorious* is usually mentioned for the extraordinary scene in which the camera, mounted on a crane, sees a wide-angle shot of the party and then glides in to an extreme close-up of the key clenched in Alicia’s hand. Nonetheless we would like to recall here the preceding scene. Alicia is going to enter Sebastian’s room to steal the key of the cellar: Hitchcock lets Alicia walk toward the camera waiting for her close-up on the room threshold. Alicia sees Sebastian’s shadow reflected on his bathroom door. The keys are on his desk.

The camera gets close to the desk in order to grasp the keys. The viewer interprets this tracking shot as Alicia's POV shot. Hitchcock expresses very well the character's goal by simulating its accomplishment with a very common stylistic solution. The action potentiality of the camera is perfectly embodied by the tracking shot, sharing Alicia's motor intentions, feelings and emotion.

The viewer is almost ready to grasp the keys, as in a well-done grasping experiment, but Hitchcock decides to frustrate her potential — and almost accomplished — action by showing in the following shot Alicia still on the threshold. The woman, after having evaluated the risks of her action, decides to approach the desk and to grasp the keys: from a stylistic point of view, the structure of the scene is circular, it begins and ends in the same way, just observing Alicia walking in Sebastian's house.

In our opinion this sequence exemplifies how the tracking shot mimicks not only Alicia's potential approach to the keys, but also, by means of ES, the viewer's own potential approach, which turns into a grasping simulation the more the keys are made ready-to-hand, thus evoking the activation of the viewer's canonical neurons. Two distinct simulation processes can be envisaged. By embodying camera movements of the tracking shot, the viewer simulates approaching to the table. This

simulation brings the keys on the table within the observer's simulated personal space, thus turning them into potentially graspable objects, thanks to the ensuing grasping simulation triggered by the activation of the viewer's canonical neurons. Once the viewer realize Alicia is still standing by the room threshold, suspense gets enhanced because it turns out that the previous tracking shot only simulated Alicia's intention to get the keys, and she still has to accomplish her goal at risk of being caught by Sebastian.

An ES-based analysis of Hitchcock's film style could implement the study of some of the most relevant techniques suitable for making the viewer part of the story. At the same time, such an approach is in line with recent attempts to describe Hitchcock's film narrative from an embodied perspective.<sup>87</sup>

#### **4.2. *Il grido*: Thinking up a Movie by Staring at a Wall**

*Il grido* represents a crucial point in Antonioni's filmography, since it anticipates the most recognizable and original stylistic solutions that the Italian director will employ in the tetralogy formed by *L'avventura*, *La notte*, *L'eclisse*, and *Il deserto rosso*. Aldo's floating off in the Po Valley landscape gives Antonioni a chance to reflect on the separation of human beings from reality, shaped by an interruption of their sensory-motor relationship. Aldo is not able to interact with the environment, nor with the other human beings, he is condemned to walk through a space-time he cannot share with anyone. Film style is strongly influenced by this kind of disembodied behavior, and Antonioni decides to contrast the myth of transparency making the viewer aware of the artificial dimension of the camera and heightening the discrepancy between film and reality. Antonioni discusses both the classical film transparency and the transparency of our conscious experience of the world.<sup>88</sup> Like Aldo who has no control over his environment, viewers feels they have no control over the fictitious world, and — as Grodal writes — “this elicits strong subjective feelings which also reflect that the

experience is disembodied”:<sup>89</sup> the viewer experiences a lack of control of vision. As we can read in the film treatment, Aldo is not conscious of his body’s behavior.<sup>90</sup>

Antonioni gets this effect by giving up the POV shot and the shot/reverse shot technique. On the one hand he aims to distort the visual relationship between the viewer and the object of her gaze; on the other hand he aims to refuse the reciprocity between individuals.<sup>91</sup> There is no space for action in Antonioni’s world, as Zernik wrote “le monde est distant, comme ‘à travers une vitre’.”<sup>92</sup> This effect is very detectable if we analyze the sequence of the sugar refinery tower, that we find at the beginning and at the end of *Il grido*.

An extreme high angle shot shows us a worker calling Aldo, since Irma is looking for him. The worker stares at the camera and we interpret the shot as Aldo’s POV shot. Suddenly Aldo bursts into the shot from the left side and makes the viewer aware that it is a FPOV shot — now an over-the-shoulder shot — revealing that there is another gaze regulating the relationship between the characters.

The same solution characterizes the following shots: Irma looks for Aldo, we see her from Aldo’s FPOV shot — still believing in the POV shot — then the man enters the shot.

The following shot — organized in a chiasmic structure — shows Irma who brings to Aldo his packed lunch. Aldo starts going downstairs, but the POV does not change, revealing the presence of a metaphysical gaze.

The same structure is repeated at the end of the movie, preparing for Aldo's death. The contact between Irma and Aldo seems to be impossible; Chatman observes that "Aldo's fall is rather the accidental consequence of a movement of yearning toward Irma, the only woman who could ever satisfy him."<sup>93</sup> Aldo's death could be the punishment for trying to get out from the entrapment Antonioni's camera has created. After Aldo's death, Antonioni gets back to the tower, offering for the last time his "absurd" POV shot.



The refusal of the POV shot and the absence of any reverse angle shot impair the viewer's ability to project herself on the movie, to share attitudes and behaviors with the characters, to empathize with the environment. Recalling what Deleuze wrote on Hitchcock, we can affirm that the camera much more than the characters determines the relations within the movie: we could easily describe Hitchcock's cinema as a cinema of affordance, while Antonioni builds cinematic walls between

the viewer and the movie, impairing movement and projection, and reflecting on the cinematic attitude to deny and at the same time to reproduce reality. According to Joseph Anderson's assumptions on "orientational relationships" in the movie, we can see how "the sense of these combinations of shots depends in large part upon the viewer's correct recognition of the physical orientation of the characters to each other and to their environment."<sup>94</sup>

To quote Chatman for the last time, we can verify this by realizing that Aldo "cannot move into dimension, into depth":<sup>95</sup> this idea of a "blocked vision" was expressed by Antonioni himself when he said that he thought up *Il grido* by staring at a wall.<sup>96</sup>

The scene we chose from *Il grido* again exemplifies the relationship between film style and embodiment, although, this time, from a negative point of view. By disengaging the camera from the character's body and by in so doing revealing a hidden dimension, the viewer is excluded from the diegetic world, becoming aware of the presence of a disembodied narrator. Summing up, while Hitchcock aims to fully exploit an embodied camera in order to violate viewers' expectation, thus enhancing film suspense, Antonioni, by using the very same film technique (FPOV shot), puts viewers in a similar existential situation as the film's characters. Aldo, in the same way as many other of Antonioni's characters is detached from a disembodied world, and viewers share his condition by experiencing an inactive and estranged relationship with the camera.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

ES provides a unitary account of basic forms of social cognition, showing that people re-use their own mental states or processes represented within a bodily

format in functionally attributing them to others. Because of a shared format of bodily representation, we map the actions of others onto our own motor representations, as well as others' emotions and sensations onto our own visceromotor and sensory-motor representations. Movement, space, objects and action are crucial elements to be studied in order to see the film as a place of interaction and intersubjectivity. We propose that these elements are linked to the function of ES.

We believe ES can enrich the philosophical debate within film studies both at the receptive level and at the creative one, by shedding new light on at least three types of embodiment related to cinema: i) film style as embodiment; ii) acting style as embodiment; iii) viewer's responses to filmed bodies and objects as embodiment.

We suggest that ES is able to have an impact on different film styles, adding a new perspective in the history of film styles. The connection between the camera, the characters, the objects on the screen and the viewer has to be studied from all angles. The different gazes the camera eye can convey (e.g., POV shots, over-the-shoulder shots and FPOV shots) imply different levels of "resonance" in the viewer.

Finally we believe that our embodied perspective can inform a new empirical investigation of both the creative and the receptive aspects of film.<sup>97</sup>

## NOTES

1. On the mediated experience both in film and media studies, see some works by Ruggero Eugeni from the perspective of contemporary semiotics: "A Semiotic Theory of Media Experience," [http://ruggeroeugeni.files.wordpress.com/2010/12/asca\\_a\\_theory\\_of\\_semiotic\\_experience.pdf](http://ruggeroeugeni.files.wordpress.com/2010/12/asca_a_theory_of_semiotic_experience.pdf); "Neuroestetica ed esperienza mediale," in *Natura, comunicazione, neurofilosofie*, eds. Francesco Parisi, Maria Primo (Roma-Messina: Corisco), 233-42; *Semiotica dei media. Le forme dell'esperienza* (Roma: Carocci 2010).

2. Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press), 24-25.

3. See Joseph D. Anderson, *The Reality of Illusion: An Ecological Approach to Cognitive Film Theory* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996); James Cutting, "Perceiving Scenes in Film and in the World," in *Moving Image Theory: Ecological Considerations*, ed. Joseph D. Anderson and Barbara Fischer Anderson (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), 9-27; Joseph Magliano and Jeffrey M. Zacks, "The Impact of Continuity Editing in Narrative Film on Event Segmentation," *Cognitive Science* (2011): 1-27; Jeffrey M. Zacks and Joseph Magliano, "Film, Narrative, and Cognitive Neuroscience," in *Art and the Senses*, ed. Francesca Bacci and David Melcher (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011): 435-54; Tim J. Smith, "The Attentional Theory of Continuity Editing,"

*Projections* 1 (2012): 1-27 (and the following “Scholars Roundtable on Continuity Editing,” 28-78).

4. For a review see Tim J. Smith, Daniel Levin, and James E. Cutting, “A Window on Reality: Perceiving Edited Moving Images,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 21:2 (2012): 107-13.

5. See Evan F. Risko, Kaitlin E.W. Laidlaw, Megan Freeth, Tom Foulsham and Alan Kingstone, “Social Attention with Real Versus Reel Stimuli: Toward an Empirical Approach to Concerns About Ecological Validity,” *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 6, art. 143 (2012): 1-11.

6. See Vittorio Gallese, “The Manifold Nature of Interpersonal Relations: The Quest for a Common Mechanism,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London B*, (2003) 358: 517-28; Gallese, “Embodied Simulation: From Neurons to Phenomenal Experience,” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 4 (2005): 23-48; Gallese, “Neuroscience and Phenomenology,” *Phenomenology & Mind* 1 (2011): 33-48; Gallese and Corrado Sinigaglia, “What Is So Special with Embodied Simulation?,” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 15:11 (2011): 512-19.

7. For a review, see Giacomo Rizzolatti and Corrado Sinigaglia, “The Functional Role of the Parieto-frontal Mirror Circuit: Interpretations and Misinterpretations,” *Nature Review Neuroscience* 11 (2010): 264-74.

8. The possibility to firmly establish the existence of mirror neurons in the human brain on the basis of indirect evidence from brain imaging experiments has been challenged for many years — see for example, Greg Hickok, “Eight Problems for the Mirror Neuron Theory of Action Understanding in Monkeys and Humans,” *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* 21 (2009): 1229-43; Agnes Lingnau, Benno Gesierich, and Alfonso Caramazza, “Asymmetric fMRI Adaptation Reveals No Evidence for Mirror Neurons in Humans,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences U.S.A.* 106 (2009): 9925-30. The recent discovery of mirror neurons in the human brain — see R. Mukamel, A.D. Ekstrom, J. Kaplan, M. Iacoboni, and I. Fried, “Single-neuron Responses in Humans During Execution and Observation of Actions,” *Current Biology* 20 (2010): 750-56 — has settled this issue, shifting the debate on what mirror neurons can explain. For a recent review of different views on this issue, see Giacomo Rizzolatti and Corrado Sinigaglia, “The Functional Role of the Parieto-frontal Mirror Circuit: Interpretations and Misinterpretations,” *Nature Review Neuroscience* 11 (2010): 264-74; V. Gallese, M.A. Gernsbacher, C. Heyes, G. Hickock, and M. Iacoboni, “Mirror Neuron Forum,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 6 (2011): 347-69.

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## EXISTENTIAL FEELINGS: HOW CINEMA MAKES US FEEL ALIVE

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This paper explores the role of existential feelings<sup>1</sup> in films, and the impact of the connections between cinema and existential feelings for emotional life in general. The paper begins by explaining the notion of existential feelings<sup>2</sup> and illustrating them in films with *Black Swan* (2010) and *The Help* (2011). Then, the paper concludes that movies offer provide insights about our own existential feelings because films promote emotional awareness by the way they function as emotional laboratories. This will lead us to examine the presence and role of surprise for emotional awareness in general, and by seeing how it works within suspense movies with the illustration of *Rebecca* (1940). The analysis will show how the paradox of suspense is tied to the way we can be surprised by our own feelings, including our own existential feelings. The paper concludes that the cinema is capable of providing this privileged place for exploration because it maintains our ability to feel surprise and keep open to surprise.

Matthew Radcliffe introduced the term “existential feelings” identifying a dimension of emotional life that had not yet been identified by philosophers of emotion.<sup>3</sup> Existential feelings are feelings that capture the ways in which we find ourselves in the world.<sup>4</sup> Radcliffe points out that these existential feelings are often described in daily talk such as when “[p]eople talk of feeling conspicuous, alive, distant, dislodged, overwhelmed, cut off, lost, disconnected, out of sorts, out of touch with things, out of it, not quite with it, separate, detached, at one with the world, in harmony with things, and part of things.”<sup>5</sup> Radcliffe thinks existential

feelings are central to the structure of all human experience,<sup>6</sup> and that they are both feelings of the body and ways of finding oneself in a world.<sup>7</sup>

Existential feelings are distinct from emotions and moods, because they report to how one finds oneself in the world and they shape all experience, so they are prior to emotions and to moods. When people have emotions and moods, they are already felt within a world of feeling. For example, I can feel happy about a present (emotion) even though I woke up in a foul mood (mood) while I already feel something about how I am in the world, such as a sense of connectedness with reality as a sense of belonging to the world (existential feeling). Therefore, existential feelings are distinct from emotions and moods because “they are structures of relatedness between self and world, which comprise a changeable sense of ‘reality,’ ‘situatedness,’ ‘locatedness,’ ‘connectedness,’ ‘significance’.”<sup>8</sup> However, precisely because they are structures of our experience of the world, they are hard to capture and are best identified when there are changes in them, that is, “where the sense of reality is diminished, fragmented or otherwise changed.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, Radcliffe analysis focuses on psychiatric illnesses and literary works, which are two instances in which such changes are most easily identifiable.

Radcliffe uses the phenomenology of touch to illuminate how “existential feelings are both a bodily feeling and a way of experiencing the world.”<sup>10</sup> It is by exploring the details of such a bodily feeling that Radcliffe explains in more detail how existential feelings are way of experiencing the body. The phenomenology of touch works both as an analogy for a better understanding of existential feelings and as a constitutive part of existential feelings. As Radcliffe writes, “there is more than just an analogy between existential feeling and touch — the tactile background contributes to our sense of belonging to the world, structuring more localized tactile experience and our experiences more generally. Thus it is partly constitutive of existential feeling.”<sup>11</sup> Consequently, Radcliffe’s existential feelings are another way

to argue that our connection to the world is necessarily an embodied connection to the world. Radcliffe begins to unfold the insights of the phenomenology of touch by pointing how the term bodily feeling is equivocal because when we touch someone else in the shoulder with one of our hands, we are both feeling the shoulder with the hand, and how the shoulder feels in the hand.<sup>12</sup> Radcliffe reminds us that touch is a whole body phenomenon, and not limited to the experience of the hands: when we kick a ball we are touching it with our feet, when we hug someone we are touching them with our arms and torso. To illustrate the encompassing sense of touch, Radcliffe gives the example of how resting comfortable on a couch for a prolonged period of time makes us feel like we are not actually touching anything, because “there is a loss of boundaries, a gradual dissipation of any clear sense of where the body ends and the couch begins.”<sup>13</sup> The illustration calls our attention to the fact that the absence of direct tactile experience is also an important part of tactile experience. He writes,

[t]he touch of one’s clothes is not ordinarily at the forefront of awareness but its absence can be. If one takes off one’s clothes and walks around the room (even a warm room), the sense of not being touched can be quite pronounced, at least for a short time. There is a feeling of something being “missing.” Indeed I am not sure that there is ever a complete “absence” of touch.<sup>14</sup>

That is, when we touch something for a long period of time, the touching may become an absence of tactile experience, which is not the denial of such phenomenology but an important part of understanding the phenomenology of touch. Radcliffe points out that touching is always intimately connected with an activity. For example, touching a pillow will be different if we are in bed falling asleep from when we are using it in a pillow fight. And just like touch is connected

to the activities we undergo, existential feelings are intimately tied to the activities we do.<sup>15</sup> So similarly, an existential sense of disconnection will feel different when one is walking on the streets alone from when one is having dinner with one's family.

In his analysis of touch Radcliffe identifies several characteristics of the phenomenology of touch, such as 1) touching is a relation between body and world, 2) in touching both what is touched or what touches can be the focus of attention, 3) there is not necessarily a clear distinction between boundaries of self and world, 4) there does not need to be specific physical contact with the body.<sup>16</sup> Since the phenomenology of touch is both an analogy to better understand existential feelings and a constitutive part of them,<sup>17</sup> the enumerated characteristics of touch provide a good way to describe the existential feelings. Consequently, an existential sense of disconnection can be described by the lack of relation between body and world, (1) with a sense that nothing is the focus of attention (2) and that everything and everybody else also looks and feels disconnected (3) regardless of how one touches or is touched by things and people in the world (4). That is, to better grasp the existential feelings we can describe the bodily feelings that go with the same feelings through its phenomenology of touch.

Due to their "diachronic character,"<sup>18</sup> existential feelings are always present. When someone goes to see a film they experience it the way there are in the world, for example someone who feels disconnected will watch a film with that emotional background. The film itself will have different modes of presenting existential feelings: different characters will portray different existential feelings, and different aspects of mise-en-scène will amplify the characters' existential feelings or provide different ones. For example, in the *Black Swan* the spectator can both experience the young dancer's existential feelings of confusion from illusionary experiences, as well as the existential feeling of realism given by the general mise-en-scène.<sup>19</sup> The *Black*

*Swan* is about a young dancer, Nina (Natalie Portman), who competes for the new principal dancer of the opening season of the Swan Lake. Nina begins to experience strange things as she forces herself to practice for perfection after she gets the role. The director (Vincent Cassel) tells Nina that there is another dancer who will be able to take the role if Nina doesn't overcome the coldness of her flawless technique. The two young dancers gets complicated by Nina's hallucinations. Nina's mother (Barbara Hershey), a retired dancer with whom Nina lives becomes concerned with Nina and tries to prevent her daughter from dancing on the opening night unsuccessfully. The threat of another dancer taking up her leading role takes Nina to stab the other young dancer, Lily (Mila Kunis) and hide her body. At the end of the first act Nina realizes that her fight was imaginary and that she has stabbed herself. The film ends with the last scene of the Snow Lake performance, in which the White Swan of the ballet throws herself off a cliff, showing Nina falling to a hidden mattress and, as the theatre explodes into applause and the director and the rest of the cast come to congratulate Nina, she bleeds to death while she whispers "I felt it. Perfect. It was perfect." The film offers both Nina's disrupted sense of reality thus having a disconnected type of existential feeling, and a continuum sense of reality offered by the other characters and the general *mise-en-scène*. Given the assumed position of realism from the spectator's point of view, the contrast can be taken as an effort to portray and understand the special and difficult existential surroundings of someone who has the existential feeling of disconnectedness.

In this way the *Black Swan* takes up the stance of Radcliffe by focusing on a psychiatric illness to make our existential feelings more visible. Existential feelings are always in the background and not easily seen and, Radcliffe tells us, they "are most amiable to phenomenological reflection when they shift"<sup>20</sup> because they become more visible when we see that they are not there.<sup>21</sup> So one way to understand them is to look at the moments in which the "structure of world-

experience can change.”<sup>22</sup> When we experience a film we change our world-experience by seeing a film because we enter the world of fiction. Fiction is a special place for emotional experience because it functions as a type of emotional laboratory,<sup>23</sup> where we try out how certain situations make us feel. The exploration of our feelings in fiction happens at the level of emotions (how we feel about situations certain characters live, how we feel about certain characters, how we feel about emotions of certain characters), and also at the meta-level (how we feel about what we feel about situations certain characters live, how we feel about how we feel about certain characters, how we feel about how we feel about emotions of certain characters). In addition, we are given the existential feelings of the film, and the ones of the characters.

In light of this, I want to suggest that the *Black Swan* provides insights to our existential feelings twice: first because it focuses on a specific change in existential feelings given by the contrast of disconnectedness and illusion versus realism; and second because watching a film is a way to deliberately change our sense of reality by moving from daily life to the fictional space.

The claim that by going to see a movie the spectator is already undergoing a change in existential feelings can be further explored with an illustration. Radcliffe explains that, “existential feelings constitute a sense of the *kinds of possibility* that the world offers.”<sup>24</sup> Therefore, given that fiction can be taken as an experimental space for emotions and meta-emotions, the cinematic experience of existential feelings may be best illustrated in a film with a story about possibilities and changes in possibilities. *The Help* is specially suited to reflect on existential feelings in cinematic emotional laboratories because existential feelings are tied to senses of possibilities and this film clearly shows a shift of possibilities.

