Spring 2011

# At home in estranged dreams: contemporary Hollywood and the uncanny

Kevin Patrick McDonald
*University of Iowa*

# AT HOME IN ESTRANGED DREAMS:
# CONTEMPORARY HOLLYWOOD AND THE UNCANNY

by

Kevin Patrick McDonald

An Abstract

Of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree
in Film Studies in
the Graduate College of
the University of Iowa

May 2011

Thesis Supervisors: Professor Rick Altman
Assistant Professor Louis-Georges Schwartz

# ABSTRACT

This study examines contemporary Hollywood by focusing on films made between 1990 and 2010. With chapters on the double, war trauma, the undead, and automata, I delineate evidence of the uncanny within individual films along with the underlying contradictions that symptomatically respond to the larger economic conditions and industrial practices that shape the contemporary period. Each of the four chapters also serve as an occasion to analyze theoretical and thematic concerns drawn from Sigmund Freud's 1919 essay on the uncanny. Throughout the project there is a strong effort to link Freud's initial account to subsequent theoretical developments with a particular emphasis on introducing the work of Jacques Derrida. The cumulative aim of these efforts is provide a critical foundation for analyzing the latent disorientation within the practices of contemporary Hollywood and capitalist society more generally.

Abstract Approved: _____
Thesis Supervisor

_____
Title and Department

_____
Date

_____
Thesis Supervisor

_____
Title and Department

_____
Date

# AT HOME IN ESTRANGED DREAMS:
# CONTEMPORARY HOLLYWOOD AND THE UNCANNY

by

Kevin Patrick McDonald

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree
in Film Studies in
the Graduate College of
the University of Iowa

May 2011

Thesis Supervisors: Professor Rick Altman
Assistant Professor Louis-Georges Schwartz

Graduate College
The University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

PH.D. THESIS

This is to certify that the Ph. D. thesis of

Kevin Patrick McDonald

has been approved by the Examining Committee
for the thesis requirement for the Doctor of
Philosophy degree in Film Studies
at the May 2011 graduation.

Thesis Committee: _____
Rick Altman, Thesis Supervisor

_____
Louis-Georges Schwartz, Thesis Supervisor

_____
Lauren Rabinovitz

_____
Garrett Stewart

_____
David Wittenberg

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the many teachers and advisors who have helped me to reach this stage and continue to influence much of my thinking. At the University of Iowa, the entire staff and faculty of the Department of Cinema and Comparative Literature provided a helpful and supportive environment. I am also grateful to the undergraduate students who made teaching both challenging and productive.

It would have been impossible to complete this project without various forms of institutional support. A Graduate College Summer Fellowship made early work on the dissertation possible. The Ballard-Seashore Dissertation Year Fellowship was invaluable in completing the final two chapters. The third chapter benefited significantly from my participation in the Andrew W. Mellon Dissertation Seminar convened by Garrett Stewart during the summer of 2009. I thank Professor Stewart and the other members of the seminar, especially Deborah Manion, for their extremely helpful comments on an early draft of the chapter.

Several faculty members deserve special mention: David Depew generously participated throughout much of the preliminary committee work leading up to the dissertation, Steve Choe graciously volunteered to read and comment on a draft of my second chapter, many of the central issues in chapter four were allowed to take their initial shape during a seminar lead by Rosalind Galt. I am of course thankful to all the members of my dissertation committee. This project would not have been possible without the advice and support provided by David Wittenberg, Lauren Rabinovitz, and Garrett Stewart. I am especially grateful to Rick Altman who not only provided thoughtful and prudent advice throughout the entire process but as the co-chair oversaw

all of the administrative formalities. I am most thankful to Louis-Georges Schwartz. This project effectively began when he recommended in the spring of 2005 that I read Jacques Derrida's *The Post Card*. His presence is indelible behind every word written in the document that follows.

Friends and fellow graduate students were no less critical to the completion of this project. Gerald Sim provided helpful and humorous advice throughout the process. Claudia Pummer, Erica Stein, and Andrew Ritchey provided substantial assistance through various reading and writing groups. Joe Klapper, Jennifer Fleeger, Peter Schaefer, and Margaret Schwartz have been great friends through it all. Ofer Eliaz provided particularly helpful advice and encouragement. Ben Stork and Kris Fallon were tireless in reading various drafts, always offering valuable insights and moral support.

I would also like to thank my family. My mom, Joanne, and sisters, Tricia and Krista, have provided endless generosity and unconditional support. I am thankful to Gina Giotta for her daily involvement and the many ways that she contributed to the completion of this project. This dissertation is dedicated to my dad, Patrick McDonald, who died in September 2005.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

# INTRODUCTION

## Contemporary Hollywood

In 1948, the United States Supreme Court ruled that the major film studios must relinquish ties to exhibition channels such as first-run theaters. Known as the Paramount Decision, the ruling effectively undercut the advantages of vertical integration and dismantled the studio system that had presided over classical Hollywood cinema. Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century Hollywood cinema subsequently witnessed significant economic, aesthetic, and technological changes. At the same time, Hollywood in many respects maintains an appearance of stability and permanence. For instance, Hollywood still relies on many of the same stylistic and narrative conventions familiar from the classical era while also featuring widely recognizable stars and well established genres. The term 'contemporary' then, like related designations such as post-classical and New Hollywood, specifies a historical framework for analyzing the complex changes and continuities that structure commercial cinema as a cultural form. More specifically, this study examines contemporary Hollywood by focusing on films made between 1990 and the present. Although the historical conditions that underlie contemporary Hollywood largely serve as a backdrop for the theoretical analysis that comprise the four chapters that follow, it is still useful to begin by further elaborating the distinctions that characterize this particular period of filmmaking.

Since the 1948 decision there have been numerous developments that serve to illustrate the divide between classical Hollywood and its aftermath. These include the widespread adoption of television, MCA's purchase of Universal in 1962, Gulf and Western's acquisition of Paramount in 1966, and the introduction of a new ratings system

in 1968 by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA).[1] Descriptions of New Hollywood in particular emphasize the advent of the blockbuster in the 1970s and its related practices of national advertising and saturation booking.[2] Many of these strategies, however, began much earlier. According to Richard Maltby, the blockbuster began in the 1950s partly a means of product differentiation (new technologies such as widescreen were used to distinguish cinematic spectacle from television), but mostly as a result of the limitations enacted by the Paramount decrees. Studios responded first and foremost by reducing the supply of product, and thereby devoted their resources to fewer and fewer films. As production costs grew exponentially, the industry's profits beginning in the 1960s were increasingly tied to "a handful of enormously successful movies in each production season."[3] As in the case of identifying the origin of the blockbuster, the markers that distinguish contemporary Hollywood are equally problematic and designating the year 1990 as a clear dividing line is no exception. Despite such obstacles, it is possible to identify four clear developments: 1) the proliferation of ancillary markets, both in their size and the revenues they generate, 2) the increasingly global orientation of Hollywood cinema, 3) the corporate reorganization and expansion in which the major studios were a constitutive component of more tightly focused media and communication conglomerates, and 4) the rise and fall of 'independent' narrative cinema as a distinctive

---

[1] For an overview of these and other turning points, see Richard Maltby's *Hollywood Cinema* (Second Edition. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003).

[2] Schatz, Thomas. "The New Hollywood," *Film Theory Goes to the Movies* (Eds. Jim Collins, Hilary Radner, and Ava Preacher Collins. New York: Routledge, 2005). See also his more recent account, "New Hollywood, New Millennium," *Film Theory and Contemporary Hollywood Movies* (Ed. Buckland, Warren. New York: Routledge, 2009): 19-46.

[3] Maltby, Richard. "'Nobody Knows Everything': Post-Classical Historiographies and Consolidated Entertainment," *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (Eds. Steve Neale and Murray Smith. NewYork: Routledge, 2000): 31.

and viable niche within the entertainment market. Although they begin at various points throughout the post-1948 era, these developments primarily take shape over the course of the 1970s and 80s such that by 1990 they are fully established as the fundamental principles that distinguish contemporary Hollywood cinema.[4]

Throughout the classical period, theatrical exhibition represented the exclusive source of revenues for Hollywood studios. The introduction of television provided a subsequent window of exhibition. That is, by licensing the rights to broadcast their films studios were able to generate additional revenues without incurring any additional production costs. By the 1970s, additional non-theatrical exhibition windows opened in the form of cable television, pay-per-view, and, most importantly, the home video market. Although the studios were initially wary of home video and what they viewed as the inherent dangers of the new technology, it proved to be the single most important ancillary market and essentially redefined Hollywood as an industry. The VCR, by the end of the 1980s, had been welcomed into most American homes, saturating the market at a much faster rate than television.[5] Even before the introduction of the VCR increasing numbers of people were watching Hollywood films at home on their television. Home video simply provided a much more lucrative means of generating revenues than the licensing of broadcasting rights. By 1986 the majors earned more revenue from video than from theatrical exhibition. By 1990 their revenues from video were twice as much as

---

[4] Stephen Prince compares the 1980s to the coming of sound and the 1948 Paramount Decision. As with these two earlier transformative events, the decade "defined a before and an after for the film industry, [it] marked a line of historical transition that differentiated the business in hard and clear terms on either side of the marker." See: *A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood Under the Electronic Rainbow, 1980-1989* (Berkeley: University of California, 2000): xii.

[5] According to Maltby, "fewer than 2 percent of US households owned a VCR. At its end, nearly 70 percent did, and American families were spending $10 billion a year on pre-recorded videos" (*Hollywood Cinema*, 192-93). Prince notes that, "yearly sales of VCRs jumped from 802,000 in 1980 to 11-12 million per year during the second half of the decade" (*Pot of Gold*, 94).

their revenues from the box office.[6] The revenues from video were initially tied to the burgeoning rental market. However, over the course of the decade the majors increasingly utilized a "sell through" pricing system whereby selling videos at a discounted price directly to consumers proved to be more profitable than selling to rental retailers.

Although the VCR would give way to digital technologies in the following decade, home video as the largest and most profitable ancillary market was clearly established and driving the industry by 1990. In effect, home video had solved the problem that began with the 1948 Paramount Decision. It wasn't access to exhibition that would determine the fate of the major studios, but access to revenues. Even while the studios owned their own theaters, the theatrical market as a source of revenue was constrained by limited growth potential. It was only by exploiting new and expanding markets that the industry would have a chance to significantly increase its overall revenues. Perhaps the most amazing attribute of the home video market was that it never directly competed or conflicted with its coexisting exhibition windows. Theatrical exhibition remains the initial release venue. As the ancillary markets proved to be similarly hit-driven, success at the box office sets-up and determines a film's downstream profitability, that is, its success as it makes its way through subsequent windows of exhibition. At the same time, while video is the most important ancillary market, it does not prevent the studios from generating additional revenues through pay-per-view, cable and broadcast television. An additional byproduct of the home video market was that it generated an increased demand for product. As a consequence, the value of the major

---

[6] Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema*: 193.

studios' film libraries increased dramatically.[7] While the rapid expansion of ancillary markets fundamentally transformed both the nature of exhibition and the industry's source of revenues, the major studios' role as producers (and owners) of filmed entertainment ensured that they would dominate these new markets and benefit the most from the new revenue streams that spanned from multiple exhibition windows to newfound media formats.

The second key development in the contemporary era is Hollywood's increasingly global orientation. Hollywood has long relied on international support for financing, talent, and access to additional audiences. Following the 1948 decision, international box office returns became even more important. International receipts first exceeded the domestic box office in 1953 and since the 1960s approximately half of the major studios' income has come from outside the United States.[8] Although international rentals lagged behind the surge in US box office between the late 70s and mid 80s, the overseas markets had recovered by the end of that decade and grown much stronger throughout the 1990s.[9] One reason for the growth was that the majors, recognizing the importance of these markets, began investing in new theater construction throughout Europe and Japan.[10] Since the 1960s a significant number of Hollywood films have also been produced outside of the US. So-called runaway productions are motivated by various factors such

---

[7] Maltby indicates that by 1996, "the value of the majors' film libraries was estimated at a figure fifteen to twenty times the value placed on them in 1980" ("Post-Classical Historiographies," 36).

[8] Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema*: 213.

[9] *ibid*. Miller et. al. further write that, "Hollywood's proportion of the world market is double what it was in 1990… [and] most 'star-driven event films' from Hollywood obtained more revenue overseas than domestically…" (*Global Hollywood*, 4-5).

[10] Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema*: 215. See also Tino Balio's "'A Major Presence in All of the World's Important Markets; The Globalization of Hollywood in the 1990s," *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (Eds. Steve Neale and Murray Smith. NewYork: Routledge, 2000): esp. 59-60.

as lower labor costs, tax subsidies, trade incentives, and a beneficial exchange rate. In certain cases, for example, production on foreign soil allows Hollywood to bypass trade barriers, thus yielding better access to otherwise restricted markets.[11] The more significant development pertaining to Hollywood's global orientation, however, again involves the growing importance of ancillary markets. While the 1990s saw the opening of new theatrical markets in Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe, the emergence of Western Europe as a non-theatrical market was equally if not more important.[12] The deregulation of European television markets over the late 80s gave rise to a significant growth of commercial stations and satellite services all needing content. By 1989, Western Europe constituted a larger and therefore more lucrative television market than the US.[13] Over this same period there was a steady decline of international film production and as a result Hollywood studios were able to dominate the global marketplace virtually free of competition.[14] As the industry increasingly looks to overseas markets to generate revenues, there are subtle shifts in how studios conceive and market their products as global commodities. Just as the growth of ancillary markets has influenced the kinds of projects studios elect to back, there is similarly an increased effort

---

[11] See Chapter Two in Miller et. al.

[12] Balio writes that, "the largest single source of overseas revenue for Hollywood was from home video. In Western Europe, the number of VCRs sold rose from around 500,000 in 1978 to 40 million, or nearly one-third of all households, ten years later. By 1990, video sales in Western Europe reached nearly $4.5, with the lion's share generated by Hollywood movies" (Globalization of Hollywood in the 1990s, 60).

[13] According to Maltby, the market in western Europe by 1989 included 320 million people and 125 million households. The US market, in contrast, reached 250 million people and 90 million households (*Hollywood Cinema*, 215). Consider also that, "70 per cent of films on European television come from the US" (*Global Hollywood*, 7).

[14] By 1990, "the European film industry is one-ninth of the size it was in 1945" (*Global Hollywood*, 5).

to appeal to international audiences. For the most part, this entails an emphasis on simplified characters and fast-paced action.[15]

As ancillary and international markets grew in both size and importance, Hollywood's major studios were undergoing a radical transformation of their own. In 1966 Gulf and Western took over Paramount and in 1967 the Transamerica Corporation took over UA. Both studios were thus folded into widely diversified corporate conglomerates that had little or nothing to do with Hollywood entertainment. Although there was some inkling of generating interrelated interests or synergy, these ventures were largely tied to unrelated business cycles and revolved around complicated financial maneuverings such as leveraging undervalued stock, assets, or debt. Mergers and acquisitions continued to shape and re-shape the industry throughout the 1980s, however, by the end of the decade media conglomerates were organized around an increasingly sophisticated and long-term business strategy (one, to be clear, that took advantage of the newly available opportunities to generate additional revenues). In one of the most telling transformations, Gulf and Western sold off all subsidiaries unrelated to entertainment or publishing. In 1989 it formally announced its new name: Paramount Communications, Inc.[16] Similarly, Warner Communications, Inc., the parent company of Warner Brothers, had by 1987 "eliminated the vestiges of its old-line conglomeration" and reorganized as "a strict communication and entertainment business", paving the way for its eventual merger with Time, Inc.[17]

---

[15] Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema*: 213.

[16] Prince, *New Pot of Gold*: 63.

[17] *ibid*: 65.

By 1990 Paramount and Time Warner were in position to compete with Rupert Murdoch's growing media empire, News Corp., which had acquired 20th Century-Fox in 1986, as well as Sony, which had acquired Columbia Pictures from Coca-Cola in 1989, and its Japanese rival Matsushita, which had acquired MCA-Universal in 1990.[18] Along with Disney, which following the institution of new management and a new business strategy in 1984 emerged as a substantial force by the end of the decade, the five aforementioned studios were the key components around which a new era of media conglomerates were formed. These conglomerates were highly diversified, however, unlike their predecessors in the 60s and 70s they allowed for horizontal integration, that is, they utilized diversification so as to maximize and exploit the synergistic relations between various sub-divisions within the parent company. An explicit example of these strategies can be found in the emergence of yet another ancillary source of revenues: the licensing of rights for the purpose of product placement or merchandising and the use of tie-ins such as sound tracks or video games for the purpose of cross-promotion. As a result of these synergies, Hollywood's primary product is much more than just a film. Instead, "It is a huge interconnected series of media formats, marketing strategies, and ancillary outlets designed to return revenue to" the parent company.[19] Of course, the most important synergy may simply be the relationship between content and distribution. The new generation of media conglomerates were designed precisely to line up and leverage this relationship in a way that more than made up for the loss of direct ties to theatrical

---

[18] For additional accounts, see Douglas Gomery's "Hollywood Corporate Business Practice and Periodizing Contemporary Hollywood," *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (Eds. Steve Neale and Murray Smith. NewYork: Routledge, 2000) and Jon Lewis's "Money Matters: Hollywood in the Corporate Era," *The New American Cinema* (Ed. Jon Lewis. Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

[19] Prince, *New Pot of Gold*: 136.

exhibition following the 1948 Paramount Decision. In the decade that followed the formation of Time Warner the major conglomerates underwent numerous changes in ownership and composition, mostly though they simply expanded in size. Already by 1990, then, the key models for corporate consolidation were in place and an oligopoly of media conglomerates had asserted its control of the expanding entertainment market.