*The Help* is an adaptation of the novel *The Help* (2009) portraying the relationships between maids and their white employers during the Civil Rights in

the early 60s. "Skeeter" Phelan (Emma Stone), a young white woman who has recently moved back home to her family's plantation after graduation, decides to write a book, *The Help*, based on the lives of the maids who have spent their entire lives taking care of white children. The film begins with scenes of an interview to Aibileen Clark (Viola Davis). The excerpt of the interview at the beginning of the movie ends with the sad gaze of Aibileen as she tries to answer the question "How does it feel to raise a white child when your own child is being looked after by somebody else?" Aibileen starts to reply "It feels..." but she never puts words on her feelings. Illustrating how difficult it is to describe our existential feelings and how they feel. At this moment the story of the film begins to be narrated by Aibileen who introduces herself by saying "I've raised seventeen kids in my life. Looking after white babies that is what I do." At first the maids are reluctant to talk to Skeeter, because they are afraid that they will lose their jobs or worse. Aibileen is the first to share her stories, after she realizes that the children whom she has been raising are growing up to be just like their parents. Her friend, Minny (Octavia Spencer), who has just been fired for using the indoor bathroom during a thunderstorm, instead of going to use the separate outdoor toilet, is the next one to share her stories for the book. A first draft of the book is sent to Miss Stein, an editor for Harper & Row in New York, who requires more interviews quickly, as she thinks the Civil Right Movement is a passing event. As racial tensions become more and more tense in the town, the maids change their minds and Skeeter obtains numerous other interviews. The book is accepted for publication and is a success. Skeeter shares her royalties with the maids, and is offered a job with a publishing company in New York. Throughout the movie we hear Aibileen's voice narrating her feelings and thoughts about what is happening. At the end of the movie Aibileen is fired and the film ends with the image of her final sentence of her narration in which she says, "no one ever asked me how it felt to be me. Once I told that I felt

free. And I got to thinking about all the people I know and things I'd seen and done my boy always said we were going to have a writer in our family one day I guess it is going to be me."

There are several moments we can observe existential feelings and their impact in *The Help*. First, when Aibileen explicitly talks about them, as when she says "I lost my boy four years ago. After that I just didn't want to live any more," or when she further describes "After my boy died a bitter seed was placed inside me." Also, we see experiential feelings when we observe the character's existential feeling in images. For example, at the beginning Aibileen is asked how did she feel about raising a child when she knew her child was home with someone else. She turns to the window and merely says "... It feels..." Instead it is the following sequence of shots that provides us with the emotional tonality of her existential feelings: first she thinks about it, her eyes move up as when we search thinking hard for something, then her eyes look at something, then we are told what she is looking at with a shot of her diseased young boy, then we see her face again completely taken by the sadness and then finally she looks out the window gazing as when someone is taken by such an indescribable pain that the only thing possible to do is to continue one's chores and look at the window in a pain that no one else seems to understand. Later in the film we are reminded of this existential state with the repetition of the question and the repetition of her gaze out of the window.

In addition, we also see how the characters' existential feelings are variable. For example, the sense of despair and pointless sense of life described by Aibileen also shifts to give place to an existential feeling of shared humour when she jokes and laughs with her friend Minny. Radcliffe describes that the way we find ourselves in the world is quite variable even though we also have a normal, consistent way of belonging to the world, which mostly we take for granted.<sup>25</sup> In the fictional space it is easier to identify the variability of existential feelings within the regular way of

belonging to the world because it is possible to compress months (sometimes years within two hours). Therefore, we are capable of seeing how existential feelings of characters change as time goes by and the way events change the characters' relation to how they are in the world. For example, at the beginning of the film we are told that Aibileen sees through her son's statement that there is the possibility that someone in her family could become a writer. But her son's death shattered all her sense of possibilities. Yet, the turn of events grants a new possibility, namely that she is the one who will be the writer of her family. In this shift of possibilities we acknowledge how the character of Aibileen changes existential feelings. Aibileen is no longer looking out the window as she was in the beginning of the film. Now she is walking forward. The image of the road ahead of Aibileen looks sunny and bright and her walking on it steady and secure amplifies the sense of new possibility of her last sentence. Thus, the film is a testimony of how "existential feelings vary in all sorts of subtle ways from person to person and from time to time. And the existential feelings of some people no doubt fluctuate more than those of others."<sup>26</sup> The illustration from *The Help* identifies several ways in which we can see existential feelings and their modifications.

Watching a film provides examples of existential feelings, as well as examples of interesting shifts in existential feelings. More importantly, cinema also provides insights into our own existential feelings. The experience of watching a film takes us out of the world in such a way that when the film ends we slowly return to the world and slowly remember the bills that must be paid, the overdue essays, the parents meetings at the school, etc., and we slowly return to feeling how we feel in the world. Our sense of belonging to the world is not like a connection of a solid rock to the ground. As Radcliffe explains, there are many different daily situations in which we notice feelings of being detached and removed from our world, such as when is suffering from a jetlag, or a bad hangover. These moments in which the

world becomes strange in a very difficult way to describe “draw attention to the fragility of our sense of belonging to the world.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, activities that place us in a suspended mode allow for awareness of existential feelings because “it is when practical dealings get disrupted that our background understanding of the world comes briefly into focus.”<sup>28</sup> Watching a film offers such momentary suspension of life.

It is in these moments where our connection to the world becomes a point of focus that we are more capable of changing our existential feelings. Because the focusing on existential feelings may produce reflection, which may ultimately reshape such existential feelings for, Radcliffe explains, “a conceptual appreciation of a situation, which is itself embedded in existential feeling, can serve to reshape the existential feeling in which it is embedded. Existential feeling is not impervious to the influence of experiences and thoughts.”<sup>29</sup> In addition, the type of experience provided by a movie may produce feelings that penetrate and change existential feelings. For example, one can imagine someone feeling quite disconnected from their friends and regaining a sense of connection after seeing *The Help* by feeling the different types of friendships shown in the film. To explain in more detail how such an example could be possible it is necessary to examine how the experience of cinema can take us by surprise.

Surprise results from the occurrence of the unexpected (either an event or a thought or feeling, of an action, etc.), and movies often provide such unexpected occurrences. Surprise does not always have the same intensity or form and a movie may offer different types of surprises. For example, moments in a film may startle us, or shock us, or we may be surprised by the turn of events of a story, by the type of music that accompanies a specific sequence of scenes, or we may be left in a state of awe after seeing a film, or a specific scene may leave us in a state of wonder about a specific question. Finally, after experiencing a film we may be surprised by

something it reveals about ourselves, or astonished by how we connect to a certain character, or perplexed by how scared we stay after seeing an outcome we had already guessed, or by being indifferent to a story we consider touching. In sum, there is no end to the possibilities of surprise in cinema. In addition, because of the indefinable and elusive immediacy of films, which allows the films to go beyond the abilities of other art forms,<sup>30</sup> the instances of surprise in cinema are unique in their strength and speed.<sup>31</sup>

Surprise directs our attention to whatever surprised us and we are more capable of being caught by new possibilities, new information, and new awareness. Surprise has interesting bodily effects, which make it almost impossible to miss that we are in a state of surprise. Darwin's description of surprise provides a good description of how the body responds to the unexpected in *The Expressions of the Emotions in Man and Animals* when he writes that

when we start at any sudden sound or sight, almost all the muscles of the body are involuntarily and momentarily thrown into strong action, for the sake of guarding ourselves against or jumping away from the danger, which we habitually associate with anything unexpected.<sup>32</sup>

Emotions, however, do not appear in isolation and the emotion that more immediately appears connected with surprise is the emotion of fear (or related degrees of fear) for if something we did not predict or that we do not know surprises us, it means that there is the possibility of danger. Darwin also identifies admiration as connected to surprise writing that it "consists of surprise associated with pleasure and a sense of approval."<sup>33</sup> Therefore, in the case in which the unexpected thing gives pleasure (for example, when it makes us laugh) other emotions besides fear can occur such as admiration, love, enjoyment, etc. In a way

one could imagine many other emotions following surprise. For instance, you may become angry if you find your friend has lied to you about something you consider important, or feel grateful when you see a friend you thought might be dead, or feel jealous and angry if you find your lover has lied to you about an affair, or really happy if you find out you surprisingly pass an exam you assumed you had failed, or feel bored if you are reading a book with excessive surprising plot.<sup>34</sup>

More importantly, surprise occurs differently when we are open to surprise (a type of existential feeling). When we are open to surprise we will be surprised more often. The claim may sound too obvious but it is especially relevant to show how cinema may have a transformative effect of existential feelings. Imagine two friends travelling alone to the same country separately. They are both good organizers of time thus managing to visit all the relevant places, and they both talk to people and provide a good summary of their trip upon their return. Yet, one of them lived it as “an experience” while the other carried a jaded attitude throughout the journey.<sup>35</sup> That is, the experience of watching a film will have a different experiential impact depending on the existing type of openness to surprise. If we are the kind of person who immediately feels fear in face of unexpected events and immediately creates control mechanisms of protection, you will be less open to be surprised, and consequently less open to be taken by the film as to promote the window of opportunity to focus on your existential feelings.

A way to better understand the impact of surprise in cinema is to look at the genre of films which are deliberately made to cause suspense and mystery. *Rebecca* is a good example to further investigate surprise and cinema’s role in promoting insight of existential feelings because, just like in *The Help*, the character changes her sense of possibilities after the sequence of events of the film thus shifting her existential feelings. In addition, Hitchcock was a master of surprise and suspense and, as Lütticken explains, “it is the dialectic of suspense and surprise that is

fundamental to his filmmaking. Hitchcock's status as 'master of suspense' derives largely from his expert manipulation of this dialectic."<sup>36</sup>

*Rebecca* is a romantic suspense movie in which a young woman marries a wealthy widower, Mr. Maxim de Winter (Laurence Olivier), who takes her back to his family mansion Manderley. The film begins with the narration of a woman (Joan Fontaine) saying that she dreamt she went back to Manderley though she knows she can never return. This young woman is an orphan who works as a paid companion to a wealthy lady and who marries the widower who will take her to Manderley. The young woman's happiness of love turns into a nightmare when she becomes haunted by the memory of the first husband's wife, Rebecca, who died in a boat accident. Though Rebecca never appears in the film, she is a constant ghostly presence in Manderley. Meanwhile the young woman begins to doubt her husband's feelings and tries hard to please him trying to act as the perfect wife thus suggesting that they host a costume party as it was done by Rebecca. The night of the party Rebecca's ship is found on the coast with Rebecca's body in it. The tone of the film turns when the discovery of Rebecca's body makes Maxim confess his hate for his first wife and the accident that led to her death. At this moment the young woman loses her innocence and grows up thus changing her attitude and posture in the film helping her husband to deal with the police. At this point of the film it is clear that young woman's existential feelings have shifted from fearful way of being in the world to a sense of feeling safe and belonging to the world. After the process of investigation and the verdict of suicide, Mr. de Winter returns home to find the mansion on fire and his wife safe.

Just like the character Abeilleen in *The Help*, the character of the young woman in *Rebecca* changes such that it gives it a sense of time. The necessity of showing the passage of time is necessary to grasp the change in existential feelings for existential feelings have a temporal structure, which shape all dispositions and activities,<sup>37</sup> and

are also “*processes* that unfold over time.”<sup>38</sup> Cinema’s manipulation of time through editing is unique because, as di Franco writes, “the indefinable and elusive immediacy of film (which prevents all but the most disciplined viewers from leaving a bad movie) allows the film artist to go far beyond the boundaries of the written word.”<sup>39</sup>

Existential feelings in cinema provide a novel and different explanation for the paradox of suspense because the opacity of existential feelings, and the ability of fictions to bring our emotional world to the surface, explains why seeing a film more than once may continue to be appealing and keep its suspense. We are in suspense because we do not know how the sequence of events is going to feel to us. It is not that we misidentify our suspense by our fears and anxieties or that we temporarily forget what was going to happen, or that we pretend to ourselves that we do not know what is going to happen. We are in suspense because we cannot be completely sure about our existential feelings since existential feelings only become visible in certain circumstances. Consequently, suspense is intimately tied to the way we are, or not, surprised by ourselves, and our feelings. If we are not surprised by our emotional reaction in face of the same sequence of shots, then we are predictable in a flat manner. If we find ourselves being surprised by our emotional reaction (even though we knew the outcome) we know that even when we have guessed life, events will continue to surprise us and no matter how well the nice surprise is predicted it will still feel good to have it.

Thus making suspense, and cinema in general, a great tool to become aware of our own existential feelings. It is possible to explore existential feelings in the cinema because existential feelings are tied to the activities we undergo. As an emotional laboratory, cinema provides a space for existential feelings in different because it presents existential feelings from the different perspectives of the several characters, and also because it presents existential feelings of the same character at

different moments of the story. Further, we are also part of the items of laboratory for the activity of experiencing a movie is capable of making us more aware of our own existential feelings. Radcliffe writes,

existential feelings are similarly bound up with our activities. For example, it is often in walking around and interacting with the world that the strangeness of things is most pronounced, perhaps when they do not solicit bodily responses in the usual on going, structured fashion. It is the whole context of practical relatedness that has changed, rather than either bodily experience or experience of objects and events outside of the body. Central to this change is an altered sense of the possibilities that a situation offers.<sup>40</sup>

And the activity of going to experience a movie works just like going for a walk because the movie does not solicit bodily responses in the usual daily way and provides a privileged place for altering our sense of possibilities, just like it happened to the characters of both *The Help* and *Rebecca*. Interestingly, both in *The Help* and *Rebecca* it is the shift in existential feelings, which enables the characters to tell their stories illustrating how “[e]xistential feelings constrain not just the content but the form of the narratives one is able to adopt.”<sup>41</sup>

The reflective aspect of cinema in terms of existential feelings makes this change capable of more impact than the change provided by going for a walk. Radcliffe explains that existential feelings are hard to see for the reasons explained earlier in the paper, and also because “different interpretations have the potential to feed back into and reshape the relevant feelings.”<sup>42</sup> Consequently, our way to reflect and interpret ourselves may disguise the nature of our existential feelings. However, cinema provides a special way to reflect upon existential feelings: an emotional reflection. While we experience a movie we are drawn to its images and its plot. The

surprise elements offered by a film capture our attention and provide an experimentation of the emotional world, which also works as an emotional reflection upon our existential feelings. As we go through the motions of the movie we have feelings but the action that follows such emotional motions is already determined for us: we just have to sit down and see, hear and feel. In this way, the cinema may be our way of reflecting on our existential feelings without interpreting, that is, by working through our own existential feelings through the experience of the film we may be able to examine our existential feelings without having gone through the pitfalls of our minds.

How much we have experienced movies, and how much we have experienced life transforms our ability to be surprised and our ability to cultivate and evaluate our capacity to be surprised. A seven year old may be surprised and distracted by a leaf falling but it is hard to imagine that an adult be equally surprised by the movements of the falling leaf. Yet, part of what we aim to retain, despite the increase of age and experience, is the ability for surprise without the delusions of innocence. That is, we want to retain a sense of joy and surprise but we do not want to make mistakes or be fooled by events and circumstances, thus remaining able to be surprise in a never-ending challenge of life. If we are able to check and review how we experience surprise then we will be capable of checking if we remain open to surprise. In addition, the way we experience surprise reveals our existential feelings because it shows how we are connected to the world. This makes cinema a way to see what type of surprise we can still live and by doing that cinema also reveals what type of existential feelings underlie our connection to the world.

In conclusion, cinema enables us to experience and explore existential feelings with strength and intensity, offerings a space of awareness and reflection about our own existential feelings. This makes movies a tool for freedom for it greatly contributes to overcome thinking of our emotions as inevitable and “we are also

more likely to view them as open to modification, and to enlist them as instruments of freedom rather than tools of self-oppression.”<sup>43</sup> Cinema is capable of providing this privileged place for exploration because it shows how we feel surprise and in what way we are keeping ourselves open to surprise without succumbing to the claws of fear.<sup>44</sup>

## NOTES

1. Matthew Radcliffe, “The Feeling of Being,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 12:8–10 (2005): 43–60. Radcliffe, *Feelings of Being: Phenomenology, Psychiatry and the Sense of Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

2. Underlying Radcliffe’s work are crucial philosophical connections (Heideggerian approaches to film, Husserl notion of time applied to time in movies, Sartre’s conception of emotions as “magical transformations of the world”) that are left unexplored here.

3. Since then others have adopted it — Jan Slaby and Achim Stephan, “Affective Intentionality and Self-Consciousness,” *Consciousness and Cognition* 17 (2008): 506–51; Brian P. McLaughlin, “Monothematic Delusions and Existential Feelings,” in *Delusion and Self-deception: Affective and Motivational Influences on Belief Formation*, ed. Tim Bayne and Jordi Fernández (New York: Psychology Press, 2009); 139–64 — though not always precisely the way Radcliffe does.

4. Radcliffe, *Feelings of Being*, 41.

5. Radcliffe, “Existential Feeling and Psychopathology,” *Philosophy, Psychiatry & Psychology* 16:2 (2009): 181.

6. Radcliffe, *Feelings of Being*, 2.

7. Ibid.

8. Radcliffe, “Existential Feeling and Psychopathology,” 179.

9. Radcliffe, *Feelings of Being*, 3.

10. Radcliffe, “Existential Feeling and Psychopathology,” 178.

11. Radcliffe, *Feelings of Being*, 93.

12. Radcliffe, “Existential Feeling and Psychopathology,” 185.

13. Ibid., 186.

14. Radcliffe, *Feelings of Being*, 82.

15. Ibid., 84.

16. Radcliffe, “Existential Feeling and Psychopathology,” 186.

17. Radcliffe, *Feelings of Being*, 93.

18. Ibid., 82.

19. Thanks to anonymous referee for pointing out the importance of mise-en-scène for identification of existential feelings.

20. Radcliffe, *Feelings of Being*, 40.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. Dina Mendonça, “Absolutely Positively Feeling that Way and More: Paradox of Fiction and Alexander’s Stories,” in *Philosophy and Children’s Literature*, ed. Peter Costello (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012), 48.

24. Radcliffe, “Phenomenology of Existential Feelings,” in *Feeling of Being Alive*, ed. Joerg Fingerhut and Sabineand Marienberg (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012), 33.

25. Radcliffe, “Existential Feeling and Psychopathology,” 181.

26. Radcliffe, *Feelings of Being*, 7.

27. Ibid., 182.

28. Ibid., 46.

29. Ibid., 115.

30. Philip di Franco, “Past, Present, Future in Cinema,” in *Cinema Journal* 8:1 (1968): 42.

31. Thanks to anonymous referee for pointing out the need for differentiation of cinema from other art forms.

32. Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (Londres: John Murray, 1872), 262.
33. *Ibid.*, 267.
34. Thanks to Klaus Gärtner for giving me an example where boredom follows surprise.
35. Thanks to Shaun Gallagher for suggesting this adjective to better describe this second type of person.
36. Sven Lütticken, "Suspense and... Surprise," *New Left Review* 40 (2006): 96.
37. Radcliffe, *Feelings of Being*, 121.
38. *Ibid.*, 211.
39. Di Franco, "Past, Present, Future in Cinema," 42.
40. Radcliffe, *Feelings of Being*, 121.
41. Radcliffe, "Phenomenology of Existential Feelings," 48.
42. *Ibid.*, 50.
43. Ronald De Sousa, "Truth, Authenticity, and Rationality," *Dialectica* 61:3 (2007): 445.
44. This paper would not have been possible without the post-doctoral fellowship (SFRH/BPD/14175/2007) granted by the Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, and it is part of the research project "Film and Philosophy – Mapping an Encounter" (PTDC/FIL-FIL/098143/2008) of Instituto de Filosofia da Linguagem. Thanks to helpful comments from anonymous reviewers of the Journal and also thanks to the Philosophy of Language Institute (Instituto de Filosofia da Linguagem) for hosting my research providing me with the necessary backup.

## THE BODY AS INTERFACE: AMBIVALENT TACTILITY IN EXPANDED RUBE CINEMA

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### TOUCHABLE INTERFACE, TACTILE EXPERIENCE

On an airplane, a middle-aged American salesperson Joe is attracted by Anna Maria, a beautiful but naïve Italian airhostess. During a stopover in Bangkok, he films her with a movie camera (fig. 1) and keeps after her everywhere like a child begging maternal affection. While he never stops pestering her, a psychiatrist gives her fiancé advice that she should act more slutty because Joe is a psychopath fixated on her purity. Anna Maria's sudden promiscuous manner and attire at a bar, then, disappoints Joe utterly so that he laments the loss of his 'dream girl' by projecting her virginal image onto the wall of his room. He kisses and hugs the mirage, which also glimmers on his own body, comically yet pathetically (figs. 2-6).



Entitled *Virginity* (*Illibatezza*), this is the first episode of a peculiar omnibus film *Ro.Go.Pa.G* (1963) — the acronym that combines the directors' names: Rossellini, Godard, Pasolini, and Gregoretti. These impressive auteurs unfold four unrelated sections about the film's rough premise, "the joyous beginning of the end of the world." Rossellini's *Virginity* received harsh criticism as the film's "weakest and least interesting segment," a "frivolous and dismayingly pedestrian screwball comedy [that] couldn't be further removed in terms of its tone and style from the raw neo-realism with which he made his name."<sup>1</sup> But if we can ever renew film history by redeeming overlooked or dismissed fragments, *Virginity* may be redeemed. Rather than pulling it back to Rossellini's famed realism, however, I will reframe it in terms of *interface* that means the contact surface between image and spectator, a notion that can be applied to the camera, the filmstrip, and the screen. *Virginity* is a film in which the body-subject comes into physical contact with the medium-interface, raising new questions about the touchable interface and tactile experience. The focus in cinematic spectatorship shifts from eye to body, retina to skin, perception to sensation, vision to participation, and suture to *embodiment*. I will then define *interfaciality* as the intrinsic dialectic between two bodies, an embodied dialectic specified through multiple facets of what I call *ambivalent tactility*. A film within a film, i.e., an interface on screen engages us with this interfaciality that is hardly limited to the old notion of self-reflexivity. This time cinema does not address the subject's passive eye, but incites him to become an active body, complicating subjectivity, the embodied agency of interfaciality.