In 1986 there were less than 200 independent films produced. By 1988 and through the early 1990s that number grew to about 400 features per year. Before the end of the decade, however, this number had been cut in half.[20] The precipitous rise and fall of independent productions is closely tied to the developments discussed above and, as a result, can be considered just as illustrative of the economic dynamics that shape contemporary Hollywood. The sudden increase in independent production was a direct consequence of the new ancillary markets and their demand for more content. Perhaps more important than the demand for content were the new financial opportunities provided by the ancillary markets. Independent producers provided financing by pre-selling distribution rights or by acquiring lines of credit against ancillary revenues.[21] It should also be noted that the demand for increased production was as much a result of the major studios' strategy of underproduction as it was due to the new ancillary markets. That is, because the major studios produced a relatively small number of films (ten to twenty in 2000) and because those films require extremely large budgets, the studios

---

[20] Wyatt, Justin. "The Formation of the 'Major Independent': Miramax, New Line and the New Hollywood," *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (Eds. Steve Neale and Murray Smith. NewYork: Routledge, 2000): 74. Citing Martin Dale, Maltby calculates that independent production in the mid-1990s is at its lowest level since the early 1930s (*Hollywood Cinema*, 222).

[21] Prince, *New Pot of Gold*: 118.

necessarily rely on independent productions to fill out their release schedules.[22] This practice is also emblematic of a broader emphasis on both dispersing risk and decentralizing production. In contrast to the studio system, post-classical Hollywood increasingly divided the process of production and enlisted specialist sub-contractors on a short-term basis.[23] Picking-up independent features similarly afforded the studios greater flexibility in terms of planning their release schedule while also providing an inexpensive, low-risk product with the potential either for significant profits or, at least, critical cachet. Even as independent production experienced a serious downturn in the 90s, it remained a crucial appendage to the major studios. Just as it had pioneered new stylistic and marketing strategies in the 1970s and innovative financial arrangements in the 1980s, independent film continued to serve as a vital training ground for new talent and a means of identifying new niche markets and emerging trends.[24] The independent film sector, in effect, provided the major studios with innovation and product diversification without the burden of additional financial risk.

With regard to the successful rise of independent producers and distributors throughout the 1980s, there are two specific models that illustrate the overall cycle. First, the decade saw the rise of several mini-majors such as Carolco Pictures and De Laurentiis Entertainment Group. These companies were independent in the sense that they operated outside of the major studios. They were not entirely autonomous, however, as they relied

---

[22] Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema*: 209.

[23] *ibid*: 219. This strategy more broadly accords with the post-Fordist preference for 'flexible accumulation'. See Chapter Nine (esp. 150-51) in David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1990).

[24] See also Justin Wyatt's "From Roadshowing to Saturatioin Release: Majors, Independents, and Marketing/Distribution Innovations," *The New American Cinema* (Ed. Jon Lewis. Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

on the majors for distribution. To the extent that almost all independent features are in some fashion facilitated by the majors, the term 'independent' should almost always be qualified by the prefix, 'semi-'. As was the case with the increase in independent production more generally, the mini-majors financed their projects by pre-selling the rights to foreign and ancillary markets. What distinguished the most successful mini-majors was that they competed directly with the major studios both in the types of films they produced and in their overall business model. Carolco, for instance, focused its production on blockbuster-style films, typically action oriented and driven by major stars. Several of these films, most notably *Terminator 2* (1991), enjoyed significant box office success. By placing such emphasis on the blockbuster, Carolco furthermore adhered to the same "tent pole" mentality that guided the majors (that is, they relied on one huge hit to support the rest of its operations). But because Carolco had to pre-sell the ancillary rights in order to fund these projects it effectively forfeited the downstream revenues that were necessary to sustain this model of production. Following a series of box office failures in the mid 90s, Carolco was no longer solvent and filed for bankruptcy. After initially suggesting that independent producers might compete with the major studios by adopting the blockbuster model, it was clear that the benefits of ancillary and overseas markets would only be available to the conglomerates that were able to retain the long-term rights to those revenues.

If Carolco illustrates the failure of independents to directly mimic and compete with the majors, a different type of approach can be found in the likes of Miramax Film and New Line Cinema. Both companies began as distributors focused on marginal fare ranging from foreign art films to exploitation and rock documentaries, all of which had

been largely neglected by the major studios.[25] In effect, the rights to these films were undervalued and Miramax and New Line were able to parlay their low-cost acquisitions into modest profits that would eventually pave the way for their entry into production. Just as Carolco's hasty ascent hinged on the cross-over success of the *Rambo* series, New Line moved into the ranks of mini-major with its own *Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise and the subsequent hit blockbuster *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1990). New Line, however, used this success to complete two key strategic maneuvers that ensured its survival. First, it created its own home video division allowing the company to retain the downstream revenues generated by video. Second, it formed Fine Line Features as a specialized distributor devoted to less viable independent features. Returning to the strategy that launched New Line, the specialty division looked to turn low-cost acquisitions into modest profits while also maintaining an affiliation with the independence of the art house.[26] Although Miramax never had the benefit of a substantial cross-over hit, by the end of the 1980s it had significantly expanded both in size and visibility.[27] With the 1989 release of *sex, lies, and videotape*, in particular, it had established its presence as a major force among independents. The film made over $26 million at the US box office, a significant return on the company's initial investment of $1.1 million.[28] Just as important was Miramax's keen marketing acumen, its ability to translate critical praise as well as controversial or illicit subject matter into a financial payoff.

---

[25] Wyatt, "Formation of a Major Independent."

[26] Wyatt, "Formation of a Major Independent": 78.

[27] Prince, *New Pot of Gold*: 156.

[28] Wyatt, "Formation of a Major Independent": 79.

As a result of their success, New Line and Miramax were both soon acquired by major conglomerates (in 1993 Miramax was purchased by Disney while New Line merged with Turner which shortly thereafter would be acquired by Time Warner). Independents were attractive for several reasons. For instance, the kind of success experienced by *sex, lies* would yield a much higher profit margin than could be attained by any of the major studios' other productions. Also, by the end of the 1980s independent film not only commanded a larger share of the domestic theatrical market, but had captured widespread attention both in critical circles and the popular press as a kind of cultural vogue.[29] In contrast to mini-majors like Carolco, it was ultimately the profitability (and underlining profit potential) of these independents that lead to their eventual and fairly seamless assimilation by the major conglomerates. As actual independents quickly disappeared, any conglomerate that had missed out simply created their own specialty or 'boutique' division whereby 'independence' functioned as a kind of marketing collateral, that is, a means of implying product differentiation. The rapid assimilation of independent companies had numerous negative effects that further jeopardized the future of independent production. Former independents such as Miramax were now able to overpay for distribution rights and consequently drove out much of their competition. The new corporate expectations (along with their marketing and release practices) likewise worked to the detriment of independent production. The independent or specialty market was increasingly hit driven and modest profits were no longer acceptable. Contrary to the adult film industry, the promise of video as a cheaper and more expedient technology did not pan out for independent cinema. Similar to the decline in international production, the decline of independent production further

[29] Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema*: 220-21.

solidified the major studios' control of the entire entertainment market. While the media conglomerates were in position to acquire any new enterprise with the potential for significant growth or profitability, the possibility of a legitimate alternative cinema or changing the current system of production and distribution grew dramatically fainter.

These four developments clearly distinguish what is analyzed in this study as contemporary Hollywood. In addition to illustrating the vast differences between the classical and post-classical periods, these developments suggest that by 1990 Hollywood had undergone an even more pronounced transformation. Namely, it was by that time that the various changes that followed the 1948 Paramount Decision had solidified into a few key strategic and structural advantages. These advantages were closely tied to economic shifts within the culture industries and beyond. And while the forces that shaped contemporary Hollywood reflected new and important developments in business practice and industrial production, the guiding principle simply followed the same economic logic that has driven commercial cinema since its inception. As always, contemporary Hollywood is driven by the accumulation of profits. The films produced between 1990 and 2010 represent business as usual and, in this regard, it is difficult to imagine anything fundamentally strange or uncanny about them. Nonetheless, as the major media conglomerates consolidated their power over the industry and appeared to enjoy limitless growth, Hollywood remained riddled by a series of insoluble contradictions.