#### **"WALKING" THROUGH PSYCHOANALYSIS, ACTING "OUT OF" NARCISSISM**

The ending of *Virginity* perfectly serves to open our discussion. It obviously visualizes Joe's Jonah complex implied in the film's epigraph, a passage from

psychologist Alfred Adler about man's desire for "a refuge which had once protected and nurtured him: the mother's womb." Joe's love is nothing but a regressive search for the pre-Oedipal refuge through his surrogate mother Anna Maria. Furthermore, it is easy to psychoanalyze not just Joe the character but Joe the spectator, with a common 1970s vocabulary. Joe's darkened room incarnates the movie theater as "Plato's cave," where his "voyeurism" enjoys the pleasure of "fetishizing" the female body which is, in this reversed case, not a sexual but virginal object that looks more real and pure than in reality. In other words, the "suspension of disbelief" works through the "disavowal of the (double) knowledge" that the seen is non-existent and no longer true. Joe's reintegration of Anna Maria into self-centered imaginary signification is a privilege of the "transcendental subject," the secluded immobile spectator whose eye, however, identifies with the mobile camera that can take a god-eye's floating perspective unnoticed by the object. And in this sense, the theater-cave holds the screen as mirror — a "Lacanian mirror" that enables the subject's euphoric self-identity only through his *méconnaissance* of the image-as-other as self. In Joe's case, the screen reflects not the truth, but the false fantasy of Anna Maria's purity, her sheer belonging to him, just as in the lost mother-child bind, on both the perceptual and psychological levels.<sup>2</sup>

This classical account, however, presumes the spectator's hyper-perceptive but sub-motor state. What if he leaves his seat and touches the screen? Joe in fact appears and behaves like a poor crying baby with no theater etiquette. Paradoxical enough, his extreme approach to the screen puts in motion the Imaginary as the unconscious adhesion to the image, reviving the dormant materiality of the body and the interface. Yet this shift from watching to touch cannot achieve a real touch of the onscreen body because regained corporeality only contacts the apparatus. He experiences "the instrument 'in flesh and blood',"<sup>3</sup> a tactile disclosure of the material structure ideologically disallowed to the transcendental subject. Joe's assimilation to

the image becomes dissimulation when “acting out” turns into “action,” just as the audience’s crying in sad movies reawakens their being physically situated in a theater.<sup>4</sup> Through his bodily contact with the bodiless image, Joe finds out the virginal image is not an imaginary hymen his scopophilia can penetrate. That is, the dumb character does not remain a macho spectator, neither by hermeneutically decoding the “imaginary signifier” nor by psycho-semiotically debunking it as an “ideological apparatus.” Breaking his shackles, Joe the prisoner moves not toward the outside of the cave but rather into its heart, thereby revealing the mechanism of illusion. While his desire must be regressive, his body might actually be progressive.

Nonetheless, my intention is not to simply reverse the Baudry-Metz psychoanalysis, but to reveal its inner contradiction and thus link transcendental to embodied spectatorship. In the first place, the subject is said to be positioned at the vanishing point of a god-eye’s monocular (Renaissance) perspective — the ideological structure of representation and specularization empowering the subject to constitute and rule the objects ideally.<sup>5</sup> He identifies with the camera, thereby “with himself as a pure act of perception (as wakefulness, alertness): as the condition of possibility of the perceived and hence as a kind of transcendental subject, which comes before every *there is*.”<sup>6</sup> The subject’s identification with the object thus takes on his internalization of it, his symbolic command of the world launched only by and after his perception.<sup>7</sup> Notable (but not noted by Baudry-Metz) is the perceptual and ontological distance that the spectator-subject in the theater-cave takes from the screen-mirror, the necessary distance for unfolding the historically Westernized visual field along the Cartesian geometric coordinates. It is through this subjectively transcendental distance that the subject can objectify the world: the subjective objectification from the geometral point of the eye.

The mirror stage is the cradle of this subjectivity. The screen works as a mirror without reflecting the spectator, because onscreen others appear as his likes and “it

is no longer necessary that this similarity be literally *depicted* for him on the screen [...] the primitive undifferentiation of the ego and the non-ego has been overcome."<sup>8</sup> That is, all imaginary signifiers on screen are 'refracted' duplicates of the original imaginary signifier in the mirror, the "reflecting" duplicate of the reflected subject. The original signifier submerged in the Imaginary is, conversely, the starting point of all imaginary signifiers organizing the Symbolic. The identification shift from camera to character opens the subject's closed circuit to an intersubjective or interobjective network, as my first-choice character is not only a subject but also an object for others in the diegetic society. Moreover, going back and forth between different characters, my identification ultimately reconstitutes the whole diegesis as a unified object, the Object that corresponds to, while integrated into, the transcendental Subject. In short, the screen is a big refractive Mirror (Imaginary Signifier) with its subset mirrors (imaginary signifiers).

Let me now replace this early Lacan's model of the Imaginary-Symbolic with his later model of its disjunction with the Real. The original imaginary signifier in the mirror is the first signifier, a "master-signifier" enabling one to represent reality. Then, what would come under its verso, an *objet a* emerging from the Real? Interestingly, Metz sees the screen as a mirror by virtue of the "Italian style" perspective, but more directly because "it encourages narcissistic withdrawal and the indulgence of phantasy which, pushed further, enter into the definition of dreaming and sleep."<sup>9</sup> This sounds contradictory, given that perspective is based on distance that the narcissistic screen-dream seemingly effaces. Remarkable here is the evolution of Baudry's cave metaphor through his two influential articles: he first lays out cinema as the "prototypical set for all transcendence and the topological model of idealism," but then, "a representation of the maternal womb, of the matrix into which we are supposed to wish to return."<sup>10</sup> In the former the "impression of reality" means "reality effect," whereas in the latter it is more like a "dream effect,"

the hallucinatory representation taken as reality, the “more-than-real” that causes “the submersion of the subject in his representations.”<sup>11</sup> Opposite of the subject’s transcendental integration of the other, this submersion implies his corporeal absorption into the womb with no distinction / distance between subject and object, perception and representation, active and passive, eating and being eaten. Such “undifferentiation between the limits of the body (body / breast)” renders the film a dreamy mode “anterior to the mirror stage, to the formation of the self, and therefore founded on a permeability, a fusion of the interior with the exterior.”<sup>12</sup>

If the theater-cave evokes the uterus, imagine it as a warped surrounding screen that is not objectifiable in perspective along Euclidean geometry, as the dream space encompasses us while neutralizing our sense of distance. “We are what we dream,” said Bertram Lewin who first coined the dream-screen-breast analogy Baudry repeats: “the dream screen is the dream’s hallucinatory representation of the mother’s breast on which the child used to fall asleep after nursing.”<sup>13</sup> Freud argues that this child cannot distinguish itself from the mother’s breast, the source of “oceanic feeling” that nostalgically refers to the all-embracing intrauterine bond between the ego and the world.<sup>14</sup> Kristeva clearly formulates three stages of the ego formation: (1) the fetus totally depends on the mother whose body is like the Platonic *chora*, a nursing receptacle, “an invisible and formless being which receives all things”; (2) for the newborn, the mother turns into the *semiotic chora* as a fixed space with a gap but without outside, providing an axis, a limit, a “projection screen” for its invocation; (3) the *mirror stage* follows in which the breast can appear as an illusion the infant creates like his mirror image.<sup>15</sup> These stages display the child’s gradual separation from the mother’s body experienced as (1) womb-screen, (2) breast-screen, and (3) mirror-screen. This naturally understandable process is unconsciously driven by Kristeva’s other notion *abjection*, the child’s attempt to become an independent subject by breaking away the mother, the *chora*

subsequently becoming an *abject*. Abjection is a precondition of narcissism, the self-protective desire of keeping the distance from what now seems threatening to annihilate one's identity.<sup>16</sup>

The narcissistic nature of the mirror stage might then insinuate the turn of the mother (hugging her child in the mirror) from an object (attracting the child-subject) to an abject (causing the horror of the undifferentiated). But the abject is by definition already absent for a narcissist, who refracts every object into an imaginary signifier so that the screen-mirror is relatively narcissistic. What I pay attention to is rather the potential of an imaginary signifier's turning back to a pre-abject object, a cause of desire that entices the ego into the undifferentiated; this is an *objet a* that opens the Real. No doubt the breast is a primal *objet a*, the mother's body part that the child hypnotically sucks and succumbs to. Attracted to the breast-screen, the subject does not remain in static self-satisfaction but goes back to a pre-mirror stage, shifting from "relative" to "primitive" narcissism.<sup>17</sup> The drive toward the image is so strong that it transforms the ego's appropriation of the imaginary signifier into the ego's self-abandonment to the *objet a*. The breast is a *signifier-turning-into-objet a*, an *interface* with the Real. Interfaciality underlies a double contradiction in psychoanalytic spectatorship theory: (1) there is a rupture between screen-mirror and screen-breast, (2) but it is a permeable rupture because our unconscious adhesion to the image, launching the Imaginary, can also reveal the Real out of it by the self-same force to a higher degree. It is this qualitative change of adhesion that *Virginity* shows. Stepping to the screen, Joe turns the imaginary into real contact, as though Anna Maria's face were his mother's breast to touch, even her womb to enter. This onscreen object is not "I" but "non-I," insofar as there is no self to identify with in the primitive child-mother union, the unconscious submersion in the immeasurable Real. By *walking through* the psychoanalytic theater-cave, Joe *acts out* of the narcissistic screen-mirror.

**I AM "IN TOUCH WITH" SURROUNDINGS BEFORE I "TOUCH" SOMETHING**

However, there is a more complex link between Joe and Narcissus. Unlike the common (Freudian) notion of narcissism, Narcissus in Greek mythology falls in love with a reflection in a pool, "not realizing it was his own." Far from configuring his imaginary identity, he is attracted by the unknown other whose dangerous beauty costs him his life. The mirror is less reflecting than attracting; his isolation from the image is not the indispensable condition for securing an ideal ego (misrecognizing the image-as-other as self), but the inevitable trigger of submerging himself into amniotic fluid (misrecognizing the self-as-image as other). This regression to the birth-state only leads him to death. The mirror stage turns from the first gate to the Symbolic into a "rear window" open to the Real; narcissism is no longer the transcendental ego formation, but the anti-narcissistic embodiment of Eros and Thanatos. Likewise, Joe's perception of the image is transduced into tactile action, the resistance to separation. Yet for this modern Narcissus, erotic death drive bounces back from the solid surface of the screen. He only experiences the technical material interface as a transparent but impenetrable gap between his body and the other's. His desire thus changes from conscious fetishistic disavowal ("I know it's just an interface but all the same...") through unconscious imaginary adhesion ("I want that body") to (un)conscious tactile ambivalence ("I can't enter it but all the same I can't help touching this interface"). And it results in the double bind of neither self-love nor other-love, neither happy life nor tragic death.

Kristeva's three-stage schema along with skin studies traces the origin of this interfaciality. (1) In the womb with no gap between mother and fetus, there is no proper touching but rather sharing the common boundary. But on the embryo's ectoderm, the brain and the skin begin to be formed as surfaces of tactile, auditory, and visual organs. (2) After its birth, the newborn learns through the skin where it

begins and ends, where its boundaries are. So “a common skin with the mother” gives way to “a skin of its own, discrete and autonomous” that the infant experiences from both inside and outside.<sup>18</sup> This corresponds to the ‘breast stage’ in which pre-spatial unity turns gradually into distinction between self and other, inside and outside.

Drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Marc Hansen explains this primordial materialization of the sensible in terms of the *écart* as “always already differentiated, but differentiated amodally, prior to sensory differentiation (at a more basic level than the separation of the distinct senses).”<sup>19</sup> That is, the skin-forming *écart*, the original tactile schism between self and non-self precedes the distinction of tactile and visual senses; the second sensible tactility is, say, a suture of the first foundational tactility, since *before I touch something, my body is always already in touch with its surroundings*. (3)

The mirror stage then implies not just the transition of the baby’s body from interoceptive fragments to a “social gestalt,” but “a fundamental, ontological form of being-with, the dedifferentiation of the mirror-image and the image of the other,” in Merleau-Ponty’s term, *flesh*.<sup>20</sup> The baby sees and feels in the mirror its bodily subjectivity situated in the common embodied space. Therefore, the mirror effect is actually not illusionistic self-idealization so much as the fundamental embodiment of (pre)subjective interfaciality between self and environment. Merleau-Ponty distinguishes the “body image” from the “body schema” through which the feeling body opens out into the space between it and its image. He stresses this tactile schema (originating with the *écart*) over the visual image (originating with the very schema). The latter is, say, a visual suture of the former.<sup>21</sup>

Hansen’s radical argument is that if the mirror is a technology that interfaces body with surroundings, this technicity “finds its enabling, sensible-transcendental or infraempirical condition in the *écart* constitutive of sensibility.”<sup>22</sup> Technicity is less instrumental than immanent as the primary *écart* yields the skin, the first interface, whose externalization takes the prosthetic forms of artificial interface like mirror

and screen. Just as the eye is an interface immanent in the subject, so the skin is an embodied interface that comprehends the retina. Thus, tactility grounds visibility. Now, *Virginity* implies that this primary tactility is reawakened by derivative tactile activity as opposed to visibility, and thereby the skin is reawakened as the primary interface. Joe's touch of the screen not only equates it with the (m)other's body to which his body vainly tries to connect and attach itself, but also confirms their always-already immanent detachment and disconnection; it presumes an *écart* that both motivates contact and hinders unification. This paradox peaks when her image is projected onto his body, when our attention shifts from her body on screen (screen-as-body) to his body becoming a screen (body-as-screen). His skin's direct overlap with her (image's) skin evokes the womb or breast stage of togetherness, while for the same reason reconfirming the skin as the first interface embodying the first *écart*. That his touch of the other only returns to himself further suggests a radically tactilized narcissism not in the Freudian sense of *ego-libido* as self-love, but in the sense of *object-libido* as self-abandon. The consequence of this is a perverted *ego-libido* as in masturbation.<sup>23</sup> On one hand, the impossibility of becoming-other turns into the possibility of becoming-interface, which reactivates the immanent being-interface; on the other hand, transcendental narcissism turns into the embodiment of anti-narcissism, which in turn arouses corporeal narcissism.

In short, touching the *screen-body* reembodies the otherwise imaginary interfacing with the other, while reactivating not only sensibility but its enabling condition of *écart* that subsequently disables any real touch of the onscreen body. And since this *ambivalent tactility* of the screen externally redoubles interfaciality immanent in the bodily subject, the *body-screen* realizes the same ambivalent tactility of the skin as a contact zone and unbreakable wall at once. "Screen-interface" turns into, or "desutured" to "skin-interface" and it entails "desuturing" the mirror phase which is the imaginary suture of the self's fragmented real (body) toward the symbolic world

(of others). So, rather than showing reflected or refracted narcissistic self-images, the mirror can interface the self with the radical other (Real) to which it belonged prior to solidifying subjectivity, though this longing for the lost other or the loss of the self only brings a pulverized-then-perverted narcissism back to the solid body-subject. This way, the desuturing imbrication of screen to mirror to skin restages the ongoing drama between the subject and the Real.<sup>24</sup> Walking through transcendental psychoanalysis and acting out of imaginary narcissism, Joe the protagonist of this drama leads us to an embodied phenomenology of the biological interface (skin), whose ambivalent tactility is externalized in the technological interface (screen). His physical confrontation with, and transformation into, a cinematic interface on screen can therefore work as an allegory performance or performative allegorization of this interfaciality. Undoubtedly, here is room for the redemption of *Virginity* from its oblivion.

### THE EVOLUTION OF THE RUBE, "EXPANDED" RUBE CINEMA

With interfaciality in mind, we may now map the historical context of "embodied spectatorship" whose theorization seriously started after the sway of the 1970s psychoanalysis; though not simply dismissible as reviewed above, this abstract Theory has been overall criticized for having "disembodied" spectatorship. What first draws attention is the 1980s historicist turn of film studies, especially the *cinema of attractions* discourse and its 2000s reloaded version regarding Rube films in view of media history. But I start with an unexplored point that could bridge the ostensive rupture between semiotic psychoanalysis and media archeology, a point from which to readdress some issues of narratology and enunciation theory.

It is notable that Metz applies Freud's double dream process to the screen by distinguishing the secondary "film story" (what is told, implying an action of

narration) from the primary “dream story” (emerging in turmoil or shadow with no narrative agency). The latter is still a story; “clearly or confusedly woven by the images themselves, [there is] a succession, whether organized or chaotic, of places, actions, moments, characters.”<sup>25</sup> This distinction adds a significant nuance to the film-dream analogy in that there could be “dream story”-centered films or filmic aspects that disturb the linear narrative of “film story” unfolding in perspective space. The spectator’s transcendental distance from the screen could shrink in terms of story as well as image, as his cognition of time could be swept into the embodied middle ground of what is happening on screen. Like the yelling audience whom Metz compares to speaking somnambulists, Joe in *Virginity* experiences a cinematic event without intellectual knowledge and interpretive reflection; an event less like a neatly integrated film story than like a dream story fully charged with instant and immediate excitations. But again, Joe’s body betrays the material mechanism of this “waking daydream” as though he were a walking somnambulist with his finger indicating his own somnambulism.

I am tempted to see this daydream effect in light of the “cinema of attractions.” Tom Gunning and André Gauderault assert that the exhibitionist presentation of visual spectacles overwhelmed the well-organized representation of diegetic stories in the pre-1907 cinema.<sup>26</sup> Such an attraction film, I say, might look like a dream story (not sedative or narcotic, but stimulating and ecstatic). Joe’s energetic reaction reincarnates early spectatorship that is mythically typified, even if exaggerated, by the audience’s rushing to the exits from a hallucinatory train coming at them into the theater. Yet Charles Musser argues that attractions as non-narrative aspects can be found in virtually all periods of cinema, just as stars attract the audience while being totally integrated with the story.<sup>27</sup> Touched on by Musser, Mulvey’s seminal piece on visual pleasure also addresses this issue within classical narrative cinema. She contrasts narrative-driven voyeurism with fetishistic scopophilia that “can exist

outside linear time as the erotic instinct is focused on the look alone."<sup>28</sup> But we also know that the female body was a central attraction along with the phallic train even before the inception of the cinema. The first Edison and Lumière films, let alone many early films about women and/or trains, were preceded by Muybridge's photographs of nude bodies and galloping horses.<sup>29</sup> Figuratively, the cinema might have come into being through the intercourse of the woman's skin (hymen) and the penetrating animal/machine (phallus), two proto-pornographic attractions, with the latter's piston movement potentially motivating narrative progress. Or Lumière's train might have astonished the audience through its phallic intrusion into the theater-womb, fantastically tearing the screen-skin (which actually works as a shield from any such onscreen violence).

The Rube genre stages this naïve spectatorship and complex interfaciality in their inverse mode, i.e., the viewer's active approach to the screen (which actually hampers any contact). It is a cinematic satire of the maladjusted to new media who cannot tell reality from fantasy, theater space from screen space. In its nascent example *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show* (1902) Josh the rube, like Joe in *Virginité*, is excited by Edison films showing a woman and a train, whose imaginary sexual coupling seem incarnated into a flirting couple in the next film – a 'primal scene' that Josh, in a fit of jealousy, tries to enter only to peel away the screen and becomes embroiled with the projectionist behind it (figs. 7-9).<sup>30</sup> Made in the same year as *Virginité*, Godard's *Les Carabiniers* (1963) has a more realistic scene in which a bumpkin touches and kisses a bathing woman on screen until his actions expose the raw apparatus of the illusion (figs. 10-11). Here, the figure of womb migrates from the darkened empty auditorium to the bathtub image, the screen really appearing like a skin to rub and caress. A cutting-edge version of the Rube may be the Tom Cruise figure in *Minority Report* (2002); media expert as he is at work, he repeatedly addresses and approaches his lost son and wife who appear in hologram as if resurrected, in his emotional womb-home (fig. 12).



Though Rubes have engaged with ‘new media’ interfaces throughout the cinematic century, such credulous characters are found in the 17<sup>th</sup>-century theater. Metz mentions Pierre Corneille’s *L’Illusion comique* (1636),<sup>31</sup> and we could draw a genealogy of the Rube in literature and arts, going back to Don Quixote or even to Zeuxis and Parrhasius.<sup>32</sup> No doubt Zeuxis’s painting was a visual attraction that literally attracted animal rubes, while he himself could be seen as the first human Rube deceived not by illusion per se — in which he would have tried not to suspend his disbelief — but rather by the illusionarily-turned apparatus, the curtain-looking canvas as the material basis of disbelief in illusion. In this regard, the double lesson of this original Rube story seems to evoke the notion of *discipline* on one hand (“you may look but don’t touch”) and to revoke that of *diegesis* on the other (“you may look but don’t believe in its material existence”) — the two keywords Elsaesser reconfigures in his update of the Rube genre study, which I will in turn retackle.

First, the Rube makes “the category mistake of thinking that the civilizational ‘quantum leap’ from hand to eye is reversible.”<sup>33</sup> It is a laughable mistake that brings superiority to the audience, who thereby subtly internalize self-censorship, disciplined at the “meta-level of self-reference.” More precisely, the cinema creates a “cognitive-sensory double-bind” in which both touch and sight are “at once

over-stimulated and censored, seduced and chastised, obsessively and systematically tied to the kinds of delays and deferrals we associate with narrative.” So both senses are disciplined by the cinema that reflects modernity and its eye-teasing commodity displayed in the show window (though at least one can touch this capitalist fetish by purchasing it and bring an object “closer” by way of its “mechanical reproduction”). Building on Benjamin, Elsaesser thus see the early Rube phenomenon in the frame of modernity and its haptic-optic correlation.<sup>34</sup> At this point, let me recall the Jerry Lewis figure (he directs and plays himself), a Rube who seems to incite us to remedi(t)ate Benjamin’s meditations through his comic experience of ‘old’ media like painting and sculpture. As Steven Shaviro analyzes them, in *The Errand Boy* (1961) Lewis pulls a string from a Samson statue with curiosity only to cause its fall and the consequent collapse of the whole display (figs. 13-14), and in *The Bellboy* (1960) Lewis’s touch of a woman’s clay bust slightly changes her face, and his struggle for restoration ends up with a total deformation of the original (figs. 15-16). Far from intending any blasphemy, this Rube’s rude actions may rather imply “self-abasement before the social prestige of the painting,” a masochistic abjection that comes from his hyper-disciplined state; he becomes “an anarchist not in spite of, but because of, his hyperconformism.”<sup>35</sup>



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How is it that Lewis touches what he knows he must not? Rethinking Benjamin here, the traditional work of art retains the invisible but material trace of some initial or prior contact, whether the artist's brushing / molding or the patina of age; from this "indexical" sort of inherent touch exudes the Benjaminian *aura*, "a unique phenomenon of a [temporal] distance, however [spatially] close it may be."<sup>36</sup> We might experience this sacred epiphany not just visually but tactilely, as though it touched us by returning our look.<sup>37</sup> But this auratic tactility is still metaphoric insofar as the physical distance between work and spectator must be held for granted. Lewis, however, seems to instinctively reembody this figurative touch in his satirical rather than sacred manner and reacts to it by literally touching the work. Upon realizing his mistake, he makes every effort to reinstate the sociocultural rule only to exacerbate and debunk it. His unconscious infantilization and conscious overconformism thus incarnates the tacit tactile desire of the object and subject to contact each other. Thus, the cognitive-sensory double-bind seems immanent in all visual arts, though salient in the cinema, and Lewis turns it into an entropic vicious cycle until it reaches a comic catastrophe. The impact of modernity might be less revolutionary than evolutionary, accelerating (rather than inaugurating) a tactility that always underlies auratic visuality. For this reason, Lewis's encounter with traditional works has no less significance than his frequent self-reflexive appearance in a TV / film within a film. He makes a mess wherever he goes by touching whatever he encounters in spite of himself, though he often solves problems in spite

of himself too. The world undergoes a continuous fluctuation between order and disorder around this mobile Rube.

In this way Lewis evokes Jacques Tati, especially in *Playtime* (1967), where Monsieur Hulot incarnates a Baudelairian *flâneur* not as an urban dandy, but as a typical rustic wandering around ultimate modern Paris. Slick surfaces of products and buildings turn into reflective and attractive interfaces, which the Rube experiences with his skin as well as his eyes. He almost slips on the polished floor, tries the elasticity of a leather chair, and mistakes a glass reflection for the real person appearing from behind him (figs. 17-19). Tati's visual jokes are indeed tactile, even creating a surreal interface effect; when the window that a store person washes slightly tilts back and forth, the bus tourists reflected on it shriek with joy as if on a roller coaster (fig. 20). In the climactic restaurant sequence, Hulot touches the ceiling which collapses (like Lewis's touch of the Samson statue), turning the pure audiovisual carnival into an enjoyable tactile catastrophe (fig. 21). Merleau-Ponty's notion of *écart* as the primal separation from the world is continuously recalled through the subject's being-in-the-tactile-world. His playtime unfolds through an environmental rather than medium-specific interfaciality.



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Before going further into such “expanded Rube cinema,” let’s check Elsaesser’s second point, diegesis. He argues that the Rube film literalizes the cinematic event as a process taking place between the screen and the audience, while the spectators of these films feel directly addressed by the on-screen performer.<sup>38</sup> The self-reflective diegesis thus operates deictic marks (I/you/here/now) whose referents depend on each collective audience’s spatiotemporal specificity; that is, these enunciative shifters turn each viewing into a distinctive performance. In this sense, Elsaesser expands the notion of diegesis from the self-closed fictional world to the dialectic overlap of narrative integration and its spectatorial experience as attraction. Articulating “space/time/agency/subject,” it can be understood irrespective of genre, style, or mode, “as not necessarily ‘real,’ but nevertheless as constituting a ‘world’” while overcoming such dichotomies as “attraction vs. narrative.”<sup>39</sup> Here, we encounter a double suturing: (1) like Uncle Josh, the Rube’s experience of cinematic attractions is the narrative itself, so the filmic diegesis is constituted by the character’s enunciative act as reacting to the diegesis of the film-within-the film; (2) the audience watches the Rube watching the film-within-the film, so their enunciative act as reacting to this

Rube film (e.g., laughing at the character while being disciplined) constitutes its extensively redefined diegesis including spectatorship.

The implication of (2) is that other media such as TV and video and their spatiotemporal locators/activators can co-constitute distinctive diegetic worlds, while the cinema can still confront us with Rube-like characters who engage with different diegeses through different interfaces as in (1). It is in view of (2) that Elsaesser incorporates enunciation into diegesis, as diegeses of TV programs may vary with viewing conditions.<sup>40</sup> But it is in light of (1) that films with the “expanded diegesis” may appeal to us both concretely and aesthetically, because the diegetic reality in which any mise-en-abyme fantasy is enunciated is also part of the film’s diegesis.<sup>41</sup> The point is that attraction and narrative, reality and fantasy form a Möbius strip through the enunciative action which is made not by the enunciator, but by the addressee: not by the sender of a medium as message, but by its receiver in (2); not by the director of a film-in-the-film, but by its spectator as a character in (1). In fact, (1) takes the same mise-en-abyme structure, but where such a modernist film about film as *8½* (1963) often centers on the intellectual enunciator-director, the Rube genre retools the model with the emotional “enunciatee”-character. This allows us to reappropriate Metz’s point (i.e., cinematic enunciation is found less in the deictics than in the reflexivity of exposing film’s text as a performative act) from the perspective of spectatorship, which can in turn render deictic aspects more visible (as Elsaesser says) than Metz argues. In short, the Rube film has a spectatorial enunciation as diegesis which is desutured towards the explicit audience space.

Internalizing the externality of enunciation, such expanded diegesis diversifies the narrative of the (contemporary) cinema of attractions, especially when the character’s contact with an interface lets him into an internal fantasy or lets someone out of it, instead of revealing material supports. Hollywood has a

long list of films in this “marvelous” genre — explicable even if supernatural: *Pleasantville* (1998) with teenagers sucked into a 1950s TV show set; *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985) with a 1930s movie star walking off the screen, and so on. But within this category the interface experience does not serve only for the smooth transition to a mise-en-abyme diegesis; it can rather draw attention to itself as an event of attraction that fissures the main diegesis, as shown in diverse films from action adventure *The Last Action Hero* (1993) to disaster thriller *Déjà Vu* (2006). I note *Déjà Vu*, because it particularly updates the idea of ‘possible world’ from the *Matrix*-type virtual reality — two spaces, real and virtual, unfold at the same time — by visualizing two time zones, past and present, that coexist in the same place. For instance, the ultramodern Rube-Cop has to adjust to this temporal bifurcation occurring in the road that he passes through, with one naked eye seeing the daytime present and the other interface-equipped eye perceiving the nighttime past of four days ago, while his head continuously receives information from a control tower, information he processes into bodily actions (figs. 22-24). What occurs here cannot be fully analyzed in terms of mere diegetic dichotomies such as actual reality vs. virtual reality, or reality vs. the Real. The question rather involves the unique experience of interface itself that takes place on the threshold between inner and outer diegeses. Before being sutured into this or that world, even the most upgraded Rube’s struggle with the most upgraded interface holds the audience between attraction and narrative.



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No doubt Hollywood has deftly integrated the eventfulness of early cinema into “intensified continuity” of still classical narrative, never stopping its “remediation” that fuses “hypermediacy” and “immediacy.”<sup>42</sup> This ongoing cinematic phenomenon accounts for Elsaesser’s preference for the “ontological” term *diegesis* as “world-making” over Manovich’s “technical” equivalent, *interface*.<sup>43</sup> But I would shed light on *interfaciality* in general rather than new media interfaces proper, inasmuch as the Rube film visualizes the cinematic event as nothing but the embodied experience of interface broadly redefined at specific and generic levels. In this regard, *Déjà Vu* evokes an early Rube feature made on the threshold of classical cinema: Buster Keaton’s *Sherlock Jr.* (1924), particularly the scene of Keaton’s maladjustment to the screen space, which the *Matrix* series digitally reloads. Just as Neo is perplexed by totally different landscapes unfolding whenever he opens a new door-interface in virtual reality, so Sherlock Jr. enters a film within the film leading him (not to film’s material base but) first to an interfacial wonderland whose landscape keeps changing. Attracted and distracted, absorbed and disoriented, his body flips, falters, and falls (figs. 25-31).



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More discontinuous than standard jump cuts, this vertiginous montage of utterly unrelated backgrounds intimates the limitation of our inertial sensori-motor system in embodying interfaciality that potentially exceeds well-sutured illusionism. That is, this Rube experiences not an artificial interface of “body-image” (though this triggers his initial jump into the screen) so much as his own immanent “body-schema,” whose malfunction in interfacial surroundings alludes to a primary tactility that results from the primary *écart* from the world. Only after this scene is he sutured into the diegesis of a *mise-en-abyme* film that gradually takes over the full screen (fig. 32), signaling the transition from attraction to drama, from a Vertovian “perception-image” with little room for relevant bodily reaction, to a Griffithian “action-image” which will be full of Keaton’s acrobatic adventure. I would call such a narrative-integrated Rube scene the “interface-scene,” in that it seemingly marks the threshold to an encapsulated second diegesis, while temporarily desuturing it. Hence, we have a crescendo in scale from *interface-image* (as seen for Joe in *Virginity*) to *interface-scene* (for the Josh figure in *Sherlock Jr.*).<sup>44</sup> This last Rube, in particular, visualizes not only sensual but immanent tactility fully embodied in his failure of the full embodiment of interfaciality. This performance

might allegorize the first condition of any spectatorship; our embodied experience of the cinematic interface, including the tactile gap from it, immanently precedes our diegetic immersion, even just when we look at the screen without moving like the Rube.

## NOTES

1. Themroc, "RoGoPaG," *Eye For Film*, n.d., <http://www.eyeforfilm.co.uk/reviews.php?id=5766>.
2. See, among others, Jean-Louis Baudry's two classic articles "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematic Apparatus" (286-98) and "The Apparatus" (299-318) in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), along with Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Celia Brittan et al. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1982).
3. Jean-Louis Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematic Apparatus," 296.
4. Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*, 102.
5. Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematic Apparatus," 295.
6. Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*, 48-49.
7. This is why Metz even suggests that we not only "receive" but "release" the film, "since it does not pre-exist my entering the auditorium and I only need close my eyes to suppress it." Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*, 51.
8. *Ibid.*, 46.
9. *Ibid.*, 107.
10. Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematic Apparatus," 294; Baudry, "The Apparatus," 306. The first was published in 1970, the second in 1975 in *Communications* 23, the same issue that has an article by Metz including the citation just above.
11. Baudry, "The Apparatus," 310.
12. *Ibid.*, 311.
13. *Ibid.*, 310-11. See Bertram Lewin, "Sleep, The Mouth, and the Dream Screen," *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 15 (1946): 419-43; Bertram Lewin, "Inferences From the Dream Screen," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 29 (1948): 224-431.
14. Robert T. Eberwein, *Film and the Dream Screen: A Sleep and a Forgetting* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 26-27.
15. *Ibid.*, 38-39.
16. The woman, the mother's body in particular, is often represented as abject: excremental (threatens identity from the outside) and menstrual (threatens from within). To "ward off the subject's fear of his very own identity sinking irretrievably into the mother" is to cut off this dirty and shameful abject and enter the father's symbolic authority. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 64.
17. Baudry, "The Apparatus," 313.
18. Claudia Benthien, *Skin: On the Cultural Border Between Self and the World*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 7-8. Benthien cites here Paul Valéry: "the human as an 'ectoderm' whose real profundity, paradoxically, is his skin," and refers to Freud's mention of consciousness as the "surface of the mental apparatus" and the ego as "surface entity." Developing this idea, Didier Anzieu coins the notion of "skin ego": a "mental image of which the Ego of the child makes use...to represent itself as an Ego containing psychical contents, on the basis of its experience of the surface of the body." A sort of 'embodied' mirror-stage ego, this notion concerns the skin as "a unifying envelope," "a protective barrier," "a filter of exchanges and a surface of inscription." Didier Anzieu, *The Skin Ego*, trans. Chris Turner (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 98.
19. Mark Hansen, *Bodies in Code: Interfaces with New Media* (London: Routledge, 2006), 60.
20. *Ibid.*, 57-58.
21. *Ibid.*, 58. The body image is the represented body as an object (noema) of intentional consciousness (noesis), whereas the body schema refers to "a 'pre-noetic' function, a kind of infraempirical or sensible-transcendental basis for intentional operation." The latter is preconscious,

subpersonal, tacitly keyed into the environment and dynamically governing posture and movement. Ibid., 39-40.

22. Ibid., 59.

23. In this sense Joe is somewhat like a pornography spectator, whose watching is more or less intended to provoke touching which cannot help but bounce from the screen-body back to his own body-screen (as his body could, if vaguely, reflect off the onscreen body image). This perverted self-caress or self-love aroused on the skin-interface via the screen-interface is the most radical type of embodied spectatorship, central for internet pornography, cybersex technology, and virtual reality. One can find a study on related web-based spectatorship: Michele White, *The Body and The Screen: Theories of Internet Spectatorship* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

24. Now, here, the Real is primarily the uterus or chora, with the skin redefined as a tactily embodied interface that desuturs the classical mirror stage.

25. Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*, 125.

26. André Gaudreault and Tom Gunning, "Early Cinema as a Challenge to Film History," in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 363-80; Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," in *ibid.*, 381-88.

27. Charles Musser, "Rethinking Early Cinema: Cinema of Attractions and Narrativity," in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 411-12.

28. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 205.

29. Linda Williams positions Muybridge in the history of pornography, which nourished the "the frenzy of the visible," a "drive for knowledge" (Koch) aimed at scientia sexualis (Foucault). Far from a narrative form in the "masquerade of femininity" (Doane), hard core is "the one film genre that always tries to strip this mask away and see the visible 'truth' of sexual pleasure itself." Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy Of The Visible"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 48-50. Mary Ann Doane argued that female spectators only masquerade to take the male gaze that fetishizes the female body. Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, and Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 31-32. My point is, however, that the female body is shot and seen as the most fundamental attraction on screen whether for visual knowledge or pleasure. The difference lies in the degree of narrativization; pornography's minimal story progresses along with the sexual piston movement, whereas narrative film's minimal attraction temporarily disrupts the movement of the story.

30. It is a remake of a British film *The Countryman's First Sight of the Animated Pictures* (1901). For details of the "Uncle Josh" film see Miriam Hansen's piece earlier than Elsaesser's. Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 25-30. Other similar early films include *Mabel's Dramatic Career* (1913) and *A Movie Star* (1916). A following couple of (post)modern Rube films as well as theoretical cues are taken from Thomas Elsaesser, "Discipline Through Diegesis: The Rube Film Between 'Attraction' and 'Narrative Integration'," in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 205-23.

31. It shows a "naïf, who does not know what theatre is, and for whom, by a reversal foreseen in Corneille's plot itself, the representation of the play is given. By a partial identification with this character, the spectators can sustain their credulousness in all incredulousness." Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*, 72-73.

32. A well-known Greek episode tells that Zeuxis's painting of grapes so lusciously invited birds, which flew down to peck at them, but when he asked Parrhasius to pull aside the curtain from his painting, the curtain itself turned out to be a painting; Parrhasius deceived Zeuxis who deceived the birds. Regarding this myth, Lacan points out that while animals are attracted to superficial appearances, humans are enticed by the idea of that which is hidden. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 103. Interestingly, the mural paintings of a 6th-century Korean artist Sol Geo are also reported to have fatally attracted birds.

33. Thomas Elsaesser, "Discipline Through Diegesis," 215.

34. *Ibid.*, 213-15.

35. Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 110-11.

36. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 243.

37. Mark Hansen, *Embodying Technesis: Technology Beyond Writing* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 120 and 140.

38. Elsaesser, "Discipline Through Diegesis," 215-16.

39. *Ibid.*, 217.

40. As Elsaesser mentions, Noël Burch formerly tackled diegesis in relation to the media shift from early cinema to television. Burch, "Narrative, Diegesis: Thresholds, Limits," in *Life To Those*

*Shadows*, ed. Ben Brewster (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 243-66.

41. This is the so-called Branigan's Paradox; whatever Brechtian device debunking illusionism of a film-in-the-film still belongs to this latter film's diegesis, as if a sort of infinite regress of diegesis works. Edward Branigan, "Diegesis and Authorship in Film," *Iris* 7:4 (1986): 37-54.

42. I am using the terms rendered common by Bordwell's counter-postclassical argument: David Bordwell, "Intensified Continuity: Visual Style in Contemporary American Film," *Film Quarterly* 55:3 (Spring 2002): 16-28; and new media studies: Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999).

43. *Ibid.*, 218.

44. As for Sherlock Jr., Francesco Casetti precisely describes the scene at issue as the trope of early spectatorship, of unpredictable 'modern' experience, after which the character adapts to the world that the film discloses. This process is called "filmic experience" as attendance that passes through three instances: the experience of a place (theater), of a situation (real/unreal), and of a world (diegesis). Thus, cinema is "an interface between two worlds." Francesco Casetti, "Filmic Experience," *Screen* 50:1 (2009): 60-61. My intervention is to subdivide this interface into two scales and interrogate the suture-desuture dialectic down to the body-world relationship.

**À PROPOS D'IMAGES (À SUIVRE):**  
**ENTRETIEN AVEC MARIE-JOSÉ MONDZAIN**

Réalisée par

Vanessa Brito (Université Nouvelle de Lisbonne)

*CINEMA (C) : En lisant votre dernier livre, Images (à suivre). De la poursuite, au cinéma et ailleurs,<sup>1</sup> il m'a semblé que votre réflexion sur la poursuite a été inséparable d'une réflexion sur l'écriture elle-même. Pourquoi avez-vous ressenti le besoin de faire l'expérience d'une écriture fragmentaire, en marge des enchaînements académiques, pour aborder cette question de la poursuite ? Cette écriture suspensive, où les fragments sont raccordés par des écarts, des sauts ou des arrêts, a été pour vous une manière d'encourager le lecteur à établir ses propres raccords et à mener sa propre poursuite ?*

MARIE-JOSÉ MONDZAIN (MJM) : Écrire un nouveau livre, me remettre à écrire, revient ici à m'interroger sur la légitimité de ma propre persévérance, sur le sens de mon obstination. Qu'est-ce qui fait que l'on passe d'une parole à une autre, d'un texte à un autre, d'un livre à un autre et que quelque chose d'ininterrompu, qui n'aura de cesse d'être repris, justifie ou légitime, même si ce n'est que transitoirement, le fait de s'y remettre, de reprendre la plume et de vouloir continuer une enquête, c'est-à-dire, d'être fidèle à un objet avec le sentiment qu'il y a encore à dire ? Que veut dire le fait de se remettre à écrire surtout quand il s'agit, dans cette écriture, de ma fidélité à ce que j'appellerais provisoirement un objet, à l'image, c'est-à-dire, à ce dont je crois avoir soupçonné qu'il s'agissait avec elle du site le plus assuré de l'infidélité elle-même. Je la sais rétive à toute capture, à toute identification, à toute définition. Elle est par excellence site du devenir dans la multiplicité, la contradiction, le changement. Alors comment le rapport que l'on a à

un objet aussi rebelle à l'interprétation et au déchiffrement, aussi résistant à la lecture et à la capture, mettait-il en marche la fidélité d'une écriture, la ténacité d'un projet, la continuité d'une interrogation ? Comment ce lieu si instable me conduisait-il à m'installer de façon de plus en plus obstinée dans la quête et l'interrogation, comme si je ne me laissais pas décourager par le registre le plus décourageant qui soit, à savoir, celui des images ? Décourageant parce qu'il ne connaît pas d'arrêt et ne promet nul triomphe. On emploie volontiers des formules comme « arrêt sur l'image », mais c'est la pensée qui s'arrête, jamais l'image. Ce sont les regards que l'on essaie de ralentir, les images continuent de fuir.

En donnant cette forme à mon livre, je voulais, par un certain choix formel ou stylistique, rendre sensible au lecteur le paradoxe qu'il y avait à s'obstiner dans la poursuite, à ne pas lâcher ce que je n'attraperai jamais et à y constituer ce qui alimente toute pensée, à savoir, le ralentissement, la décélération et le suspens. C'était plutôt une expérience de la perte de mon objet. Dans le rapport à la lettre, à l'écriture, comment rendre sensible ce que les images me faisaient éprouver, d'autant plus que j'ai fait le choix de ne pas montrer des images dans ce livre ? De toutes les façons, cela n'aurait pas eu grand sens de montrer des images pour les mettre au défi d'avoir été dites pour être vues et une fois vues, impossibles à dire... Ce sont souvent là, les apories les plus banales ou courantes à propos de l'image : voir ce qu'on dit, dire ce qu'on voit, ne pas arriver à dire tout ce qu'on voit, faire entendre ce qu'on ne montre pas etc. Je ne voulais pas m'en tenir là, mais plutôt me placer dans ce lieu où ce que je dis, n'étant pas montré, fait voir malgré tout quelque chose au lecteur, quelque chose qu'il ne voit pas, y compris quand on le lui montre.