Throughout the 1980s and 90s Hollywood enjoyed a high rate of annual growth (around 9 percent).[30] Two problems, however, undercut what appeared to be a vigorous and healthy industry. First, box office sales were relatively flat. Rising box office grosses

---

[30] Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema*: 189.

were primarily due to the steady increase in ticket prices.[31] Second, production costs had skyrocketed over the same period, severely hindering the major studios' profit margins. The exponential rise in production costs were the result of the large salaries commanded by major stars, the expansion of marketing budgets, and the growing number of prints required by saturation booking. On average the Hollywood studios were producing films at a loss.[32] The subsequent result of this deficit was that the studios' profits were concentrated in the earnings of an increasingly small number of films. Even though the developments that shaped contemporary Hollywood brought about an underlying structural stability, the industry remained beset by rampant uncertainty and economic volatility. With only a few films released each year and perpetually at the mercy of fickle audiences, the financial health of the major studios veered precariously based on the performance of one or two productions. The larger incongruity, however, was that as the industry underwent a massive expansion overall profits were diminishing disproportionately.

In terms of aesthetics, Hollywood cinema both acquiesced to economic imperatives while retaining the familiarity of its classical precursor. The influence of downstream revenues lead producers to back projects that were more likely to do well in ancillary and foreign markets. The overall effect did not so much alter any particular style or narrative convention as simply encourage certain types of projects. That is, the studios preferred blockbusters or, better yet, franchise films precisely because of their propensity to support multiple and renewable revenue streams. Though the impact of Hollywood's changing economic circumstances may not always be readily visible, the underlying

---

[31] Prince, *New Pot of Gold*: 1.

[32] *ibid*: 20-21.

presence of these circumstances can usually be detected with a certain amount of effort. In a particularly interesting case, David Bordwell identifies several important, if sometimes subtle, changes in spite of his own claims regarding the ongoing continuation of classical norms.[33] He specifically identifies an intensification of stylistic conventions based on new technologies. He also documents a distinct rise in allusionism and a growing sense of belatedness based on historical developments such as the introduction of film school and the wider availability of diverse film materials. Finally, he tracks a newfound predilection for novelty. Although novelty has certainly operated throughout the history of commercial cinema, it plays an increasingly important role for the films that fail to function as legitimate blockbusters especially as they struggle to distinguish themselves within ancillary markets such as home video. Hollywood cinema has always endeavored to strike a productive balance between familiarity and novelty, simplicity and complexity. In contemporary Hollywood, this balance is simply more explicitly tied to the ability to generate revenues beyond theatrical exhibition.

The experience of Hollywood cinema is likewise inundated with underlying conflict. Films are increasingly consumed in the comfort and convenience of one's own home. And for the most part, feature films are as coherent and visually pleasurable as ever. As it has become easier and easier to consume Hollywood's product, the experience is nonetheless marred by an array of divergent understandings. Hollywood produces films that are predominantly escapist fantasies and, yet, they are always also accompanied by their own explicit commercial logic, that is, general knowledge regarding the process of their production and their calculated efforts to accumulate long-term profits. While this

---

[33] Bordwell, David. *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.

knowledge, like celebrity gossip and box office figures more generally, circulates widely, the intricate financial arrangements and synergistic relationships that directly fuel contemporary Hollywood largely remain a mystery. Simultaneously, as home video served to congeal filmed entertainment into a discrete consumer good, the actual commodity is more and more dispersed, percolating across multiple formats, international and ancillary markets, and further fragmented through promotional tie-ins and para-textual accessories. As David Harvey has noted, the impact of an ever intensifying compression of time and space is ultimately one of disorientation and disruption.[34] Innovations in transportation and communication have effectively accelerated the global exchange of products, labor, and capital. Despite the advantages this provides for corporate interests, the compression or dissolution of time and space has yielded an overarching crisis of representation (both in a social and aesthetic sense) and a collective experience characterized by paradox and excessive instability.[35] With regard to Hollywood cinema this experience is perhaps most evident in a growing sense of untimeliness or temporal dislocation. Films produced between 1990 and 2010 perpetually refer to earlier styles and genres among other things. More significantly, however, Hollywood cinema as a commodity increasingly exists outside of time altogether. Even as its products are multiplied across additional exhibition windows (effectively expanding its commercial life span indefinitely), Hollywood cinema demonstrates the extent to which popular culture is now largely removed from and indifferent to any sense of history.

---

[34] Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*: 284.

[35] See Harvey and Fredric Jameson's related account in *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

The four chapters that make up this study proceed by analyzing these traces of the untimely and other evidence of the uncanny as it arises within the formal and narrative variations of individual Hollywood films. This focus on textual analysis specifically aims to isolate and examine contradictions that are symptomatic of the economic conditions that underlie the contemporary period. As a result, the developments outlined here as my point of departure primarily shift to the background. The disproportionate focus on content in this treatment is, in part at least, tied to what might be considered another vestige of the untimely. All too often, content is an afterthought for both film scholars and media conglomerates alike.[36] Precisely because of the developments detailed here there has been a substantial increase in demand for product, thus marking the return if not of Hollywood's repressed than at least of the sector that had suffered the most neglect as new distribution technologies and access to additional revenue opportunities garnered the industry's main focus. As mentioned above, content not only remained vital to contemporary Hollywood but faced the added pressure performing well across diffuse theatrical venues while also holding up over the course of multiple viewings. This added pressure resulted in formal and thematic experiments that sometimes appear on the surface as strange or unusual. In my analysis these surface elements are strictly a facet of Hollywood conducting business as usual. However, it is the argument of this dissertation that through careful scrutiny these oddities open a passage through which it is possible to identify an underlying uncanniness, one that belies not only contemporary Hollywood's economic and aesthetic formation but its critical study as well.

---

[36] An important exception can be found in Garrett Stewart's *Framed Time: Toward A Postfilmic Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2007). Stewart proposes narratography as a method of reading technological shifts within thematization, plot, and particular formal variations. In attending to these details, "narrotography reads certain theoretical positions, as well as numerous cultural symptoms, back to us in a sometimes clearer translation" (163).

## Theories of the Uncanny

In terms of organization, the approach to contemporary Hollywood outlined above is largely grafted within a critical genealogy of the uncanny as a theoretical concept. Although this strategy may at first appear somewhat discordant, the uncanny, as I briefly suggested above, provides a particularly apt framework for addressing the incongruities that accompany contemporary Hollywood. Following an overview of the theoretical concerns at stake in this project, I will go on to further discuss the relationship between the uncanny and broader economic or historical conditions. With regard to undertaking this project as a critical genealogy, my analysis begins with Sigmund Freud and, more specifically, his 1919 essay, "The 'Uncanny'."[37] In addition to introducing a number of key concepts and baseline definitions, the essay provides the four tropes around which the following chapters are organized. The double, war trauma, the undead, and automata each provide a theoretical and thematic basis for analyzing films produced within the contemporary period. In the case of the first two chapters, this analysis follows an examination of both how the trope figures within psychoanalysis more broadly and how it explicitly or implicitly filters into intersecting theoretical discourses. In the following two chapters, the organizing tropes are cast more generally so as to support a shift in scope and method. That is to say, the third chapter consists of a more sustained analysis of a singular text while the fourth chapter gives way to a wider ranging account in which a broad array of texts and debates are briefly considered.

With regard to the specific films analyzed, my selections aim to strike a balance between covering a broad cross-section of contemporary Hollywood and developing a

---

[37] Freud, Sigmund. "The 'Uncanny'," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, vol. XVII (London: Hogarth Press, 1955): 220-226. Hereafter abbreviated as *U*.

theoretical focus that is germane to each individual trope while also speaking to the larger economic and historical conditions that inform the culture industries. After examining the cinema in general as a type of doubling, I explore in the first chapter two recent examples where variations on the doppelganger illustrate the strategic importance of novelty in contemporary Hollywood. Both *Adaptation* (Spike Jonze, 2002) and *The Prestige* (Christopher Nolan, 2006) occupy the middle ground between a blockbuster or legitimate award contender on the one hand and a truly independent or art cinema on the other. Both films feature widely recognized stars and operate within the stylistic and narrative norms of Hollywood filmmaking while at the same time emphasizing a distinctive overall aesthetic, an ambiguous and convoluted narrative, and an implicit self-reflexivity. In terms of these latter attributes, the two films aim to differentiate themselves while also adhering to the commercial logic of the Hollywood system. Emblematic of Hollywood's affinity for novelty, the two films further illustrate an underlining undecidibility, a confluence of contradictions that do nothing to hinder their consumption but, as I will argue, nonetheless harbor traces of disorientation.