*C : Vous venez de mentionner que les images ne cessent de fuir. Pourquoi cette question de la poursuite vous a-t-elle paru si importante dans le cadre d'une réflexion sur l'image ? En quoi est-elle pour vous autre chose qu'un thème ?*

MJM : La première fois que j'ai écrit sur l'image, dans un texte qui était un peu programmatique de ce que j'allais faire dans les années suivantes, je l'avais appelé « La vivante fugitive ». <sup>2</sup> J'avais alors formulé un ressenti, l'expérience intime d'un rapport aux images qui me privait de toute capture, possession, de toute expertise et de toute science. Je savais que je ne serai jamais dans un rapport de propriété ou de maîtrise face aux images. Donc, il s'agissait déjà de renoncer à un certain type de pouvoir, de laisser toute sa liberté à l'image comme étant d'autant plus intéressante que c'était une course décevante. Ce qui alimentait cette déception était de l'ordre de l'énergie désirante. La poursuite n'était qu'un autre nom pour parler du désir. Désir de capture peut-être, désir de savoir étayé sur le désir de voir. Le désir n'était pas exempt de tout ce que l'image refusait de donner. Jusqu'à ce que je me dise que ce qui était peut-être le plus vivant — ce sont les Pères de l'Eglise qui m'en ont indiqué la direction — c'était que le désir se nourrit de sa propre déception, c'est-à-dire, de sa propre relance, encore que ce mot est abusivement utilisé et banalisé. Il s'agissait de voir le lien qu'il y avait entre l'objet du désir et l'image, lien qui ne se réduit nullement au désir de voir. L'image, loin de ne désigner que les objets de la vision, concerne les objets du désir donc ne peut être qu'un non-objet qui, se refusant à combler le désir, l'attise sans fin. C'est ainsi que le mot poursuite est venu s'inscrire pour moi au cœur de la question de l'image : il ne s'agit plus de l'interroger dans l'espace qu'elle occupe et traverse à la fois, dans les parcours qui nous séparent d'elle ou qui nous en rapprochent, mais de la questionner dans le temps, car il n'y a de poursuite que sur une trajectoire temporalisée, donc, dans une histoire à la fois continue et discontinue. Ce que j'essaie de faire entendre dans ce livre c'est que cette temporalité se déploie à tous les niveaux, au niveau biographique, parfois le plus circonstanciel, mais aussi à tous les autres niveaux de l'épreuve de la temporalité : dans toutes les poursuites, les courses, les chasses, les suspens, en un mot, dans toutes les cynégétiques de la vie, qu'elles soient amoureuses,

philosophiques ou narratives, qu'elles soient réelles ou fictives. L'image apparaît et fait apparaître tous les « tempos » pour reprendre à Patrice Loraux sa formule quant au « Tempo de la pensée ». La thématique de la poursuite permet de délocaliser, de spatialiser l'image et de la temporaliser. Ceci est très important car c'est bien sous le signe du lieu qu'opèrent aussi bien les illusions que les prétentions au savoir et à la maîtrise. L'image détrône tous les règnes, déjoue les assignations à résidence et les régimes de la croyance qui consistent à croire que ce qui est à voir est bien là dans la place où on le voit. À partir du moment où je délocalise, le mot poursuite temporalise l'objet de la quête et fait que l'objet du désir est quelque chose qui a à voir avec le sens, la direction, l'itinéraire d'une vie. Cette vie propre à l'image peut être celle d'un corps, d'une pensée, d'un déroulement conceptuel, d'une action politique. Elle ne s'accommode jamais de ce qui fait tableau en un lieu et qui se donne à brouter à des appétits de consommation et de propriété.

*C : Dans ce livre, dont le sous-titre est De la poursuite. Au cinéma et ailleurs, quelle est au juste la place que le cinéma y occupe ? Je vous pose cette question parce que vous y affirmez que « la poursuite est l'essence même du cinéma » (141) et que cela tient à la matière et à la technique des images cinématographiques, mais, en même temps, on a aussi le sentiment que le cinéma y est un objet parmi d'autres (parmi des souvenirs, des passages biographiques, des poèmes et des textes) et que le vrai objet de ce livre serait la vie elle-même, dont le cinéma est une métaphore... Qu'est-ce qui a déterminé la place que le cinéma occupe dans cet ouvrage ?*

MJM : Le cinéma, qui est un mot grec, indique par définition, étymologiquement, le mouvement. Le monde qui est le nôtre a introduit pour la première fois dans le régime des arts et de la création une dimension iconique qui n'était plus locale mais temporelle. Nous ne voyons pas le cinéma là où a lieu, réellement, techniquement, ce qui nous est donné à voir. La réalité de l'écran, le

mode de rassemblement, la durée d'un film — puisqu'un film se définit par son contenu, narratif ou non, et par sa durée —, nous met en présence, de la façon la plus remarquable, des images comme pure matière temporelle. Donc, dire que je découvrais dans le cinéma l'essence de la poursuite, ou dire que la poursuite était cinéma, me permettait aussi de regarder dans l'histoire des poursuites, qui ont précédé de loin l'histoire du cinéma. Cette façon de penser le déroulement du monde en termes de trajectoire ou de temporalité, toujours infidèle à la localisation, fidèle aux déceptions du désir et en même temps à l'obstination des courses, c'est quelque chose qui traversait l'histoire de ce qu'on nous donnait à voir, à imaginer ou à rêver. Je n'appelle pas image que ce qui est seulement visible. Quand je m'intéresse aux *Métamorphoses* d'Ovide, à l'*Illiade* ou à l'*Odyssee*, à d'autres époques et à des formes d'iconicité textuelles, c'est le cinéma qui me permet aujourd'hui de comprendre d'une autre façon ce qui fut l'enjeu dans l'histoire des images. C'est sans doute la raison pour laquelle, quand j'écrivais *Homo spectator* [Bayard, 2007], j'ai tourné mon regard vers les images rupestres. Il ne s'agissait pas d'inscrire une sorte d'onto-archéologie dans l'histoire des images, mais de repérer dans la constitution même de ce qu'on appelle l'humanité quelque chose qui avait à voir avec le déroulement des gestes, la construction du regard dans l'attente du récit. Du récit, peut-être y en a-t-il pour ceux qui considèrent que ces figures rupestres opèrent comme des récits de chasse. On a aussi découvert que les déplacements des torches animaient les images au fil du déplacement des corps et produisent un premier « cinéma ». Cette découverte confirmerait que c'est la mise en mouvement de ce qu'on donne à voir qui est inlassablement interrogée sous le signe de la temporalité. Dans la fixité apparente d'un face à face fasciné ou terrifié qu'est-ce qui circule toujours et encore ?

Cette question de la circulation je l'avais pensée bien avant de parler du cinéma. Lorsque je travaillais sur la pensée iconique à Byzance et particulièrement sur la

période iconoclaste, j'ai reconnu dans l'économie patristique une pensée singulière de la circulation des signes. C'est pourquoi j'ai parlé de *Commerce des regards* [Seuil, 2003] — le commerce dit bien aussi la circulation de signes et des choses entre des personnes. Le commerce qu'on pourrait appeler "iconomique" est indissociable d'une entrée du sens dans l'histoire, dans la temporalité. Ce que l'Église avait très bien compris puisque l'incarnation de celui qui n'est qu'image est en même temps le signal par lequel la théologie s'efface devant l'économie historique de la visibilité. On sort de la métaphysique et de la transcendance de l'être pour ne connaître que l'immanence d'un devenir, immanence historique, avec un récit, etc. Donc, que l'image soit totalement liée au cheminement des vies — de la vie individuelle jusqu'à la vie comprise de façon plus vaste, générique ou transgénérique —, le cinéma me l'inspirait au sens propre. Cela dit, puisqu'on m'a parfois posé la question de savoir pourquoi je n'avais pas parlé de peinture, c'est parce que c'est le cinéma qui m'a permis de comprendre mon rapport à la peinture, au dessin et aux autres images.

Je suis de mon siècle, c'est-à-dire que le cinéma intervient également comme industrie dans un monde où les images, par cette forme de leur production, ont été saisies au cœur même de ce qui construit une liberté et la détruit. Le mouvement des images, la fuite des images, le déroulement des récits, la poursuite, la circulation des signes sont constituants de l'histoire des sujets qui vivent ensemble et qui construisent un monde mais sont indissociables aussi de ce qui détruit les liens entre nous, détruit les mondes du possible et menace notre histoire. Le pouvoir qui a été repéré, qui existe dans les images et qui fait qu'elles sont inséparables de la question du désir, a fait que toute structure dominante, que toute domination de type économique et politique n'a de cesse — et ça je l'avais repéré dès la période iconoclaste — de s'emparer du monopole de la production des images pour étayer grâce à elles la souveraineté sur la croyance de ceux que l'on veut assujettir. Le

monde dans lequel nous sommes n'a fait que se déployer en ce sens. Sous le signe aujourd'hui désigné du nom de communication, le pouvoir s'empare des images, tout comme l'Église a su le faire à un moment donné et comme les iconoclastes aussi ont désiré le faire au détriment de l'Église. L'idée était déjà claire : celui qui a le monopole des images a le monopole du pouvoir. Je découvrais donc que le cinéma – ou ce qui est devenu l'industrie visuelle ou audiovisuelle, qui ensuite a pris les formes que nous connaissons par d'autres techniques qui sont celles de la télévision et des techniques de la communication —, montre à quel point la question de l'image, non seulement concerne le désir, la poursuite pour chacun de nous, mais concerne, dans le même mouvement, la destruction, l'écrasement, l'aliénation et la domination sur les corps et sur les croyances, dont les forces capitalistes, maintenant essentiellement soucieuses de communication, se sont emparées. Installer un pouvoir sur les opérations imageantes, c'est s'assurer la domination de la croyance à partir de l'expérience corporelle de la vision. Donc, le cinéma non seulement était pour moi le paradigme même de ce que je poursuivais et de ce que c'était l'image appliquée dans le registre de la poursuite, mais devenait en même temps le lieu de la persécution, c'est-à-dire, devenait, à travers les industries cinématographiques et la communication audiovisuelle, le régime sous lequel on pouvait maltraiter, avec le plus de violence, les corps, les regards et la croyance de la communauté. D'où le fait que je me sois tenu au plus près des objets cinématographiques, pas nécessairement dans une posture savante, cinéphile, qui n'est pas ma question, mais en tant que spectatrice qui va très souvent au cinéma et qui en voit le plus possible, pour tirer de ma propre expérience cinématographique le maximum de ressources qui me permettraient d'indiquer à un lecteur, à quelqu'un à qui je m'adresse par l'écriture, des zones de perturbation, de fidélité et d'infidélité à nos propres désirs à travers le rapport à ces images et le rapport que nous avons au pouvoir qui est pris sur nous, c'est-à-dire, aux industries dominantes, à la domination par l'industrie et la finance,

dont le cinéma est l'un des secteurs les plus prospères, puisqu'il est devenu une branche de l'industrie de la communication.

*C : Dans ce livre vous insistez aussi sur le fait que les fictions cinématographiques ont une puissance politique, notamment, sur leur capacité à faire advenir la figure du peuple. Qu'est-ce que ça veut dire au juste « faire advenir la figure du peuple » ? Est-ce lui donner un corps, un visage, trouver quelqu'un qui puisse l'incarner ? À ce propos vous écrivez : « [Jésus] aurait très bien pu être la première incarnation du peuple si l'ambition paulinienne ne l'avait pas assigné à la fondation d'un règne. » (47) Que peut nous apprendre le problème de la figuration du Fils par rapport à celui de la figuration du peuple ?*

MJM : On peut faire une première remarque, à savoir que le mot peuple n'est soutenu par aucune image. Le terme a la valeur performative d'un nom, il opère comme un nom propre qui fait advenir à l'existence par la donation du nom. Ainsi peut s'entendre la formule « au nom du peuple ». Mais quelles sont les images qui entourent ce nom ? On peut convoquer les images de la foule, d'une population, celles de masse ou de rassemblement mais cela peut être aussi l'image de quelqu'un qui dit « je suis le peuple » en se considérant comme son incarnation soit par la voie de la représentation institutionnelle soit par celle du délire mégalomane comme dans le film de King Vidor, *La Foule (The Crowd, 1928)*. Le peuple est en tant que tel infigurable, invisible. En même temps — et c'est pour ça que j'ai repris le texte de Sieyès, qui soutient comme son hors champ, le texte de Jean-Luc Godard —, le peuple qui veut être *tout* et qui en même temps n'est *rien*, qui participe du visible et de l'invisible, a finalement comme destinée de faire *quelque chose*.<sup>3</sup> Ce quelque chose est le registre de l'incarnation d'un geste, d'une action. Le peuple veut être agent et se fait reconnaître dans sa puissance effective. Cette puissance s'exprime dans ce que j'appelle des « fictions constituantes », qui sont des figures historiquement variables et qui peuvent être d'ordre institutionnel mais pas nécessairement. Chaque

fois le peuple sera cette voix au nom de laquelle — comme les chrétiens disent au nom du Père invisible — le sujet de la liberté revendique son pouvoir d’agir et de penser et refuse sa soumission, son aliénation et toute domination abusive sur ses droits. Le peuple a le même niveau d’abstraction que les mots qui entourent l’émergence de la Nation au moment de la Révolution. À l’énoncé de la trilogie fondatrice de l’égalité, de la fraternité et de la liberté il est impossible de substituer des images. On peut forger des allégories, créer des mises en scène, produire des emblèmes et des symboles, on en reste toujours à des gestes analogiques et illustratifs qui théâtralissent l’imaginaire politique mais ne résolvent en rien la question du rapport entre le concept et le registre fondateur d’une irréalité. Les images ne sont pas des allégories, même si les allégories mettent en scène des images. La question de la représentation reste entière, c’est celle de la délégation de pouvoir, de la visibilité : comment rendre visible l’égalité, la liberté, la fraternité ? Leur non-visibilité n’indique pas leur transcendance, leur inexistence, mais leur immanence dans les gestes et les actions accomplis au nom d’une croyance constituante. Cette croyance en une fiction constituante autorise chacun de nous, sans distinction d’origine, de sexe, de genre, de richesse, donc inconditionnellement à être le sujet de son action.

Quand les chrétiens ont pris un certain nombre d’initiatives narratives, mythiques, quand ils ont construit les fables qui font advenir dans la personne du Fils une image – et une image qui prétend être celle de l’humanité tout entière – rédemptrice de tous inconditionnellement, il y a un véritable élan de fiction égalitaire sous le signe de l’universel qui est formulé pour la première fois à l’occasion de cette fable incarnationnelle. La dimension fictionnelle fut alors explicite puisque la fable chrétienne fait advenir l’image à partir d’un non lieu, d’une naissance sans paternité, d’une paternité sans fécondation, d’une fécondation sans rapport sexuel, d’une filiation asexuée, d’une réversibilité des places

d'engendré à géniteur, de créé à créateur, de mort à vivant... C'est là le prix fictionnel de l'universalité. *Eikon* est le mode singulier sous lequel se rend visible la transcendance en n'ayant rien perdu de son universalité. Ce qui est un coup de force antiplatonicien alors que les Pères s'appuient par ailleurs sur le *Sophiste* et le *Timée*. Pour Platon quand les choses deviennent visibles, elles perdent en universalité et en stabilité ; ce qu'elles gagnent en visibilité elles le perdent en être pour ne plus connaître que le régime de l'apparition et de la disparition. Le virage iconique chrétien consiste précisément à conférer au registre filial, qui est celui de l'image, une puissance d'universalité, d'égalité, de liberté qui n'a rien perdu, en devenant visible, de l'essence paradigmatique de l'*eidos*. Ce qui veut dire que le registre de l'image est bien celui dans lequel nous pouvons voir apparaître l'universel dans le vivant. Il me semble qu'il y a là une espèce de coup politique révolutionnaire, tout à fait formidable, dont Paul a été aussi porteur : « il n'y aura plus ni juif, ni grec, ni homme libre ni esclave, ni homme ni femme... », on dépasse tout ce qui distingue, différencie, catégorise, etc. Mais le second versant apparaît très vite, c'est la volonté de puissance qui anime les porteurs du nouveau modèle, le paradigme visible veut installer ce qu'on appelle le règne. Cette question du royaume est significative parce qu'il est impossible de décider si Jésus est roi ou pas, si son royaume est ou n'est pas de ce monde. On écrit sur la croix « voici le roi des juifs » et toute la scénographie de la passion est une parodie de couronnement royal, un sacre à l'envers. On met pourtant dans la bouche de Jésus la formule : « Mon royaume n'est pas de ce monde » et à partir de là, paradoxalement, on crée un empire. Pourtant dans toutes les traditions du Moyen-Orient ante-chrétiennes et postchrétiennes il existe des mises en scène de la royauté détrônée : ce sont des fictions égalitaires, des manifestations populaires qui se poursuivent y compris chez les chrétiens, avec le carnaval et dans tous les rituels festifs du renversement des pouvoirs et des places. Cette énergie anti-hiérarchique et anarchisante parcourt la pensée chrétienne et a

largement inspiré les mouvements hérétiques qui refusaient l'installation impériale et impérialiste du pouvoir chrétien. Il y avait là, je dirais, comme un murmure tenace qui soutenait la doctrine chrétienne et dont d'ailleurs bien des mystiques, eux aussi, ont voulu relever le défi, en se séparant de la domination institutionnelle. En tous les cas, cette filiation là, qui s'appelle l'incarnation chrétienne, permet de comprendre que l'idée que l'on se fait du peuple dans le monde chrétien c'est à la fois la source du pouvoir monarchique et de la puissance révolutionnaire. Quand on parle des révolutionnaires de 1789, il faut bien savoir que l'abbé Sieyès a une culture et une formation théologique chrétienne dont il refuse désormais la domination institutionnelle monarchique, allant, au contraire, reprendre, vivifier, défendre et formuler les exigences démocratiques, à savoir, qu'il est bien plus fidèle à quelque chose de christologique en devenant le porte parole du peuple. Il fait presque une prosopopée : « que dit le peuple, que veut le peuple... ». Le Christ était la face visible d'une instance invisible, mais cette instance invisible n'est pas transcendante, elle est immanente à chacun de ses membres. C'est ce qui change tout, à savoir que l'universel est en chacun de nous, il n'est pas en dehors. Là est la rupture avec toute onto-théologie. La fiction constituante d'un universel démocratique réanime l'une des potentialités de ce qu'a été une vraie révolution dans la pensée juive, une pensée juive révolutionnaire et qui est scandaleusement devenue une pensée chrétienne conservatrice prompte à refuser aux juifs toute participation à l'universel.

Ce qui m'a intéressée, c'est le lien entre l'invisibilité du peuple et sa capacité d'être vu en chacun de nous. Car nous sommes tous les membres de ce corps invisible qui s'appelle le peuple, nous sommes tous en mesure d'en faire vivre une figure par la façon que nous allons avoir de nous inscrire dans une communauté. Ce qui n'empêche pas, bien au contraire, de se poser le problème supplémentaire de la représentation. À partir du moment où la communauté élargie devient démocratiquement importante, à savoir, au niveau des décisions et de l'organisation

des institutions, de quelle façon vont être choisis ceux qui incarnent, presque au sens chrétien du terme, cet universel, le fait d'être là pour les autres ? On en connaît les impasses, les paradoxes, les abus et les échecs. Je dirais qu'on ne connaît que ça parce qu'il s'agit d'une fiction constituante et non d'une réalité : Chaque fois que quelqu'un a été véritablement le peuple, il l'a payé de sa vie. S'il veut effectivement échapper au couronnement, il va lui falloir soit devenir un dieu carnaval, soit disparaître, soit accepter les scénographies sacrificielles. La vie du « représentant » devient une fable dérisoire ou tragique. C'est pour ça que je trouve le film de Frank Capra, *L'homme de la rue* (*Meet John Doe*, 1945), remarquable. Capra, d'origine italienne, chrétienne, humaniste, pose la question de savoir comment faire vivre et faire comprendre à la population des spectateurs les espoirs, les impasses, les échecs, les paradoxes et les contradictions inhérentes à la figurabilité du peuple. Il déplace la question de la représentation pour poser celle de la figurabilité. Le cinéma appelle cette élection, le casting. La question du peuple devient une question théâtrale et cinématographique de mise en scène du drame contradictoire et insoluble que représente le choix d'un corps pour figurer le corps du peuple. Capra finit par proposer ceci : qu'il n'y aurait que le cinéma et les acteurs du cinéma qui peuvent faire apparaître et disparaître le caractère non-substantiel du peuple dans une radicale singularité. Comment faire vivre l'universel dans l'exception ? Tel est le paradoxe de la légitimité de l' élu. C'est bien le cinéma qui a mis en scène admirablement cette aporie. On va m'objecter que le théâtre aussi. Brecht s'était posé le problème de façon frontale : de quelle façon le théâtre pouvait-il saisir et faire voir dans la présence des corps qui sont sur la scène l'histoire d'une invisibilité du peuple, de son incarnation historique, de ses paradoxes critiques dans ses triomphes et ses échecs ? Quelle différence y a-t-il entre le théâtre de Brecht et le cinéma ? Je dirais qu'il y a deux façons de voir Brecht, de le voir et de le lire. Il y a à la fois l'inscription dans le texte de sa pensée dialectique du théâtre, avec la

distribution des places, des paroles, de l'histoire, et puis ce moment privilégié qui est l'interprétation et qui est apparition et disparition de la figure dans laquelle va s'incarner le texte. Ce qui est singulier ou spécifique au cinéma, c'est l'absence du textuel dans la parole même – il ne m'est pas venu à l'idée d'aller lire le scénario de Capra – mais il y a également la réitération possible qui me permet de voir rejouer à volonté le drame du paradoxe démocratique sans que le rapport de ma distance ou de mon identification soit l'objet d'une théorie critique. D'emblée le cinéma s'adresse à moi de façon identificatoire et émotionnelle par la grâce des corps qui apparaissent sans que cette dimension pathique, empathique même, me dessaisisse de la question ou m'impose une solution. Ce qui veut dire que le cinéma n'est pas dialectique. L'image a cet avantage politique et cet inconvénient critique : n'étant pas dialectique, elle peut vous entraîner n'importe où ailleurs vers tous les possibles. Il y a une indétermination selon laquelle l'image n'est cause de rien, mais cette indétermination est construite pour que le spectateur puisse se déterminer. S'il n'en est pas ainsi, c'est alors que ce qui est montré est déjà déterminé comme peuvent l'être par exemple la publicité ou la propagande. Disons que Brecht a la volonté vive de ne pas laisser ressortir les spectateurs dans l'état dans lequel ils sont rentrés. Le cinéaste n'en sait strictement rien et renonce à toute maîtrise, il ne peut que déterminer la forme la plus favorable à la liberté de celui qui regarde. Toutes les industries de programme et de communication veulent au contraire prévoir et conduire les effets de leurs propositions visuelles. Ainsi en va-t-il d'un certain cinéma et d'une télévision dominante. Autrement, plus un film est réussi, plus le risque qu'il prend à l'égard de la liberté de celui à qui il s'adresse lui enlève toute volonté de puissance.