The second chapter likewise draws attention to the role of novelty as I examine several films revolving around questions of war and historical trauma. *Courage Under Fire* (Edward Zwick, 1996) and *In the Valley of Elah* (Paul Haggis, 2007), for example, utilize complex flashback structures amidst temporal dislocation and manipulation to conceal or defer the debilitating effects of combat and other instances of irreparable violence. These strategies, like the prevalence of technologically mediated images of war, again foreground a degree of ambivalence, particularly between the historical context to which these films refer and the novel virtuosity with which they render such events. The

films in this chapter are also part of a vague middle ground, one that I take as representative of contemporary Hollywood precisely because of the way it manifests the industry's divergent and symptomatic interests. The third chapter focuses on the undead narrator in *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes, 1999), a film that as winner of the Academy Award for best picture suggests a clear departure from any kind of middle ground. For a film so widely celebrated for its technical and thematic accomplishment, I endeavor to highlight several decisive incongruities as they both reveal the film's skill and the ideological pressures faced by middle class baby boomers at the dawn of a new millennium. Whereas the third chapter examines one of contemporary Hollywood's most well-regarded films, the final chapter more broadly considers certain constitutive features of the blockbuster. In addressing the figure of the automaton as it appears in *Bicentennial Man* (Chris Columbus, 1999) and *I, Robot* (Alex Proyas, 2004), I consider in my most wide ranging chapter the intersections between artificial life, the impact of commodities, the cinematic medium, and the rendering of labor within a biopolitical era. Just as the first chapter suggests a parallel between the double and cinematic technologies and the two subsequent chapters make reference to variations of the mise-en-abyme, the final chapter makes it clear that the automaton is not simply a discrete figure contained within any given Hollywood film. On the contrary, artificial life not only permeates the underlying logic of all special effects driven cinema but simultaneously renders the impoverished nature of life within capitalist society at the end of the twentieth century.

To return to the theoretical underpinnings of this project, Freud in the most basic sense characterizes the uncanny in his 1919 essay as a return of the repressed and, in the case of his analysis of E. T. A. Hoffmann's 'The Sand Man', as an iteration of castration

anxiety. Such recourse to repression and the castration complex was, of course, not uncommon. They represented two of the most important psychological operations both within Freud's lexicon and for psychoanalysis as a whole. In spite of their conceptual centrality, both were also salient examples of an inescapable indeterminacy, one that beginning with the etymological investigation undertaken at the outset of his short 1919 essay would be fundamentally synonymous with the uncanny. Though the propensity for contradiction and indeterminacy may have been endemic throughout the psychoanalytic enterprise, such matters did little to undermine its power as a heuristic model. The interesting question with regard to Freud's account of the uncanny, then, is not so much the explicit appearance of strange incongruities but, rather, how certain outward oddities conceal or obscure much more entrenched structural paradoxes. In terms of analyzing contemporary Hollywood, I adhere to a familiar mode of scholarly interpretation whereby symptomatic details are subject to critical interrogation. In a certain sense, my examination is devoted to what David Bordwell refers to zones of indeterminacy.[38] These zones may very well be a perpetual feature of Hollywood cinema and, moreover, they may never threaten its function either as pleasurable entertainment or a commercially viable product. However, in contrast to Bordwell, I claim that this type of analysis provides important insights into the indelible incongruities that underlie contemporary society and that ultimately shape its cultural productions.

In the course of developing the four tropes drawn from Freud's uncanny essay I have the opportunity to engage a broad spectrum of theorists including Friedrich Kittler, Cathy Caruth, Kaja Silverman, Maurice Blanchot, Tom Gunning, and Walter Benjamin. However, the most important figure, particularly in terms of advancing a genealogy of

[38] Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It*: 81.

the uncanny, is Jacques Derrida. Over his career Derrida established a compendium of paradoxical terms ranging from supplement and trace to *pharmakon* and hymen, each bearing a strong conceptual affinity to the indeterminacy associated with the uncanny. In each of these cases, Derrida illustrates in extensive detail a fundamental inclination within the given term for dual, contradictory, and transposable meanings. In the etymological account that begins the uncanny essay Freud similarly identified a double meaning within the German word '*heimlich*', the root and antonym of '*unheimlich*'. In its primary sense, *heimlic*' signifies: "belonging to the house, not strange, familiar, tame, intimate" (*U* 222). Conversely, in its secondary meaning, the term connotes concealment, that something has been kept from sight or withheld from others. The divergent meanings lead Freud to surmise that *heimlich* eventually "coinicides with its opposite, *unheimlich*" (*U* 226). In other words, the doubling of meaning within the initial term leads to the dissolution of difference between the two opposing terms.

The appeal to paradoxical terminology may suggest a certain common ground. A more direct linkage, however, is apparent in Derrida's references to Freud and the uncanny essay in particular. As he notes in "The Double Session," "We find ourselves constantly being brought back to that text," enticed "by the paradoxes of the double and of repetition, the blurring of the boundary lines between 'imagination' and 'reality', between the 'symbol' and the 'thing it symbolizes'."[39] It is in this text more than anywhere that Freud's acute interest in "undecidable ambivalence" and "interminable substitution" is evident. Likening such matters to what he terms dissemination, Derrida specifies that he is necessarily "proposing a rereading" of Freud's initial account.

---

[39] Derrida, Jacques. *Dissemination* (Trans. Barbara Johnson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981): n. 32, 220. See also, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987): 270, 342.

Whereas Freud, precisely in order to prop up and enhance the merits of psychoanalysis, ignores or suppresses evidence of indeterminacy, Derrida embraces and seeks to encourage the disseminal force couched both within the initial fraying of meaning and in subsequent efforts to negate the persistence of instability. Throughout his career Derrida pointed again and again to the role of differential structures, or what he more specifically identifies as *différance*.[40] In his view, these differences permeated the most basic notion of presence, which is to say the foundation on which all stable meaning relies. Accordingly then, he suggests that any appearance of stability or permanence is simultaneously riddled with instability and contradiction. Derrida's overall theoretical endeavor shifts the uncanny away from either its adjectival function or the specific psychological operations named by Freud. Instead, he treats the uncanny more broadly as a means of conceptualizing an insoluble indeterminacy, one that is perhaps most clearly visible in the terminological breakdown between *heimlich* and *unheimlich*. With regard to moving from Freud to Derrida and from extended theoretical discussion to textual analysis, the uncanny undergoes regular shifts in its conceptual valence. The resulting tension is most noticeable in the contrast between Derrida's implicit endorsement of the uncanny and its symptomatic figuration within contemporary Hollywood. Although these divergences remain, to a certain extent, insurmountable, Derrida's inclusion contributes to several additional aims, most significantly the possibility of developing a deconstructive reading practice specifically addressed to popular narrative cinema. Such an approach scrutinizes traces of ambiguity and contradiction not so much as a threat or exception to Hollywood's orthodox function but as a constitutive part of its composition

---

[40] Derrida, Jacques. "*Différance," Margins of Philosophy* (Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982): 1 – 27.

and continual success. Insofar as this practice endeavors to disassemble or destroy its object of study, such results are only possible through the critical insights that follow from an understanding of the object's innermost and complex operations.

As Michel Foucault established, genealogy cannot be characterized as an unbroken continuity, a straightforward linear evolution. Instead, it is an account of the myriad and entangled events, the "unstable assemblage of faults, fissures, and heterogeneous layers" through and against which a concept forms.[41] While my attempt to balance multiple theorists and cultural materials may peripherally relate to this disparity, a more specific indication of the temporal disorder inherent in the genealogical approach is found in the figure who provides a third conceptual account of the uncanny. Before Freud or Derrida intervened, Karl Marx identified several ways in which capitalist society was already fundamentally marked by the uncanny. Industrialization gave rise to more concentrated urban centers and, consequently, more of the population paid rent in exchange for temporary shelter. This new form of dwelling was an estranged and hostile one. It is no longer a home of one's own, but instead "the house of a stranger who daily lies in wait," ready to throw its residents out "if he does not pay his rent."[42] The growing experience of perpetual homelessness of course belied an even more profound form of alienation, the estrangement of one's labor. In the new large-scale factories, laborers were increasingly dehumanized and, in turn, the objects they produced confronted them as all the more foreign and, yet for that same reason, strangely familiar. Marx further adds that,

---

[41] Foucault, Michel. "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," Foucault Reader (Ed. Paul Rabinow. New York: Pantheon, 1984): 82.

[42] Marx, Karl. *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* in *The Marx-Engels Reader* (Second Edition. Ed. Robert Tucker. New York: Norton, 1978): 100. See also, Vidler, Anthony. *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992): 5.

"Estrangement is manifested not only in the fact that my means of life belong to someone else, that my desire is the inaccessible possession of another, but also in the fact that everything is in itself something different from itself […], all is under the sway of inhuman power" (100).

Although the different elements described here overlap in variable ways throughout the chapters that follow, their overall purpose is to serve three distinct objectives. First, this study aims to examine the uncanny as a theoretical concept, particularly as it develops in the work of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Derrida. Second, I utilize the four uncanny tropes derived from Freud's 1919 essay to analyze thematically distinctive films produced between 1990 and 2010. Third, I combine theoretical and textual analysis as part of an attempt to address the effects of capitalist production on contemporary Hollywood cinema and how we understand it. Though the first part of this introduction detailed the specificity of contemporary Hollywood (the various changes in how it is produced and consumed since 1948 in general and 1990 more specifically), much of my analysis returns to the simple circumstance that Marx identified in the middle of the nineteenth century. Hollywood films are complex commodities determined by unfathomable economic processes. While they may not be encrypted with alienated labor in the same way that manufactured goods once were, they continue to traffic in the dreams and desires that remain outside of our possession. If there is any chance of ever changing our relationship to the 'inhuman power' that necessitates our perpetual alienation, it begins by understanding how we are made to feel entirely at home within an array of estranged dreams.

# CHAPTER I
# A DOUBLE'S DOUBLE:
# PSYCHOANALYSIS, WRITING, CINEMA

Ernst Jentsch contends in his 1905 essay "On the Psychology of the Uncanny" that the uncanny primarily stems from intellectual uncertainty. Despite the fact that Sigmund Freud had his own reservations about Jentsch's claim, the double serves as the most apt representative of this uncertainty. Throughout Freud's essay the double not only appears as a vexing and ambivalent figure in its own right, but as a virtual repository for processes of duplication, double meanings, repetition compulsion, and duality in general. Ultimately, this confluence of associations marks a much broader double logic that, as I intend to show, permeates not only psychoanalysis but aesthetic conventions more generally. In the first section of this chapter I outline the relationship between Freud's specific comments concerning the double and various examples of a double logic as it is manifest elsewhere in psychoanalysis. In the second section I move to vastly expand this consideration by taking into account both Jacques Derrida's acute interest in the double as well as corollary debates within the confines of film theory. The final section considers a variety of contemporary Hollywood films in which the double is not only a key figure but symptomatic of larger questions concerning the nature of representation at the end of the twentieth century.

Psychoanalysis and Freud's Double

The double first arises in the uncanny essay as part of Freud's discussion of E. T. A. Hoffmann's 'The Sandman'—the same tale that two of Freud's precursors, Jentsch and Otto Rank, had likewise considered.[1] It is only after his analysis of Hoffmann's story, however, that Freud provides an initial set of definitions. First, he contends that the double includes either physical or mental identification. That is, it concerns cases in which either physical resemblance or psychological connection renders two separate characters indistinguishable. Second, and more generally, the double involves any kind of doubling, dividing or interchanging of the self. Third, the double concerns "the constant recurrence of the same thing—the repetition of the same features or character-traits or vicissitudes of the same crimes, or even the same names through several consecutive generations" (*U* 234). Insofar as these characterizations of the double are developed in reference to literary sources, Freud's account closely follows the work of his colleague Rank.

In Rank's study, the double is more specifically linked to mirror reflections and shadows as well as broader notions of guardian spirits and the soul. Regardless of its specific manifestation, however, Rank surmises that the underlining point of the double is to preserve the ego against death. Or, as Freud later puts it, the double originates "from the soil of unbounded self-love, from the primary narcissism which dominates the mind of the child and of primitive man" (*U* 235). Like Rank, Freud also goes on to note that, "when this stage has been surmounted, the 'double' reverses its aspect. From having been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death." In the

[1] Rank, Otto. *The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study* (1914). Trans. and ed. Harry Tucker Jr. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1971.

etymological review that begins the essay, Freud finds that *heimlich* comprises two opposing ideas. Because it houses two separate meanings, the term eventually collapses into its antonym *unheimlich*. Something similar occurs with the double. The split designed to preserve the ego returns as its opposite, the destruction and annihilation of the ego.

This antagonism is primarily discernible in the relationship between narcissism and death. For example, Rank begins his study by considering *The Student of Prague* (Paul Wegener, 1913), "a 'romantic drama', which not long ago made the rounds of our cinemas" (*Double* 3). The film involves the confrontation between a young student Balduin (Paul Wegener) and his doppelganger. The wicked double initially disrupts Balduin's social ambitions and soon enough leads his counterpart to his mortal demise.[2] For Rank, the film exemplifies the way in which the double always "works at cross-purposes with its prototype," explaining further that the interruption of romantic pursuits typically ends "in suicide by way of the death intended for the irksome persecutor" (*Double* 33). The double, then, indeed is not only a harbinger of death but its instigator as well. This is not only the case in literature or fiction, but is also evident in various belief systems where prohibitions and superstitions are built around reflections, shadows, and other effigies of the soul.

While Rank largely associates the double with death, he considers narcissism more specifically in his final chapter. That is, in discussing the fable of Narcissus he

---

[2] German Expressionist cinema has been widely considered in relation to the uncanny. See: Lotte H. Eisner's *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*. Trans. Roger Greaves. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), Thomas Elsaesser's *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imagination* (New York: Routledge, 2000), esp. 61-105, and Brigitte Peucker's "Movement, Fragmentation, and the Uncanny," *Incorporating Images: Film and the Rival Arts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

broaches an example in which death and self-love are coterminous. As the tale has it, when Narcissus finally sees his own image reflected he is so enamored that he is unable to do anything else thereby precipitating his own death. Though Freud had only recently addressed the concept of narcissism, Rank clearly explicates its relevance. [3] First, he notes that the association between madness and the double corresponds with the regressive tendencies typical of paranoia.[4] Predisposed to megalomania, the paranoid subject attributes unwanted qualities to others so as to preserve an overvalued sense of self. Thus the double is a mechanism by which the actual source of fears and anxiety can be disguised or avoided by assigning them to a seemingly separate entity. With regard to the proliferation of premature deaths, Rank asserts that it is not only easier to dispatch a figure who has accrued feared and hated qualities, but necessary since one "loves and esteems his ego too highly to give it pain or to transform the idea of his destruction into the deed" (*Double* 80). By strange turn, suicide serves a narcissistic endeavor in that it allows those suffering pathological thanatophobia a paradoxical means of sidestepping

---

[3] See Freud's "On Narcissism: an Introduction" (First published 1914, revised 1922), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works* (Ed. James Strachey, vol. XIV. London: Hogarth Press, 1955): 69-102. As Freud explains, narcissism refers to cases in which "libido has been withdrawn from the external world" and redirected toward the ego (75). Narcissism presupposes the existence of the ego and is thereby distinguished from auto-eroticism. In expanding his libido theory, Freud is lead to postulate both an original narcissism that threatens to blur together with auto-eroticism and an ego-ideal. The latter is an ideal onto which narcissism is displaced: "What he projects before him as his ideal is the substitute for the lost narcissism of his childhood in which he was his own idea" (94). Shortly thereafter Freud adds, "A man who has exchanged his narcissism for homage to a high ego ideal has not necessarily on that account succeeded in sublimating his libidinal instincts" (94). The fact that substitution does not guarantee sublimation will be relevant in our consideration of the double. For a more explicit connection, consider the passage in which Freud treats the critical agent – what he will later recognize as the superego – capable of separating itself from the ego as another variation of the double (*U* 235).

[4] Freud's thinking here is developed in relation to the Schreber case. See "Psycho-analytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia" (1911), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works* (Ed. James Strachey, vol. XII. London: Hogarth Press, 1955).

the threat of death. In such circumstances, self-destruction and self-protection begin to seriously blur.