*C : Vous avez parlé à plusieurs reprises de « fictions constitutantes ». Pourriez-vous préciser ce que vous entendez par là ?*

MJM : Je distingue le constitué du constituant. Le constitué étant assez proche de ce que Foucault désignait du nom de dispositif, c'est-à-dire, de tout ce qui reçoit sa forme dans un ensemble dominant, les figures de l'opposition à cette domination étant comprises. Il s'agit de l'imbrication, de l'enchevêtrement composite de ce qui dans les institutions, les objets, les dispositifs symboliques ou matériels font qu'un certain monde, par exemple celui que nous partageons, est descriptible et inscrit selon des normes. Je peux ainsi désigner l'ensemble des contrats et des contraintes qui dessinent la forme et me donnent le cadre dans lesquels je vis, je parle, j'agis, je fais des enfants, j'ai des amis, je travaille etc. On ne tiendrait pas debout s'il n'y avait pas dès notre arrivée dans ce monde, déjà là, constituée, la composition des contrats et des contraintes pré-posées, traversées, structurées, comme disent les analystes, par le langage dans les effets de la parole, par la construction de la langue, par notre nidation grammaticale dans le berceau qui nous accueille. Mais tout cela, étant déjà là, peut être considéré ou désigné comme l'ensemble indéfini, indénombrable, mais nombré, des déterminations inévitables qui font que je vais m'inscrire dans un espace et un temps qui font de moi non seulement un élément du système mais la conséquence de ce système. Je fais partie du dispositif auquel je dois d'être là à titre de membre et de conséquence et, à ce titre, je deviens une des causes de la perpétuation du système. Je vais perpétuer le caractère consistant et déterminé dans lequel s'inscrit une place à mon nom, place qui pourrait se définir non seulement par l'ensemble consistant et rassurant de ses déterminations, mais aussi par les micromouvements qui permettent de m'assurer qu'il y reste assez de jeu dans le système pour que je ne le vive pas comme pure tyrannie. Voilà ce que j'appelle non seulement le constitué mais un certain régime de croyance dans lequel je peux me laisser convaincre que le jeu est suffisant pour que je renonce à toute transformation du constitué. Je pense par exemple aux politiques de divertissement, aux politiques culturelles, aux stratégies de communication comme on les appelle, qui s'emparent

de toutes les formes du jeu, qui font mine de s'inquiéter sur la place de la création ou de l'innovation dans le but de rendre inoffensive et même impossible et impensable toute révolution transformatrice. Tel est le grand jeu réformiste dont la rhétorique associe scandaleusement la liberté et la création à la sécurité et à l'identité. Ce monde constitué permet à tous ceux qu'on appelle réalistes de dire que c'est là le réel, que ce qu'ils nous demandent de croire est l'objet de leur savoir et que ce soi-disant réel, son jeu interne compris, est non-transformable : le dispositif évolue, il bouge, mais il est infissurable, c'est-à-dire qu'il est un devenir dans une plasticité indéchirable. C'est ainsi que les immobilistes peuvent instrumentaliser une pensée comme celle de Deleuze pour justifier, à travers une théorie des flux, la mobilité incessante de ce qui ne bouge pas. Mais ce qui est en tous les cas assuré dans une telle pensée, c'est l'impossibilité du fracas, de la fracture, du vacarme, de la révolution, de la suspension. En ce sens, la poursuite peut devenir, elle aussi, non pas le régime déceptif du désir mais, au contraire, le mot par lequel la continuité s'assure la mobilité et l'immobilité dans le même mouvement – une mouvante paralysie.

Ce que j'appelle le constituant, ce sont les opérations imageantes et symboliques qui me construisent en tant qu'agent de mon action et sujet de mon désir. Il s'agit d'un tissage fictionnel entre les sites du regard et de la parole, il s'agit aussi de la forge où s'inventent les armes qui permettent de résister à toute domination. Arrivant dans un monde où l'on m'a assigné une place et où je peux confortablement m'installer comme on prend place dans un train. Quand le train se met en route, je peux croire que je bouge alors que je suis dans le train. Kant a abordé la question du déplacement du sujet embarqué sur le bateau qui navigue ; c'est, dit-il, un problème de phronomie. La question de l'autonomie du voyageur est la suivante : est-ce que je peux sauter hors du bateau ou du train ? Et pour aller où, puisque l'on se sépare du chemin commun ? C'est la possibilité du saut, du

bond, de l'arrêt, du suspens. En quoi celui qui est dans le train, dans ce train de vie, peut s'attribuer à lui-même la capacité d'être la cause de son action alors que lui-même n'est que la conséquence de l'action des autres, du désir des autres. D'où me vient cette exigence, cette volonté dont la philosophie témoigne, de prendre le risque du saut ? Nous devons à Nietzsche d'avoir changé radicalement de ton en philosophie pour convoquer et invoquer un autre registre d'existence du sujet dans ce train du monde, sous le signe de la danse, du bond, du saut, de l'arrachement au cours et à la pesanteur des choses. Il existe des gestes producteurs de liberté qui permettent de répondre à ce désir de joie, à ce désir du désir, dont Nietzsche revendique le ton, le chant, le cri de jubilation et de colère et dont Freud entend la souffrance, capte les symptômes. Ce sont les gestes fictionnels qui sont les passeurs, qui nous font circuler entre le visible et l'invisible. Les philosophes et les poètes le font entendre mais différemment. Ceux qui prennent des risques avec l'ordre de la raison et avec les raisons de l'ordre à la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> et au début du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, veulent en finir avec la musique létale du capitalisme : ils instaurent la dissonance, le vacarme et la confusion tantôt révolutionnaire tantôt ludique. Si le monde est à l'endroit, alors il faut le mettre à l'envers pour qu'il occupe un meilleur endroit. Marx voulait remettre sur ses pieds la dialectique hégélienne, mais encore faut-il que ce renversement ne s'investisse pas d'une nouvelle fixité constituée. S'il y a quelque chose de l'ordre d'un saut à accomplir, de quel ordre est ce saut ? Ce saut est un saut hors de ce qui est appelé la réalité. C'est pour ça que je l'appelle fiction. Pour reprendre le jeu de mot lacanien, on peut dire que ce qui se donne pour réalité est une « fixation », une façon de nous fixer, et qu'il faut nous défixer, nous arracher à cette crucifixion du déterminisme historique et des dispositifs impérieux et impérialistes. Je choisis le mot fiction pour parler de l'arrachement qu'exige ma propre constitution de sujet non-conditionné. Cette hypothèse traverse le travail de Hannah Arendt, par exemple. Sa lecture de Saint Augustin la mène, étape par étape,

à se poser la question du commencement et du caractère inconditionnel du déconditionnement et de l'inconditionnalité de la liberté humaine. Le mot fiction est malheureusement utilisé pour désigner le registre d'une imagination rêveuse, fabulatrice ou romanesque, et porte le poids négatif de ce qui manque d'être. La fiction est au contraire pour moi une façon de désigner ce qui est constituant face à la fixation constituée qui correspondrait à ce qu'Annie Lebrun qualifie d'un « Trop de réalité ». La fiction constituante serait l'exigence d'inscrire ce qui véritablement me fait être et qui est du surréel. Les surréalistes m'ont intéressée sous ce signe là ; ils ont cherché à travers le surréel le hors champ de la réalité qui lui est immanent : c'est la création qu'habite tout sujet en train de se constituer. Toute posture créative, inventive, tout geste inaugurant et inaugural suppose un saut, un arrachement aux dispositifs et c'est ça ce que j'appelle la fiction constituante, cette revendication d'un plus réel que la réalité. Ceci me semble politiquement capital car si la révolution est une fiction constituante, cela veut dire que la révolution est toujours possible et même qu'elle est inévitable. C'est la réhabilitation politique de la catégorie du possible comme étant ce qui, infirmant la réalité, réinstaura la possibilité d'un autre monde, d'un monde pour lequel je vais me battre et qui sera celui où il y a de l'autre inconditionnellement. Qu'est-ce que cela implique dans la réalité de nos vies ? Les pratiques de la fête, les gestes de l'art, l'invention des jeux, la création des formes, la culture de l'intempestif, de la dischronie et de l'anachronie jubilatoires. Pour expérimenter la fracture et le séisme il faut du courage parce qu'il s'agit de l'exercice du péril. Comme l'écrivait Wittgenstein, « le courage est toujours original ».<sup>4</sup>

## NOTES

1. Marie-José Mondzain, *Images (à suivre). De la poursuite, au cinéma et ailleurs* (Montrouge : Bayard, 2011).

2. Cf. Mondzain, *L'image naturelle* (Paris : Le Nouveau Commerce, 1995).

3. A ce propos, cf. le texte publié en portugais « Nada, tudo, qualquer coisa. Ou a arte das imagens como poder de transformação », in *A República por Vir: Arte, Política e Pensamento para o Século XXI*, ed. Leonor Nazaré et Rodrigo Silva (Lisbonne : Fondation Calouste-Gulbenkian, 2011), 103-28.

4. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarques mêlées*, trad. Gérard Granel (Paris : TER, 1990), 32 et 52.

CONFERENCE ROUND-UP SUMMER 2012:

*POWERS OF THE FALSE* (INSTITUT FRANÇAIS, LONDON, 18-19 MAY),  
 SCSMI CONFERENCE (SARAH LAWRENCE COLLEGE/NYU, NEW YORK, 13-  
 16 JUN.), *FILM-GAME-EMOTION-BRAIN* (UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM, 14-  
 21 JUL.), AND FILM-PHILOSOPHY CONFERENCE (QUEEN MARY –  
 UNIVERSITY OF LONDON/KING’S COLLEGE LONDON/KINGSTON  
 UNIVERSITY, 12-14 SEPT.)

William Brown (Roehampton University)

My previous conference reports for *Cinema: Journal of Philosophy and the Moving Image* have both offered up reasons for why cognitive scientists, analytic philosophers and film theorists/philosophers influenced by continental thought should take each other more seriously.<sup>1</sup> Or rather, if the rifts between these strands of thought have in fact been very serious for those affirming and perhaps even creating them, then it is perhaps about time to start bringing these strands of thought together, to see how the rifts are also bridges.

The four conferences (or more accurately, the two conferences, one symposium and one summer school) that I attended in the summer of 2012 would seem to affirm that this *rapprochement* is slowly beginning to happen — and it is tracing the strands of this process across these four events that is my intention with this round-up. Naturally, to do this will by definition exclude summaries of many excellent papers that were delivered and discussions that were had at all four events, at which I similarly missed (owing to the nature of parallel panel sessions) many excellent contributions and interventions. As such, I can and perhaps must simply admit that this round-up is a *partial* review of the four events in question – and that my tracing a thread of (the need for) connection between the various, still disparate,

approaches to film studies is a reflection of my own outlook and biases, rather than an impartial consideration of the state of play in contemporary film studies.

Indeed, I am deliberately ploughing a minor furrow here, by which I mean that I am picking up on and gathering together shreds of evidence for this (perceived need for) rapprochement between approaches, and all for the sake not of reflecting the current climate in film studies, but for the sake of indicating the direction in which film studies might — and the direction in which I think it should — go. Fortunately, I am not alone in this endeavour, in that the Film-Game-Emotion-Brain summer school in Amsterdam was designed precisely to bring together film scholars, neuroscientists, psychologists, computer scientists, filmmakers, gaming scholars and more, in the hope of building bridges towards potential research projects.

What is more I have recently read works by scholars that try to bring together the various strands of film studies that we might characterise as being film theory / film-philosophy (typically a “continental” approach to film, especially a Deleuzian one) and cognitive film theory (which shares ground with a more “analytic” or empirical approach to film and the philosophy of film). To name but three, these include monographs by John Mullarkey,<sup>2</sup> Robert Sinnerbrink<sup>3</sup> and Patricia Pisters<sup>4</sup> — all of whom took part in one of the events considered here.

With some substantial organisational and published support behind me, then, I must hold my hands up and say that I present my biased / partial review of these four events for political reasons, as well as for what I hope are more rigorously intellectual reasons. Indeed, perhaps the very point that I wish to make is that rigorously intellectual work cannot ignore politics — and that it is the injection of politics into otherwise rigorous intellectual work, and the injection of rigour into political discussion that I wish to push for here.

What do I mean by this distinction between politics and intellectual rigour? Perhaps a useful way to explain this distinction would be to look at the discussion

that took place following my own paper at the SCSMI Conference. In my paper, I had proposed how the appearance of women in Hollywood cinema by and large conforms to the norms of beauty determined by numerous psychological studies into what constitutes a beautiful female: near-symmetrical and youthful faces, preferably with blond hair and big breasts.<sup>5</sup> I then argued that many of these studies are skewed to favour young, white and heterosexual males, and that they attempt to offer as empirical and timeless a conception of female beauty that in fact is historically contingent and constructed. While Torben Grodal responded by saying that men are hard-wired to find women with these traits attractive, Cynthia Freeland, Karen Pearlman, Sheena Rogers and Rikke Schubart, among others, responded with vigour, seemingly in favour of the need to understand female beauty not as being timeless, but as being indeed constructed. In other words, if when we consider beauty and sex we quickly find that psychological studies carry flaws, in that they unthinkingly represent the dominant, patriarchal outlook on society, and that cinema not only reflects this dominant, patriarchal outlook but arguably also feeds back into it by reinforcing it (of course young straight males will find buxom, young blondes attractive, because those are the traits that have been upheld as attractive in countless films, TV shows and magazines since their birth), then the intellectually rigorous work of psychologists needs more consciously to bear political issues in mind if it does not want simply to reinforce the dominant, patriarchal position. As Freeland, Pearlman, Rogers and Schubart themselves remarked, this might also apply to a society like SCSMI (the Study for Cognitive Studies of the Moving Image), since rarely do female academics at this (otherwise male-dominated) conference gather, let alone discuss matters of sex and gender. In short, if much of the opposition over the last two or more decades to pioneering political (feminist) critiques of cinema by the likes of Laura Mulvey<sup>6</sup> has been as a result of the perceived lack of intellectual (empirical) rigour in their methodological

framework (psychoanalysis is not empirical), then there is also room to recall that the political infuses, and must be recognised and critiqued in, studies that otherwise take themselves to be intellectually rigorous.

The key issue to bring into this conference round-up, then, is how one accounts for *difference*. Psychological studies are undoubtedly of great value to society, and psychological/cognitive studies of cinema certainly help us enormously in understanding what happens in our brains and to our bodies when we watch movies. Nonetheless, psychological studies in general and cognitive film studies more locally run the risk of naturalising mean responses to the world and to film. But this comes at the expense of difference. Anomalous responses are on the whole ignored, even though it is anomalous figures like Phineas Gage who perhaps have taught us most about our brains. Furthermore, what one defines as statistically relevant is itself a political issue, since to study only the mean risks rendering abnormal those who do not fit the mean. Daniel Barratt's paper at SCSMI perhaps makes this most clear. Barratt argued that there is emerging in studies strong evidence for the role that cultural difference plays in cognition — that Asian peoples might perceive the same things as Europeans and North Americans, but that there is an emphasis among Asian perceivers on the relations between things in addition to/instead of an emphasis on those things themselves, as per European and North American perceivers.<sup>7</sup> Given the fact that Asians, Europeans and North Americans have the same genetic make-up, this difference is not one of biology, but one of culture. In other words, difference here is not simply a matter of race, but a matter of politics; or rather, race and difference are political issues — but politics here is not simply a question of cultural differences entirely separated from the body; instead, politics feeds back into and affects the body in such a way that biology and culture are intimately bound together. It is not a rift between culture and biology that is required for a fuller understanding of the

human, and of the human in and in relation to cinema, but a bridge between culture and biology.

If there are differences between humans according to race and culture, and if these differences affect our bodies, perhaps even our biologies, as biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling has suggested in the context of bone development,<sup>8</sup> and if humans have a common ancestor such that they became different rather than always having been different, then difference is something that is produced. Indeed, the production of difference is perhaps the founding principle of evolution itself, for even if humans suffer the illusion that evolution is anything other than a slow, slow process, and even if there can be very rapid changes in certain sets of conditions, evolution is nonetheless ongoing and constant; it does not stop. By this rationale, it perhaps comes as no surprise that there is an increasing interest among film scholars in artistic creation and creativity more generally — since art might from the perspective of evolution as difference be understood as the culturally normalised and consciously institutionalised creation of difference itself (art not as evolutionarily useful, but art as a means of making evolution sensible). That is, artistic creation is perhaps the meeting ground itself for intellectual rigour and politics, in that empirical studies cannot alone account for art since it ignores the spiritual dimension therein, but nor simply can politics account for art, since this is to disregard the precision and repeatability of certain techniques and the use of mechanical technology that is foremost visible in film production.

To this end, it does not seem surprising that Damian Sutton came up with a tentative philosophy of production during his keynote at Film-Philosophy,<sup>9</sup> while there was a significant presence of artists, particularly artist-filmmakers, at *Powers of the False*, Film-Philosophy and SCSMI. Steven Eastwood, Charlotte Ginsborg, William Greaves, Anna Lucas, Carol Morley, Ben Rivers, and Philip Wardell all presented work at the former, with Ken McMullen and Ken Jacobs offering keynote

addresses at Film-Philosophy and SCSMI respectively.<sup>10</sup> And while a filmmaker like Wardell might have expressed some hesitation in talking about his methods and processes of creation, all three conferences, particularly *Powers of the False*, seemed on the whole to welcome the opportunity for scholars and artists to meet and to discuss the act of creation, which I am characterising here as the creation of difference.

Furthermore, philosopher Alva Noë provided a keynote at SCSMI on precisely this topic. Noë asked how neuroscience can account for art, and the basic principle of his argument seemed to be as follows: art, from the perspective of the audience member (if we are talking about film), is about working out what a brain can do. Noë received a lukewarm reception from the SCSMI crowd, but I think that he is arguably correct — and I should like to explain why. Noë's suggestion is that a work of art makes us think (or feel) something that we have never felt before. If art is a journey into the new — if it is the creation of difference, in that everything new must by definition be different from what preceded it, since otherwise it would not be new at all — then on the neurological level, art induces new connections between neurons in the brain. In effect, art is a bit like learning. For if, after Donald Hebb, we accept that what fires together wires together in the brain, and if we accept that there is a neurological basis for thought, as Gerald M. Edelman and Giulio Tononi have argued,<sup>11</sup> then new thoughts, which are the basis of learning, are linked with new neural connections. Art, then, involves for the audience member new thoughts and sensations, it is a learning experience, it is perhaps the experience of learning what our brains — and by extension our bodies — can do.

Part of the lukewarm reception to Noë's proposal might be found in the fact that cognitive film studies is about how we understand films based upon conventions and the recognition of that with which we are already familiar. In other words, novelty and learning are not concepts that are commonplace in cognitive

film theory. That said, Noë was speaking specifically of art — and so it may be that films that we understand and enjoy because familiar are no less pleasurable, but that they do not constitute, according to Noë's definition, art. I am not concerned here with whether Noë's definition of art is right or wrong; but when crossed with film and film studies, this definition of art brings to the fore key issues regarding not what film can potentially do as an aesthetic form, but what it does as a cultural force. For, if young men find buxom blondes attractive as a result in part of exposure to them as paragons of attraction in films, then not only might cinema itself become standardised via lines of production as a result of a risk-averse industry that wants neither to try nor to induce anything new, but instead to recycle only the tried and tested, then so, too, might the range of thoughts and feelings that human audience members have in response to cinema become limited, controlled, and antithetical to art as Noë understands it. It is not that cinema is or even can be homogeneous; but if only a certain type of film — put bluntly, mainstream narrative cinema — is allowed to prosper, not least because psychological studies of cinema suggest that it is the “most pleasurable” (by which they mean the most effective at maintaining our attention — and perhaps also at shortening our attention, and thus our patience, both in response to alternative modes of cinema and in response to the non-cinematic world in general), then the world will be poorer for the loss of difference. Indeed, the loss, or at the very least the delimiting, of difference would run antithetical to evolution, and therefore to nature itself. Perhaps, then, it is worth taking seriously Noë's definition of art — that difference is at its core — rather than to dismiss it out of hand, for this might be an issue of political, and thus biological, urgency.

Although most SCSMI members would not read his work, Noë's approach here would also chime with Film-Philosophy keynote Bernard Stiegler's take on the role that cinema has in the world as a means of outsourcing, but also of homogenising,

memory; for Stiegler, who sees himself as conducting critique in the mould of the Frankfurt School and its successors, the critique of cinema is truly a matter of political urgency.<sup>12</sup>

The *rapprochement* between artists and academics might be seen in the proliferation of the essay-film, as well as studies into it, since the combination of forms, film and essay, demonstrates that what either form can do has not been exhausted, nor has the potential of the essay-film to show us what our brains can do. The essay-film, specifically the Spanish/Spanish-transnational essay-film, received coverage in particular at Film-Philosophy from Belén Vidal<sup>13</sup> and Steven Marsh.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the essay-film, in challenging what both film and the essay can do, allows us to bring forward more forcefully the thrust of the *Powers of the False* symposium as a whole. For if difference is the bedrock of art as it is of existence, and if difference is created, as opposed to existing *a priori*, then art and existence are both journeys into the new, into that which does not yet exist. That which does not yet exist, by virtue of its non-existence, cannot be said to be true; instead, it is false. And so while we understand truth as pertaining to the existent, and therefore to repetition and habit, truth in this sense fails to capture the power of the false, of that which lies at the heart of any truth that comes into being. Perhaps it is natural that the documentary, under the umbrella of which the essay-film typically lies, should be the main object of analysis, then, for this symposium. For, the documentary's claims to truth have for a long time been challenged not just by theorists of the documentary as a form, but by documentary makers themselves — as the analysis of various films that blur the boundary between documentary and fiction would attest.<sup>15</sup> Even documentary, then, would seemingly attest a world of difference, a world in which difference is the key to life.