The second connection Rank draws between the double and narcissism concerns the animistic view of the world produced as an ancillary to what Freud termed primary narcissism. The reason death "is denied by a duplication of the self" is precisely because death within the animistic view is not a natural concept (*Double* 83). All subsequent desires for immortality are really, then, a wish to restore "the original naïve belief in an eternally continuing existence" (*Double* 84). For Freud, primary narcissism suggests a state prior to any distinction or boundaries. Like the animistic belief that souls can be indiscriminately attributed to all objects and phenomena, animate and inanimate alike, this primary state knows no restrictions. The double is consequently divided between the desire to return to this earlier state and a marker necessarily indicating the end of that earlier state. In this regard, there is a degree of overlap between Rank and the terminology employed by Jacques Lacan in "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function." According to the latter psychoanalyst, the image the infant recognizes in the mirror serves as "the rootstock of secondary identifications." [5] Simultaneously signifying the subject's ideal and its inescapable alienation, the mirror stage entails entry into language, the secondary order *par excellent*. Not unlike the double itself, language allows the subject to surpass death while never ceasing to serve as a reminder of the subject's mortality.

To return to the uncanny essay, Freud goes on to claim dissatisfaction with his earlier formulations. With Rank clearly in mind, he says that it is not enough to consider

---

[5] Lacan, Jacques. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function, as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," *Écrits: A Selection* (Trans. Bruce Fink with Héloïse Fink and Russell Grigg, New York: Norton, 2002) 3-9.

the manifest motivations of the double. Instead, "the quality of uncanniness can only come from the fact of the 'double' being a creation dating back to a very early mental stage, long since surmounted" (*U* 236). This desire to return to an earlier, more primitive state raises an additional set of problems. Freud associates this with the desire to return to an infantile state both idealized as prelapsarian and plagued with dangers ranging from the omnipotence of thoughts to the involuntary compulsion to repeat. More notably, this desire forces Freud to again confront the porous and equivocal line that divides the primitive from its modern counterpart.

On the one hand, Freud claims modern society has surmounted earlier thoughts regarding death. At the same time, however, he acknowledges that since "no human being really grasps it" we all "still think as savages do" on the particular topic of death, adding furthermore that, "the primitive fear of the dead is still so strong within us and always ready to come to the surface on any provocation" (*U* 242). "Considering our unchanged attitude towards death," Freud shifts his inquiry to the whereabouts of repression, that is, "the necessary condition of a primitive feeling recurring in the shape of something uncanny" (*U* 242-243). The switch in terminology, characterizing our attitudes toward death now in terms of repression, is telling. Whereas the term surmount implies an inexorable point of division, repression necessitates a far less absolute partition. In effect, repression institutes a dividing line that ensures a return of what precedes it. If modern society has surmounted earlier anxieties pertaining to death, it does not mean that these anxieties have been completely vanquished. On the contrary, it means not only that these anxieties are destined to return but that the double is another vestige of this failed division.

At this point, the discussion of the double has long departed from the mere identification of plot devices or narrative content. Instead, the double is emblematic of a broader division between similarity and opposition, the particular problems of which are manifest in the relationship between death and narcissism and the untenable distinction between primitive and modern. Most of these problems are already evident, for example, in earlier texts such as *Totem and Taboo*. Here Freud examines the totem animal that, like the topic of death, maintains a highly ambivalent status.[6] Simultaneously sacred and forbidden, the totem rehearses the meeting between instinctual desire and external prohibition. Though the prohibition eventually succeeds, it can never fully abolish the desire. And because "the prohibition and the instinct persist," a situation follows "which remains undealt with—a physical fixation—and everything else follows from the continuing conflict" (*Totem* 38). In more general terms, Freud is drawing a distinction between the conscious subject, where the prohibition prevails, and the unconscious, where the original impulse remains operative. What's ambivalent about the totem is that it simultaneously represents both an unconscious desire and its social injunction.

In primitive societies where the ruler is associated with the taboo object Freud finds an ambivalent mixture of affection and hostility. These feelings are none other than the outward projection of internal perceptions. This is also the basis of what Freud calls the omnipotence of thoughts or, more simply, the belief that psychical acts can have real consequences.[7] As in the primitive belief in animism or the child's general over-valuation

---

[6] Freud, Sigmund. *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics,* 1913 (Trans. and ed. James Strachey. New York: Norton, 1950).

[7] Freud's concept of the omnipotence of thoughts is first formulated in his case study on the 'Ratman'. See "Some Remarks on a Case of Obsessive-compulsive Neurosis" (1909) in *The Standard Edition of*

of mental processes, the omnipotence of thoughts encourages a breakdown between the interior realm and the exterior world. With regard to the totem, Freud suggests that there is a more basic duality at work:

> When we, no less than primitive man, project something into external reality, what is happening must surely be this: we are recognizing the existence of two states—one in which something is directly given to the senses and to consciousness (that is, is present to them), and alongside it another, in which the same thing is latent but capable of re-appearing. In short we are recognizing the co-existence of perception and memory, or, putting it more generally, the existence of unconscious mental processes alongside the conscious ones. (*Totem* 117)

In recognizing this dual state, Freud identifies a fundamental dividing line that is repeated in everything from the practice of totem and taboo to the development of the double as a literary theme. Though designed to delineate between opposing distinctions, the line is more likely to facilitate substitution and exchange.

The unconscious similarly signals a state prior to reason or systematic logic. More often than not, however, the unconscious first appears only with the first signs of repression. As in the establishment of the totem, resistance originates externally with the introduction of a prohibition. Thus repression can only happen once this division has been introduced. The logic of this divide is obviously tenuous. On the one hand, what's primary appears only in retrospect after the institution of resistance. On the other hand, repression attempts to void the very division that produces it. The result is a proliferation of divisions perpetually failing. Both the double and what amounts to an underlining double logic within Freud's thought illustrate a penchant for dualities doomed to fail. In drawing upon oppositions ranging from self-destruction and self-preservation, modern and primitive, conscious and unconscious, Freud repeatedly allows for their transgression

---

*the Complete Psychological Works* (Trans. and ed. James Strachey, vol. X. London: Hogarth Press, 1955).

and potential dissolution. To say that Freud's work is grounded in a double logic not only suggests that his psychoanalytic theory is predisposed to instability and constant revision, but that, like the double, it is also liable to cast an uncanny pall. In the following section, it will become evident that just as the uncanny and this double logic permeate psychoanalysis at a general level, concerns about the double similarly inform writing as it relates to both western aesthetics and theories of the cinematic medium.

## Writing: From Mimesis to Nature's Double

For Friedrich Kittler, there is a crucial distinction between the double as it emerges over the course of the nineteenth century in conjunction with literature and the double that emerges with the new technologies of the twentieth century.[8] The former refers to the menacing figures lurking throughout the work of poets such as Alfred de Musset and Adelbert von Chamisso as well as writers such as Guy de Maupassant, Edgar Allan Poe, and E. T. A. Hoffmann. Because of the way these authors exploit the ambiguities of the written word, Kittler claims as a rule that, "Doubles turn up at writing desks" (*RPF* 87). In effect, the double appears to readers between printed lines if for no other reason than it can. Conversely, the twentieth century double is a mechanized creature. As part of its diminished effect, Kittler links this later version to psychoanalysis. Like cinema, psychoanalysis is "a science of unconscious literalities, [and, as a result, it] indeed liquidates phantoms such as the doppelpänger…" (*GFT* 153). Whereas Freud attempts to contain the double as part of a scientific discourse, cinema parlays it into

[8] Kittler, Friedrich. "Romanticism—Psychoanalysis—Film: A History of the Double," *Literature, Media, Information Systems* (Trans. Stefanie Harris. Ed. John Johnston. New York: Routledge, 1997). See also, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), esp. 150-170. The earlier essay is hereafter cited as *RPF* and the latter text is abbreviated as *GFT*.

mass entertainment. Again, for Kittler, the early special effects that literally render the double on screen eliminate the uncanny quality that this figure once elicited.

Whereas Rank's study suggests that the penchant for fictional doubles indicates an actual neurological or mental ailment on the part of the author, Kittler insists that the literary double is simply a byproduct of the writing process. That is to say, the process of transcription is itself a kind of doubling. In addition, the double lies in the reader's own susceptibility for misrecognition. This misrecognition is borne in two ways. First, the "cunning strategies" through which the double is produced remain hidden (*RPF* 88). Second, Romantic literature began introducing featureless characters. As ideal surrogates for their readers, such characters invited an increasingly identificatory mode of reading. The machinic or cinematic era begins in earnest, in contrast, when the double is no longer exclusively the product of either the writer's strategies or the reader's imagination. The double is instead produced as an actual thing with an ontological status. As opposed to literature, Kittler considers cinema a storage medium literally preserving everything that crosses its path. Again, as with psychoanalysis and other modern discourses such as criminology, film is understood as actually taking possession of and controlling bodies. In literature the double emerges through the liminal space 'between lines'. Cinema, in contrast, frames the double squarely within its visual field and thus controls its entire existence. What complicates matters still further is that psychoanalysis and cinema obscure and confuse their parallel treatment of the double. Psychoanalysis not only "obstructs any understanding of the technical" apparatus (in favor of its psychic counterpart), but "verifies a poetry that the film has just superceded" (*RPF* 95). In his account, then, psychoanalysis and cinema jointly mitigate the uncanny impact of the

double while also confounding, rather than clarifying, new convergences between the psychical and the technical within the twentieth century.