If I have been arguing that difference is the key to life and to cinema, in that different films can help us to have different, new thoughts, and that repetition

delimits thought in that it leads to the homogenisation of films, with the homogenisation of films itself leading to homogenous responses to films, which in turn potentially delimits thought (or certainly does not help to realise cinema's potential to induce new thought), then a second central issue at play here is time. From the scientific perspective, time is based upon repetition, in particular the repeated oscillations of a quartz crystal that we use to measure chronometric time. However, an understanding of time as being based upon repetition runs counter to the conception of difference as being uniquely new (i.e., it is not a repetition of anything) and of newness/novelty being the fundamental experience of the world and of art/cinema within that world. In other words, if chronometry runs counter to the creation of difference, it in some ways runs counter to the experience of time itself. We have two different conceptions of time that are at loggerheads with each other. It is possible that cognitive film studies will only be able to make further progress when it accounts not just for the fact that time is based not upon repetition but upon difference, but also for the fact that there are surely different times, or different experiences of time, co-existing in the world. In other words, if we must accept difference in the realm of subjectivities and bodies, we must also accept it in the realm of temporality. I am sure that new, enormous breakthroughs in thought and understanding will follow the politicisation of rigorous time, as rigorous time has led to vast changes in the makeup of a world based upon difference.

Furthermore, if I am aligning homogenisation of time via chronometry with the homogenisation of art via cinema and its imperative to arouse ever greater levels of attention and thus to delimit our opportunity and perhaps also our capacity for thought, then an ethical dimension enters here into the debate. Not only was this ethical dimension manifested in these conferences/events in the form of papers that considered the overlooked of society,<sup>16</sup> but also via films, such as Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011).<sup>17</sup> However, I shall stick to Noël Carroll's keynote at SCSMI to

draw out what I mean. In his consideration of William Wyler's *The Big Country* (1958), Carroll argued that films can offer to us moral lessons regarding how to act in the world and towards others. However, discussion following Carroll's talk suggested that morality belongs to the realm of repetition and homogenisation, while ethics belongs to the realm of difference. Films may moralise, and we may use films as examples for how to conduct ourselves in our daily lives; nonetheless, the ethical response is not to follow examples in terms of how to act, or to repeat, but to *choose* how to act, to lead a life of difference, perhaps to be different.<sup>18</sup>

Now, it is of course important to bear in mind that difference can be an illusion. Francesco Casetti's excellent keynote at Film-Philosophy reminded us that the very idea of film as philosophy in fact has been around for a lot longer than typically we give it credit, with philosophers of cinema emerging as early as the 1910s in Italy.<sup>19</sup> In other words, in drawing the dichotomy between difference and repetition as I have done so far, I must not overlook the relationship (the bridge) as well as the difference (the rift) between these two terms, which themselves arguably feed back into each other in a mutually reaffirming way.

Nonetheless, I hope here to have elucidated the ways in which the as-yet-slow but slowly accelerating *rapprochement* of "continental" film theory and a more analytic/cognitive approach to film centres upon a deeper consideration of the issue of difference, in terms of politics, culture, biology, spectatorship, creativity, time and ethics. I hope to have shown the challenges that each — broadly speaking — poses to the other, as well as the opportunities that each has of enriching the other and, therefore, ultimately our understanding of cinema and perhaps the world in general.

All that remains, then, is to praise the organisers of the *Powers of the False* Symposium (Steven Eastwood, Catherine Wheatley), the SCSMI Conference 2012 (Richard Allen, Malcolm Turvey), *Film-Game-Emotion-Brain* (Maarten de Rijke,

Sennay Ghebreab, Ed S. Tan), and the Film-Philosophy Conference 2012 (Lucy Bolton, Sarah Cooper, John Mullarkey, Catherine Wheatley again). They have each organised stimulating events that bring academic research and discourse alive, allowing it to evolve through the presentation and the creation of new ideas in a forum of friendly if serious academic exchange.

## NOTES

1. See William Brown, "Cognitive Deleuze: Conference Report on SCSMI Conference (Roanoke, Virginia, 2-5 June 2010) and Deleuze Studies Conference (Amsterdam, 12-14 July 2010)," *Cinema: Journal of Philosophy and the Moving Image* 1 (2010): 134-42, <http://cjpml.ipl.pt/1-cognitive-deleuze>, and "Conference Report on Film-Philosophy Conference (Liverpool John Moores University, 6-8 July 2011)," *Cinema: Journal of Philosophy and the Moving Image* 2 (2011): 218-29, <http://cjpml.ipl.pt/2-brown>.
2. John Mullarkey, *Philosophy and the Moving Image: Refractions of Reality* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
3. Robert Sinnerbrink, *New Philosophies of Film: Thinking Images* (London: Continuum, 2011).
4. Patricia Pisters, *The Neuro-Image: A Deleuzian Film-Philosophy of Digital Screen Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).
5. Brown, "The Face of Hollywood: Beauty, Goodness and Social Feedback," paper delivered at the SCSMI Conference 2012, Sarah Lawrence College, 15 Jun. 2012.
6. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16:3 (1975): 6-18.
7. Daniel Barratt, "The Geography of Film Viewing: What Are the Implications of Cultural-Cognitive Differences for Cognitive Film Theory?," paper presented at the SCSMI Conference 2012, Sarah Lawrence College, 15 Jun. 2012.
8. See Anne Fausto-Sterling, "Bare Bones of Sex: Part I," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30:2 (2005): 1491-528.
9. Damian Sutton, "The Diagrammatic and the "real that is yet to come": Is a Philosophy of Production Studies Possible?," paper delivered at the Film-Philosophy Conference 2012, King's College London, 14 Sept. 2012.
10. See Ken McMullen, "Thoughts on the Making of *An Organisation of Dreams*," paper delivered at the Film-Philosophy Conference 2012, Queen Mary – University of London, 12 Sept. 2012.
11. See Gerald M. Edelman and Giulio Tononi, *Consciousness: How Matter Becomes Imagination* (London: Penguin, 2001), 120-34.
12. Bernard Stiegler, "About an Organology of Dreams – after *An Organisation of Dreams*," paper delivered at the Film-Philosophy Conference 2012, Queen Mary – University of London, 12 Sept. 2012.
13. Belén Vidal, "Asynchrony and the Cinephilic Quotation: Notes on the New Essay Film from Spain," paper delivered at the Film-Philosophy Conference 2012, King's College London, 13 Sept. 2012.
14. Steven Marsh, "Turns and Returns, *Envois/Renvois*: The Postal Effect in Recent Spanish Filmmaking," paper delivered at the Film-Philosophy Conference 2012, King's College London, 13 Sept. 2012.
15. See, *inter alia*, from the *Powers of the False* symposium, Institut français, London: Anna Backman Rogers, "The Creative Powers of the False: The Case of the Maysles Brothers' *Grey Gardens*," 18 May 2012; Brown, "A Rejection of the True/False Binarism, or There Is Only Performance," 18 May 2012; Trent Griffiths, "Who Told the First Lie?: Beyond Judgment in *Forbidden Lie\$*," 18 May 2012; Markos Hadjoannou, "Animating Reality: *Waltz with Bashir*," 18 May 2012; Matt Holtmeier, "Catfish and the Crystal-Documentary: Powers of the False and Fabulation in Series," 19 May 2012; and Joseph Watson, "*Paradise Lost* and the Ethics of Investigation: The Documented Case of the West Memphis Three," 19 May 2012. Evan Davis also made a similar argument without using the term "powers of the false" in "Disrupting the Real: A (Re)definition of Fake Documentary," paper delivered at the SCSMI Conference 2012, Sarah Lawrence College, 13 Jun. 2012.
16. See in particular Patricia Braz, "The Power of the False in Pedro Costa's *In Vanda's Room*," paper delivered at the *Powers of the False* Symposium, Institut français, London, 19 May 2012, and António M. da Silva, "Because They are Too Dirty!: Abjection and the Films of Contemporary Brazilian

and Portuguese Filmmakers Cláudio Assis and João Pedro Rodrigues,” paper delivered at the Film-Philosophy Conference 2012, King’s College London, 13 Sept. 2012 — both of whom, coincidentally, approached ethics via the concept of abjection in relation to Portuguese cinema.

17. Richard Rushton, “A Cinema Against Ethics: *Melancholia*,” paper delivered at the Film-Philosophy Conference 2012, King’s College London, 13 Sept. 2012.

18. For more along these lines, see Brown, “Good Art ≠ Moral Art,” *Society of Cognitive Studies for the Moving Image Forum*, 23 Jun. 2012, <http://scsmi-online.org/forum/good-art-≠-moral-art>.

19. Francesco Casetti, “Philosophical Issues in Early Film Theory,” paper delivered at the Film-Philosophy Conference 2012, King’s College London, 13 Sept. 2012.

## CÍRCULOS E POÉTICAS EM FILMES LITERÁRIOS DE FERNANDO LOPES

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Fernando Lopes (1935-2012) foi um realizador emblemático da geração do Cinema Novo Português. Autêntico cineasta farol na geração dos anos 60, fiel às suas regras, tratou por tu a memória do cinema, esteve ligado a periódicos de referência, como a revista *Cinéfilo*. Ao longo de uma carreira que se estendeu por meio século criou 31 filmes, entre documentários e longas metragens de ficção. A sua primeira obra, intitula-se *As Pedras e o Tempo* (1961) e última *Em Câmara Lenta* (2012), toma por referência um romance (de Pedro Reis) com o mesmo título e confirma uma muito singular relação do cineasta com o texto literário. Com o desaparecimento de Fernando Lopes o imaginário do cinema português sofreu uma convulsão invulgar. O legado de enorme coerência estética, deixado por este realizador, embora suscitando uma desigual apreciação crítica na última fase da sua obra, reclama um estudo, que inevitavelmente conduzirá a uma reavaliação do seu valor cinematográfico. A generosidade das suas imagens e a inteligência de um olhar que nunca se deixou aprisionar por uma falsa moral serão então objecto de confirmação.

“Um túnel escuro que conduz a um rectângulo de luz branca.” Esta frase retirada de uma crítica de José Vaz Pereira publicada no *Jornal de Letras e Artes* por ocasião de estreia de *Belarmino* (1964)<sup>1</sup> simboliza aqui uma ligação umbilical entre palavras e imagens revelada na singularidade do cinema de Fernando Lopes. A sua obra oferece-nos, com efeito, uma das mais densas abordagens da relação entre literatura e cinema, a qual constitui um tema essencial de toda a reflexão fílmica.

Não foi por acaso de que Truffaut num dos textos mais programáticos da *Nouvelle Vague*, “Une certaine tendance du cinema français” (1954) reage ao que qualificava como “filmes de argumentistas,” e discutia a questão da adaptação do texto literário ao cinema. No fundo, a discussão remetia para a importância do realizador, logo do Autor e para a autonomia do texto fílmico. Truffaut, importa recordar neste contexto, mostrava-se convicto de que um romance não contém “cenas impossíveis de serem filmadas.”<sup>2</sup> Em certa medida parte da obra de Fernando Lopes comunga deste espírito, desde logo ao entender a literatura através de uma percepção contemporânea que a desinstitucionaliza. E ao partilhar a ideia de que um filme adaptado de um romance constitui uma leitura, mais do que uma versão visual da narrativa. Nessa medida, o realizador valoriza um trabalho de tradução e transposição semiótica onde o argumento, a direcção de fotografia ou direcção artística, concorrem para uma finalidade autoral que, em última análise, se foca num romance em concreto, filmando-o como se pode filmar um corpo, uma paisagem, ou uma cidade. Afinal, três objectos de eleição constantes nas várias histórias do cinema, e sempre sujeitos às modulações do olhar e à inteligência com que os realizadores de excelência constroem uma visão do mundo, surpreendendo-o como fenómeno.

### FILMAR O ROMANCE NA SUA MATERIALIDADE

Em Fernando Lopes, o facto de quatro dos seus filmes mais discutidos possuírem títulos homónimos dos romances que lhes deram origem, parece reforçar este objectivo de filmar o romance na sua materialidade, para melhor elaborar um fluxo de imagens fílmicas, resultantes da relação da câmara com um corpus de imagens

textuais suportadas por palavras e nexos de sentido caucionados por uma garantia de legibilidade. Ao visível corresponderá sempre, um outro plano de leitura. Talvez a história do romance se desconstrua através dessa outra história do filme. O que seria possível graças à transfiguração. E à fantasia cinematográfica, que outra coisa não é que o túnel escuro ao longo do qual podemos caminhar, em direcção a um rectângulo de luz branca. Algo que Fernando Lopes começou por concretizar na sua primeira longa-metragem, obra de rotura (que aliás lhe valeu uma espécie de excomunhão ideológica por parte da ortodoxia intelectual simbolizada na revista *Seara Nova*).<sup>3</sup>

Vamos então a esses filmes: *Uma Abelha na Chuva* (1972), a partir do romance de Carlos de Oliveira; *Crónica dos Bons Malandros* (1984), a partir do livro de Mário Zambujal; *O Fio do Horizonte* (1993), a partir do romance de António Tabucchi e *O Delfim* (2002), a partir do romance de José Cardoso Pires. E curiosamente em todos eles é aqui aplicada a expressão *a partir de*. Partir de uma leitura para outra, do texto para o filme, do enredo para a sua metamorfose, da palavra em acto para a imagem em hiato, porque o cinema impõe, como sabemos, uma outra diegese e o espectador constrói o seu próprio universo ficcional a partir dos interstícios das imagens, do que se abre nelas, dos seus vazios, daquilo que está fora de campo. O romance, cada romance, é assim um material que se filma, do qual se parte, que se percorre e ao qual se regressa, transformando-o mediante uma apropriação cujas regras envolvem o uso e a não fidelidade ilustrativa, ou a adaptação canónica e servil.

Tal não significa que filmar um romance seja a mesma coisa que moldá-lo em imagens, transpô-lo para sequências cinematográficas, seduzi-lo para um desvio em nome do espectáculo. Muito pelo contrário, trata-se de penetrar no texto e de valorizar as suas sugestões visuais. Em Carlos de Oliveira e em Cardoso Pires essa dimensão é muito forte. Já com Tabucchi ela aparece-nos envolta numa lógica de migração poética marcada pela dimensão contemplativa e por uma metafísica da

palavra em trânsito, enquanto entidade capaz de instaurar uma clivagem no real. Com Zambujal, dir-se-ia que a trama romanesca comunga de uma agilidade do quotidiano cara a uma escrita jornalística que produz uma espécie de estereótipos inesperados do mundo (ou melhor do submundo), e as imagens oscilam entre o caricatural, o circunstancial e o imponderável. Daqui decorre uma dimensão visual tutelada por evidências sócio-culturais. Mas *A Crónica* foi também, como veremos mais adiante, resulta num filme falhado.

“O essencial do cinema é sugerir o que não é mostrável,” escrevia Gérard Cstello-Lopes num texto onde discorre sobre a relação que manteve com o cineasta.<sup>4</sup> O romance, cada um destes que foram lidos e filmados por Fernando Lopes, é riquíssimo em coisas que existem, mas carecem de revelação. Reconhecemos aí o poder do cinema: mostrar, desbravar um material que se oferece à reflexão e à especulação filosófica. Podemos elaborar listas intermináveis de exemplos. Da lista de Castello-Lopes faz parte o sorriso de Alida Valli na caleche de *Senso* (1954) de Visconti, o tocar no joelho de Clarie no filme de Rohmer, a corrida de César Monteiro no pátio em *Recordações da Casa Amarela* (1989). E da minha lista relativa a Fernando Lopes faz parte o desenho traçado pelo movimento das luvas de boxe no treino de Belarmino, o sabor imaginado de uma bola de Berlim que o pugilista come num café da baixa, o chicotear enraivecido dos cavalos na *Abelha*, o outro “eu” de Claude Brasseur espelhado numa cidade portuária inventada em Lisboa, em *O Fio do Horizonte*, ou a voracidade cinegética de *O Delfim* enredada nos passos de um marialva em busca da presa.

Na impossibilidade de estudar aqui em toda a extensão os processos de filmagem conjugados com as estratégias de apropriação dos textos, recenseamos algumas questões reveladoras do muito trabalho que há a fazer sobre a obra de Fernando Lopes. Obra nuclear na filmografia do realizador, *Uma Abelha na Chuva* cruza o real e o fantástico: “um olhar sobre o real que vê nele o fantástico,” diz o

autor. O romance é tratado como objecto real que o cinema vê numa dimensão fantástica. Vale a pena interrogar esta ideia justamente a partir do filme inspirado em Carlos de Oliveira.

### CONJUGAR A POESIA E A MONTAGEM

Convicto do papel desempenhado na sua formação pelos musicais americanos, F. Lopes realça os dois níveis de construção do filme, no plano sonoro e no da imagem e joga com as noções de dissonância e contraponto.<sup>5</sup> Desta contradição entre imagem e som, deste duplo dizer, resulta qualquer coisa de extraordinário, talvez uma amplificação fantasmagórica do visível.

Neste filme podemos considerar que a literatura é a preocupação fundamental do realizador no sentido em que o trabalho que faz sobre o romance remete sobretudo para a poesia de Carlos de Oliveira, “leitura pessoal e puramente cinematográfica.”<sup>6</sup> Este consistente trabalho sobre a visibilidade do texto literário diz respeito à palavra poética, mesmo quando a matéria mais essencial se encontra na formulação romanesca, e na prosa. A opção de utilizar uma película *Ilford*, em vez de uma película *Kodak*, exemplifica bem o que é pensar cinematograficamente um texto literário, uma vez que se trata de decidir por diferentes opções relativas à relação com a luz e, por consequência ao processo de moldar atmosferas, tendo em conta a essência do texto, o seu modo exclusivo de ser. Os ambientes pantanosos que vemos no filme são trabalhados segundos códigos de Murnau. O romance é lido com movimentos de câmara que, por razões biográficas, Fernando Lopes assume como “movimentos sentimentais.”<sup>7</sup> Esta procura de um “lirismo” leva-nos a pensar no carácter auto referencial da poesia de Carlos de Oliveira, patente em *Micropaisagem* (1969):<sup>8</sup> “o pulsar / das palavras / atraídas / ao chão desta colina.”

São de algum modo cadências deste tipo que o filme elabora, embora vá ao encontro de um romance onde também se lê: “Uma sombra indistinta não é bem um homem. Falta-lhe a luz dos olhos, o sorriso, as feições, a alma à flor da pele. É uma coisa anónima e sem rosto, mesmo quando tem voz e passa a cantar pelas azinhagas.”<sup>9</sup>

No confronto destas duas citações, percebemos que Fernando Lopes, segue uma intuição poética, que foi colher a um espaço literário exterior ao romance, um instrumento mediante o qual surpreende e captura cenas que articula através de um nexos que conduz a uma outra ficção. Eduardo Prado Coelho, num texto de apresentação de *Uma Abelha Chuva*<sup>10</sup> sublinha a noção de uso da linguagem remetendo assim para o plano estético onde se decide o desfecho dos enigmas que povoam as leituras, modos de usar patentes na exploração das diferentes possibilidades visuais de uma obra literária. Prado Coelho caracteriza o acto de escrita como o acontecimento onde “o dizível se desprende.” O filme é então um lugar de acolhimento e construção da visibilidade da própria escrita, ou de alguns dos trechos onde se recorta o uso cinematográfico da literatura.

A sombra de um homem anteriormente referida num passo do romance de Carlos de Oliveira, simboliza o eixo narrativo específico do trabalho cinematográfico de Fernando Lopes, que como escreveu Eduardo Prado Coelho “filma o não acontecer na sua relação com o acontecer.”<sup>11</sup> Dito de outro modo, filma a possibilidade, conjectura o que se desprende desse real da escrita literária, para lhe dar uma equivalência numa outra escrita, dominada pela montagem. Não é por mero acaso que a actividade de montador do realizador, as amplas qualidades demonstradas em *Belarmino*, e o gosto por um virtuosismo técnico, operam agora um salto em direcção a um novo contexto narrativo que se apropria da literatura para a transformar por dentro. Vale a pena recordar esta afirmação do realizador de 1972: “hoje reconheço que, a partir de Resnais, se instala em mim o fetichismo da

montagem.”<sup>12</sup> Podemos interpretar este procedimento como descodificação do romance, tornada possível mediante a intencionalidade de o filmar.

Aqui chegados vale a pena seguir uma pista estimulante lançada por José Manuel Costa<sup>13</sup> a partir da afirmação de Óscar Lopes e António José Saraiva, segundo os quais o romance de Carlos de Oliveira “concentra as suas qualidades de narração incisiva numa reactualização da novela camiliana.” Questão que, por sua vez, nos levaria ao tema da superação de diferenças sociais, numa igualdade que só o amor, no que possui de mais decisivo, acaba por consentir. Essa ressonância camiliana por um lado, e a materialidade do discurso dos personagens centrais, por outro, ocupam a atenção de Fernando Lopes que escolheu filmar aquilo que o texto de Carlos de Oliveira instaura, uma espécie de dilaceração, em vez de escolher os efeitos da intriga e a trama que a constitui. O enredo é tecido por imagens em vez de palavras, como já aqui se disse.

A depuração da mensagem neo-realista levada a cabo por Fernando Lopes constitui um sinal de que é a força interior dos personagens centrais, nomeadamente Álvaro Silvestre e Maria dos Prazeres, e o seu vazio interior resultante de um desmoronamento do mundo intrínseco a cada um (como observa J. M. Costa), aquilo que mais seduz o realizador.

Filme explicável por uma “ausência de regras” que o seu autor gosta de aprofundar, radicalizando a ideia de Alexandre O’Neill, “em poesia a regra é nunca ter regra”<sup>14</sup>, encontra nos acidentes da rodagem (uma vez que foi feito com meios financeiros muitos escassos e filmagens escalonadas no tempo por imperativos económicos) um estímulo a esta experimentação, que também lhe granjeia uma aura compatível com a reputação do livro de Carlos de Oliveira. Numa entrevista da qual a revista *Celulóide* fazia eco aludindo a um compasso de espera que afectou a conclusão do filme,<sup>15</sup> o cineasta considera que foi o lado introspectivo do romance, com os seus medos e terrores, os seus sonhos e frustrações, aquilo que mais o

motivou. Razão suficiente para considerar que não se tratava de uma adaptação, mas da tentativa de descobrir certos aspectos do universo de Carlos de Oliveira num jogo onde as imagens parecem sugerir tudo.

Uma citação de Jean-Marie Straub, ilumina, no dizer de José Cardoso Pires<sup>16</sup> o que o espectador vê, e transmite o enigma desse jogo: “o que é preciso é que o filme destrua a cada minuto, a cada segundo, o fotograma anterior.” Esta anulação dá lugar a uma desordem no tempo e no espaço, análoga à que envolve a actividade onírica. A transposição do sonho, daquilo que habita a mente dos personagens, para uma dinâmica de destruição/substituição engendra uma memória assente num outro tipo de experiência, onde os contornos das superfícies são vagos, os rostos ora difusos, ora marcados pela severidade do olhar do outro, as palavras dispersas num eco interior.

### COINCIDÊNCIAS NA CIDADE ROMANESCA

António Tabucchi é outro escritor com quem Fernando Lopes estabelece uma ligação privilegiada. A partir do romance *O Fio do Horizonte*, e do seu personagem principal, Spino, que segundo o autor se pode considerar uma abreviatura de Spinoza, filósofo da sua eleição, Fernando Lopes encontra uma cidade imaginada a partir de Lisboa que, de certa forma se transforma em razão romanesca. A relação entre o horizonte, que Tabucchi imagina nos olhos do seu personagem, como um lugar geométrico que se desloca à medida que também ele caminha, suscita um momento ideal onde o sujeito e o fio do horizonte coincidem.<sup>17</sup> O filme de Fernando Lopes é essa possível coincidência, criando um espaço de certo modo autobiográfico onde o autor se assume como alter-ego de Spino. Este tópico autobiográfico acaba por ser reforçado pela remissão para Belarmino, o boxeur, e nessa justa medida há

uma Lisboa devolvida a uma cadência urbana tecida por nostalgias. Há assim um sentido específico do romanesco e Fernando Lopes redescobre uma cidade que se “dispersa pela terra dentro,” e onde podemos encontrar uma “doçura pobre e imóvel,” onde se pode passear toda a manhã ao longo do porto e ver navios em manobras de descarga.<sup>18</sup>

O escritor italiano reforça, ao declarar sem ambiguidades e convictamente que gostou do filme, a ideia de uma transposição do espaço literário para o espaço fílmico. Fala da transposição de Génova do livro para o Cais do Sodré lisboeta, servida por uma fotografia expressionista e nocturna, propensa a ambiguidades, indecisões, sugestivos mistérios. E confirma a autonomia da leitura fílmica.<sup>19</sup> É nela que se baseia a possibilidade do romance se oferecer como objecto singular e raro a descobrir pela câmara. Estamos perante um processo melancólico de localizar e descrever uma cidade. Intuir-lhe uma dimensão ausente, uma espécie de levitação a partir de recortes fotográficos do real, e de impulsos que excitam a alma do *flâneur*. O romance de Tabucchi com as suas tonalidades de policial, tanto do agrado de Fernando Lopes, incentiva esta geometria interior. O cineasta traça-lhe as linhas e os movimentos com sobreposições disruptivas.

*O Fio do Horizonte* levou João Bénard da Costa<sup>20</sup> a encadear uma série de “imagens recorrentes” que remetem para *Belarmino*, o primeiro grande filme de Fernando Lopes, na perspectiva canónica do crítico. Referindo-se a *Matar Saudades*, 1988, diz ter sido “muito injustamente recebido,” por “conciliar” referências a Johnny Guitar com a “retórica de Oliveira.” Agora, o estilo de montagem, apresenta uma visão nada vulgar sobre “a solidão e o medo,” dois elementos constitutivos da natureza humana, sempre muito presentes na escrita crítica de Bénard da Costa. Realidades que passam do objecto literário de Tabucchi para o filme através de uma escuta, da ressonância do tempo dentro de cada um, da cada *persona*. “Que diabo está a sua imaginação a inventar fazendo-se passar por memória? Mas justamente

naquele instante, não em ficção, bem real dentro de si, uma voz infantil chama distintamente.”<sup>21</sup>

Uma voz infantil que chama, pode ser, afinal, uma expressão da solidão e do medo. Uma vez mais é essa direcção poética (ou dos sobressaltos do poema) que o olhar de Fernando Lopes segue. Para chegar mais longe, ao fio do horizonte. Ou ao fim daquilo que, no entender de João Bénard, consiste no objectivo último da montagem: fazer do cinema uma “ficção circular.”<sup>22</sup> Nesta óptica a literatura é objecto de um entendimento engrenado nesta circularidade. Se quisermos aceitar uma metáfora, ela faz parte do conteúdo das latas onde se guardam os filmes. Latas onde, como no poema de Fernando Pessoa *Autopsicografia*, “Gira, a entreter a razão, / Esse comboio de corda / Que se chama coração.”

Num texto crítico sobre *Belarmino* publicado na *Vértice*, Nuno Bragança faz uma afirmação admirável, quando diz “que este cinema aborda os seus objectos humanos com o mesmo tipo de preocupação que movia Cézanne ante as paisagens que se propunha pintar.”<sup>23</sup> Este mesmo raciocínio é aplicável à relação de Fernando Lopes com a literatura que mais directamente o interessa. Penetrar num objecto literário, desvendar-lhe antagonismos e coincidências, implica um tratamento estético de uma linguagem por outra. Como na pintura Cézanne, que produzia um conhecimento acerca do real submetido a uma análise cromática e plástica, capaz de gerar intensidades únicas. Também neste cineasta, tomadas as devidas proporções, deparamos com uma inteligência do olhar, que, em concreto nos filmes que temos vindo a referir, leva à segmentação e à recombinação de imagens, para com elas criar uma teia de alusões ao que persiste, após ter sido iluminado de uma determinada maneira. *O Fio do Horizonte* encontra-se nesse limbo de perfeição onde um texto dialoga com as suas próprias vozes longínquas. É o que se passa, por exemplo, com modo de vivenciar uma certa experiência da cidade (agora transformada em conceito), que nesta obra sempre na esteve na “raíz das coisas,”<sup>24</sup> não se prestando

nunca a um efeito cenográfico ou descritivo. A cidade enquanto génese de personagens e de conflitos, material plástico (e daí a pertinente referência a Cézanne) com o qual, e a partir do qual, Fernando Lopes se dirige à literatura de Tabucchi.

Existe portanto na relação de Fernando Lopes com a literatura um apelo romanesco de Lisboa, que estabelece uma ponte com o imaginário pessoano de António Tabucchi. Citar Pessoa e reconfigurar os sinais do seu espaço biográfico vital corresponde neste filme ao acentuar do valor da poesia. O escritor italiano, para além de tradutor de Pessoa, descobre no universo do desassossego e da heteronímia, uma matriz da sua identidade literária. E vai-se “transmutando” num quase heterónimo de Pessoa.

Spino, personagem central de *O Fio do Horizonte* tem sido apontado como uma reconfiguração de Belarmino<sup>25</sup> e ambos funcionam como uma projecção do realizador. Com as suas solicitações, sabedoria e domínio técnico, a montagem é a inscrição visual de uma presença autoral, uma assinatura. Como se Fernando Lopes fosse também ele, mais uma *persona* inquietante a deambular entre um halo de morte e uma celebração da vida. Na palavras de Spino de *O Fio do Horizonte*, “não se pode deixar morrer uma pessoa no nada,” pois “é como se morresse duas vezes.”<sup>26</sup> E o cinema pode ser neste caso entendido como ressurreição, experiência sobrenatural da palavra literária.

### A PREDAÇÃO, A LENDA E O LUTO

Neste encadeamento de escritores José Cardoso Pires aparece ligado a um projecto antigo do realizador que se veio a concretizar em 2002 com o filme *O Delfim*. O livro, muito emblemático da década de 60, é considerado o genial testemunho de um fim

de regime, espécie de epílogo cultural de um período social e político. E foi lido na altura da sua publicação como prenúncio da derrocada do Estado Novo. Muitos anos depois, vemos este texto surpreendentemente reencontrado na sua condição de “retrato em movimento” (a expressão é um título de Herberto Helder, muito íntimo do naipe poético de Fernando Lopes).

A visão que o filme dá da narrativa é, uma vez mais, consequência de um tratamento da solidão e do medo, uma obscura contabilidade emocional entre o que fica e aquilo que desaparece para sempre, entre a lenda e luto.

Óscar Lopes sublinha a existência de “um universo de predação” na obra do escritor que se acentua a partir de *O Anjo Ancorado*, em consonância com o desencanto, dando lugar a “um esquema hipnoticamente obsessivo.”<sup>27</sup> A escrita de Cardoso Pires pode ser qualificada de cinematográfica, por criar um tipo de visualidade moldada pelo ritmo do olhar que oscila entre o detalhe e a totalidade, por se deixar penetrar pela influência de Hemingway, pela forma como cada palavra se desdobra no mundo, existindo como coisa física e objectiva. Tais características, que potenciam o desejo de fazer filmes a partir dos livros do escritor, também suscitam equívocos: “todas as obras consideradas cinematográficas são alçapões. São sereias. Vamos atrás de uma música que é a música da escrita e depois a música do cinema é outra,” esclarece Fernando Lopes.<sup>28</sup>

O facto deste filme ser visto em conjugação com *O Fio do Horizonte*, prende-se justamente com este tipo de questões. Por isso é importante a evocação por parte do realizador de um filme de Manoel de Oliveira, *A Caça* (1964) onde a simbologia de um pântano está muito presente, tal como em *O Delfim*. Trata-se de promover uma articulação a partir de outro tipo de discurso fílmico, ou de aspectos da história do cinema, por forma a alcançar a coerência de uma relação entre literatura e cinema. Desse modo se exhibe a plenitude física das personagens, de tal modo que ao filmá-las é sobretudo a tensão abissal que as separa que vemos

captada pela câmara. A relação entre Tomás Manuel da Palma Bravo e Maria das Mercês, o casal de personagens chave, é tratada pelo realizador como uma entidade que se desprende da escrita de Cardoso Pires, para cumprir um destino trágico, onde o pântano da aldeia da Gafeira simboliza, no filme, o perigo de sucessivas auto-destruições, a irrealdade de um passado cujos valores foram artificialmente inculcados no presente, em suma, o lugar movediço para onde conflui a atracção e a repulsa.

O filme faz existir em estado *viscontiano* a depuradíssima engrenagem literária mediante a qual Cardoso Pires retrata um país, uma memória e a sua pose, um sintoma e a sua preocupante alusão. Fernando Lopes ocupa-se da ideia de fim e retira-a intacta do romance para a fazer *aparecer* em estado de desgraça. Num plano derradeiro, inesquecível, o patético parece recuperar um sentido e uma dignidade que só a alegoria do cinema parece ser capaz de assegurar. “Que caia a noite” são as últimas palavras que se ouvem em *off*.<sup>29</sup> Nessa ambivalência sempre estranha, entre a vastidão da paisagem e a contenção dos rostos, entre a sala da casa senhorial e o latir longínquo dos cães, entre a mulher desprezada e a cartilha pela qual se rege o marialva, entre o senhor e seu criado, Fernando Lopes introduz uma presença de leitor irrequieto e cria um espaço fora do texto, inventa uma elipse, graças à qual a diegese nos transporta para um estado de desordem.

Revisitação é a palavra que convém a este filme voltado para um país, (Portugal, entenda-se) em parte propenso a devorar-se a si próprio, como se nisso se pudesse ver também algo de premonitório em relação aos tempos malditos que hoje, precisamente agora, se vivem. A obra de um outro cineasta português contempla por vezes, esta ideia de ensaio sobre o país, é o caso de um belo filme de Manuel Mozos, *Ruínas* (2010), ou *Brandos Costumes* (1974), de Alberto Seixas Santos, servindo-se de outros materiais e sedimentações). Filmes de reencontro com uma verdade difícil de suportar.

João Lopes, numa crítica a *O Delfim*, aproxima-o da sugestiva circunstância do nosso cinema viver “assombrado pelo seu próprio país.”<sup>30</sup> Um delfim de maus agoiros, semeia sinais investigados por um narrador ao qual Fernando Lopes confere uma espessura e uma trajetória encobertas por um tempo decifrado devagar, em que ontem podia ser hoje e hoje nem sempre se parece com o presente.

Confusão de códigos, de condutas, de suspeitas, um lastro policial (não no sentido imediato do género, mas pela radicação no crime e no castigo, na impunidade e na mentira), eis algumas pistas para ficarmos diante das imagens desta obra que filma o peso de um acontecimento por acontecer (para seguirmos aqui a perspectiva de Eduardo Prado Coelho numa das mais elaboradas análises feitas ao romance<sup>31</sup>). O trabalho do realizador faz aparecer o real do texto, a literatura, e recobre com as imagens, que são o produto dessa aparição, o real da história. E ao proceder assim, pode distanciar-se do que leu, para criar um mundo próprio. “O prazer do leitor vem desse informulável que fica em suspenso no corpo vivo do texto.”<sup>32</sup> O filme é a captura desse “informulável.” Faz dele a presa desejada. Revolve as afinidades e as formalidades entre os homens da Gafeira, ou os caçadores que a frequentam, como o mar revolve o lodo da lagoa. São esses gestos invisíveis e essa cadência surda que ocupam o realizador.

Na primeira página do romance, um companheiro de caça de Tomás Manuel da Palma Bravo, a quem chamam *o engenheiro*, pousa a mão numa antiga monografia da aldeia e os dedos afastam o pó que cobre a capa. A transposição desta primeira página para o filme, num aparente realismo das imagens, onde ressoa a ruralidade da circunstância e a cumplicidade cinegética, vive do afastar desse pó que não se vê, mas induz o tempo no coração da imagem. A sabedoria de Fernando Lopes reside nessa deslocação dos sinais, na capacidade de trocar uma beleza por outra, sem nunca substituir o essencial. Uma troca é a procura de uma rima. Fernando Lopes desenvolve alguns dos seus filmes nesta tentativa de fazer rimar olhares,

paisagens, pessoas, fotogramas e planos. *O Delfim* rima com *Uma Abelha na Chuva*.<sup>33</sup> Por exemplo em ambos existe uma “geografia” inventada pelo realizador, em ambos existe um erotismo à Tennessee Williams, em ambos brutalidade e fragilidade masculina.

Desenvolver a partir deste núcleo de questões uma análise mais extensa ao modo como o cinema de Fernando Lopes se ocupa da literatura é certamente uma tarefa que tem que ser levada por diante. A este propósito registre-se que alguma coisa falha em *A Crónica dos Bons Malandros*, desde logo meios que permitam deslocar o livro para um ambiente de musical, que era o objectivo inicial do autor. O livro, na expressão do realizador, ficou-lhe “atravessado.” A sua intenção era fazer um filme inspirado em *Guys and Dolls* (1955) de Joseph Mankiewicz, baseado numa novela de Damon Runyon.<sup>34</sup> O que teria sido a oportunidade para a literatura rimar com o lado divertido, e permitir mais um olhar sobre Lisboa personagem.

É chegado o momento de concluir que, mesmo quando usa a expressão “adaptação,” Fernando Lopes conquistou para o seu cinema uma autonomia discursiva e um tratamento fílmico do texto literário que está muito para além do trabalho formal de utilizar um romance valorizando-o visual e narrativamente. É verdade que ele está do lado daqueles criadores de filmes que transformam uma linguagem noutra. Mas interessa sobretudo perceber como o faz. Verificam-se naturalmente cumplicidades geracionais e afinidades que explicam a sua predilecção por Carlos de Oliveira, Cardoso Pires, Alexandre O’Neill. Mas o modo de fazer deslizar os textos destes escritores para o ecrã decorre de uma sabedoria que Fernando Lopes vai buscar na totalidade ao cinema da sua própria casa, e com a ética dessas imagens (podem ser de Buñuel, Godard, Manoel de Oliveira, Ozu, Mizogushi, Resnais, Nick Ray, e de mais uns quantos...), aborda a literatura como quem caminha em círculos numa *cidade com a luz coada pelo temperamento das suas colinas*. A isto se pode chamar uma “poética das adaptações.”<sup>35</sup>

Mas a presença da literatura nesta obra, está cheia de reciprocidades. Estas começaram logo com *Belarmino, amigo pensado* de O'Neill.<sup>36</sup> Não sabemos se temos jeito como ele, se somos campeões de alguma coisa. Mas permanecemos, de certeza absoluta, espectadores destes filmes. É decisivo continuar a vê-los numa altura em que este *País Relativo* nos mandou a todos para o tapete do seu ringue que já não rima com coisa nenhuma. É também por isso que se impõem novo balanço de Fernando Lopes, agora, fechado o círculo da sua filmografia.

## NOTAS

1. José Vaz Pereira, "Belarmino," *Jornal de Letras e Artes* 156 (1964): 13-14.
2. Ver a este propósito Eduardo Paz Barroso, "Justificação e Crítica do Cinema Português," dissertação de Doutoramento, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, 2002, 221ff.
3. Uma das questões emblemáticas no Cinema Novo Português diz respeito à relação dos realizadores com o aparelho cultural da oposição comunista ao regime, patente no teor das críticas aos seus filmes em publicações culturais controladas pela oposição de matriz ortodoxa. João Bénard da Costa referiu-se abundantemente à questão. Fernando Lopes foi chamado à *Seara Nova* e confrontaram-no com a necessidade de se auto-retratar renunciando a opções estéticas que lhe podiam valer a acusação de um "desvio pequeno burguês" e de formalismo. Ver por exemplo Bénard da Costa, "As Imagens Recorrentes, o Fantasma de Belarmino," *O Independente*, 11 Mar. 1994, reproduzido no catálogo *Fernando Lopes por Cá* (Lisboa: Cinemateca Portuguesa – Museu do Cinema, 1996), 139-40. Em Paz Barroso, *Justificação e Crítica do Cinema Português*, esta questão também é amplamente estudada e documentada.
4. *Fernando Lopes por Cá*, 16.
5. "Entrevista," in *Fernando Lopes por Cá* (Lisboa: Cinemateca Portuguesa – Museu do Cinema, 1996), 78.
6. "Eu sabia e sei que a relação entre escritores e realizadores é muito complicada," afirma Fernando Lopes — *Fernando Lopes por Cá*, 78. Na sua simplicidade aparente esta frase exprime um conflito latente em torno da adaptação. Acontece que no caso vertente Carlos de Oliveira acabou por aceitar bem o filme, quando o reconhece como uma leitura (cinematográfica) e não como adaptação. Mas é também nesta subtilidade que se decide uma concepção do papel da literatura no cinema, ou como lhe chamou Nuno Júdice, devoto da obra de Carlos de Oliveira, "um caso excepcional de simbiose entre dois autores." *Revista Arte* 7 2 (1991), 50.
7. "Entrevista," 80.
8. Ver a este propósito Manuel Gusmão, *A Poesia de Carlos de Oliveira – Estudo e Antologia* (Lisboa: Editora Comunicação, 1981).
9. Carlos de Oliveira, *Uma Abelha na Chuva* (Lisboa: Sá da Costa, 1980), 121.
10. Programa do Cinema Estúdio, Lisboa, 13 Abr. 1972.
11. *Ibid.*
12. José Manuel Costa, folha da Cinemateca para *Belarmino*.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Fernando Lopes por Cá*, 80.
15. *Celulóide* 131 (1962): 11-16.
16. José Cardoso Pires que acabou por desempenhar um papel importante na clarificação deste filme, num texto que situa bem as diferenças entre romance e cinema, entre adaptação e leitura, dando também sugestões para o alcance da transgressão que "desloca tempo e memória," reconfigurando a paisagem em novas camadas de sedimentação, apelo a uma memória que desorganiza o efeito linear do real. "Entre Duas Memórias," *Fernando Lopes por Cá*, 31-32.
17. António Tabucchi, *O Fio do Horizonte* (Lisboa: Quetzal, 1987).
18. *Ibid.*, 49.

19. *Fernando Lopes por Cá*, 61
20. Bénard da Costa, "As Imagens Recorrentes."
21. Tabucchi, *O Fio do Horizonte*, 48.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Nuno Bragança, "Acerca de *Belarmino*," *Vértice* 256 (1965): 45-50.
24. José Navarro de Andrade, folha da Cinemateca para *O Fio do Horizonte*.
25. *Ibid.* e também Bénard da Costa, "As Imagens Recorrentes."
26. Tabucchi, *O Fio do Horizonte*, 42.
27. Óscar Lopes, "Os Tempos e as Vozes na Obra de Cardoso Pires," in *Cifras do Tempo* (Lisboa: Caminho, 1990), 295-96.
28. Suplemento "Y," *Público*, 29 Jun. 2001, 39.
29. Ver crítica de Luís Miguel Oliveira, suplemento "Y," *Público*, 19 Abr. 2002.
30. João Lopes, "Desejo e Perdição," *Diário de Notícias*, 6 Abr. 2002.
31. José Cardoso Pires, introdução a *O Delfim* (Lisboa: Publicações Dom Quixote, 1988).
32. *Ibid.*, 24.
33. Ler entrevista do realizador, *Revista Ler* (Primavera 2002).
34. *Ibid.*
35. *Ibid.*
36. Com esta referência ao poema de Alexandre O'Neill, "Amigos Pensados," *Belarmino* procura sublinhar o efeito de reciprocidade aqui aludido. Neste caso, trata-se de criar um poema a partir de um filme e de uma teia de afinidades discursivas, ideológicas e estéticas. Do mesmo modo, é feita referência a outro título de um poema do mesmo escritor, "País Relativo," ambos incluídos em *Feira Cabisbaixa* (Lisboa: Sá da Costa, 1979). Este parágrafo explora possibilidades abertas pela paráfrase dos poemas de Alexandre O'Neill como "método" de leitura de alguns dos temas desenvolvidos em filmes de Fernando Lopes comentados neste ensaio.