In effect, the double illustrates a decisive shift in historical and technological paradigms or, what Kittler terms, discourse networks. While Kittler has legitimate reasons for drawing this particular dividing line, his account of cinema comes across as especially peculiar. By fundamentally divorcing the medium from 'writing', he discards what has been an important association for theorists ranging from Vachel Lindsay and Sergei Eisenstein to Christian Metz, Thierry Kuntzel, and Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier. What's more, while cinema may have rendered doubles literal in a way that literature had not, it was not without its own discursive and representational fissures likewise capable of eliciting the uncanny. In tracking Jacques Derrida's various engagements with the double, I use the remainder of this section to demonstrate the extent to which writing permeates and informs cinema. For this very reason, I argue that traces of the double linger both within cinema's most basic formation as a visual medium and within its strategies as a narrative discourse. In contrast to Kittler then, I show that cinematic representations of the double, even when deployed by Hollywood in the most circumscribed and tractable way, still retain a degree of the uncanny potential once manifest in their literary forebears.

In "The Double Session" Derrida considers the role of mimesis from Plato to the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé.[9] Throughout this account and in the other essays included in *Dissemination*, mimesis serves as an intersection between the anxieties Freud associated with the double and broader concerns about aesthetic representation. Derrida

---

[9] Derrida, Jacques. "The Double Session," *Dissemination* (Trans. Barbara Johnson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981). Hereafter abbreviated as *D*.

begins by commenting on Socrates' comparison between the soul and a book in the dialogue "Philebus." ascertaining that, "writing in general is interpreted as an imitation, a duplicate of the living voice or present *logos*" (*D* 185). Although poets and other purveyors of aesthetic endeavors are roundly condemned as imitators, mimesis is simultaneously drawn into more venerable associations. As a result, Plato's discourse suffers from conflicting pressures:

> he is obliged sometimes to condemn mimesis in itself as a process of duplication, whatever its model might be, and sometimes to disqualify mimesis only in function of the model that is 'imitated', the mimetic operation in itself remaining neutral, or even advisable. But in both cases, mimesis is lined up alongside truth: either it hinders the unveiling of the thing itself by substituting a copy or double for what is; or else it works in the service of truth through the double's resemblance. (*D* 187)

Like the double, mimesis concerns duplication, resemblance, and repetition. And as in Freud's account, mimesis oscillates between the good and bad implications of these different processes. The aggregate effect is that lines of demarcation begin to blur and hierarchical or binary relations are rendered structurally problematic.

For Derrida, the instability inherent in mimesis fuses it with writing more generally. Like writing, mimesis entails perpetual division and repetition, prompting an endless dispersal of meaning. And the result is a "strange mirror that reflects but also displaces and distorts" (*D* 191). In other words, mimesis inaugurates a second order of existence, one in which everything plays "out in the paradoxes of the supplementary double: the paradoxes of something that, added to the simple and the single, replaces and mimes them, both like and unlike, unlike because it is—in that it is—like, the same as and different from what it duplicates" (*D* 191). Despite the introduction of a second order or double logic, both writing and mimesis maintain a relationship with "the process of

truth" (*D* 193). Imitation, like any form of representation, bears a referential relationship to the thing itself. In fact, "having no outside, no other," the thing itself by strange turn "must be doubled in order to make its appearance, to appear (to itself), to produce (itself), to unveil (itself); in order to emerge from the crypt where it prefers itself; in order to shine in its *aletheia*" (*D* 193). In beginning to reverse the hierarchy between referent and representation, Derrida also questions the status of an object prior to its ability to signal its own existence. The relationship between the thing and its subsequent signifier no longer necessitate a referential logic. Instead, like the double, imitation inaugurates a state of undifferentiated exchange.

Mimesis, in short, becomes the manifest presence of the thing itself. It is not so much a substitution as it is simply tantamount or equal to the original. Derrida, in an earlier footnote, further elaborates the implications of this logic. Reasoning that, "Mimesis produces a thing's double," then, "no qualitative difference separates it from the model" (*D* n. 14, 186-187). If the double is identical to the original, it assimilates the good or bad value of the original and negates its own supplemental status. Although the negative connotations of the double are in this regard neutralized, it necessarily remains redundant insofar as it has a separate existence of its own. Derrida surmises that these incongruities underlie the inevitable ties between mimesis and truth. Truth, in other words, is characterized as a process of "unveiling of what lies concealed in oblivion," one that is particularly incumbent within the "relation of resemblance or equality between re-presentation and a thing…" (*D* 192-193). Truth is nothing in itself, but the process in which something else is brought into being.

Derrida devotes much of the remainder of "The Double Session" to Mallarmé's mobilization of mimesis itself as a "differential structure." The term that comes to embody this accomplishment, hymen, is anagrammatically embedded within a chain of terms—theater-idea-mime-drama—included in Mallarmé's unpublished plans for what he titled as *Book* (*D* 209). There are two features of this term warranting closer inspection. First, hymen has two meanings. It refers to both marriage and separation. In this sense the term serves Derrida as both a stand in for mimesis and as a repetition of its logic. The term's double meaning consequently produces confusion. Instead of delineating opposing categories the hymen acts as a medium between them: "The hymen 'takes place' in the 'inter-', in the spacing between desire and fulfillment…" (*D* 212). Derrida's affection for the inherent undecidability of such terms lies not only in his overarching commitment to *différance* but also in the fact that they are all inextricably grounded in writing as such. Moreover, it is precisely these terms that allows for a double inscription or dissymmetrical writing by the likes of Mallarmé that in turn spawns the double science Derrida called deconstruction.[10]

The introduction of mimesis, the second order of representation, does not institute a simple binary between it and what came before. Derrida stresses this first by treating the hymen as an interstitial medium and then by further complicating its status through a homonym between the French terms *entre* and *antre*. Whereas the first term signifies a connective link, the latter term signifies a cave, grotto, or abyss. The *antre* would seem to escape outward and away from the surrounding structures at the same time that it remains

[10] Derrida describes this notion of a double science in the preface to *Dissemination* (*D* 4). See also his related comments in the interview 'Positions' collected in *Positions* (Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), esp. 41.

folded within them (*D* 212-216).[11] This aspect of the hymen can also be seen in Derrida's treatment of the term *pharmakon* in the preceding essay. "Plato's Pharmacy," similar to its companion "The Double Session," begins with a marginal reference to Plato's *Phaedrus*. The common feature linking these different terms can be found in how Plato treats writing. "Plato thinks of writing, and tries to comprehend it, to dominate it, on the basis of opposition as such" (*D* 103). This means that it must always be external to what it opposes. For Derrida, the *pharmakon* is a term that cannot be governed by such oppositions even as it helps define them. As he puts it, if "one got to thinking that writing as a *pharmakon* cannot simply be assigned a site within what it situates, cannot be subsumed under concepts whose contours it draws, leaves only its ghost to a logic that can only seek to govern it insofar as logic arises from it…" (*D* 103). Whereas Plato attempts to assign clear boundaries between inside and outside, Derrida finds within terms such as *pharmakon* a resilient disruption of straightforward stratification. Or more to the point, separate registers can never be established as such. There must always be a medium that links between the two. As one such instance, the *pharmakon* constitutes "the medium in which opposites are opposed, the movement and the play that links them among themselves, reverses them or makes one side cross over into the other" (*D* 127). It is this medium that produces difference.[12]

---

[11] There are strong links between this aspect of the hymen and what Derrida refers to as invagination. See his "Living On: Border Lines," trans. James Hulbert, in *Deconstruction and Criticism* (Ed. Harold Bloom et. al. New York: Seabury Press, 1979) 75-176.

[12] In a closely related and generally useful essay, Alan Bass writes "Mallarmé, for Derrida, practices the *hymen*, sees literature as a practice of suspending decision, of articulating doubleness. In 'The Uncanny', Freud, perhaps despite himself, also comes to remark upon a literary practice or irreducible doubleness. Such practices leave one suspended *between* truth and nontruth, and 'between-ness' is what Derrida is emphasizing as concerns writing and the unconscious" (74). See "The Double Game: An Introduction" in *Taking Chances: Derrida, Psychoanalysis, and Literature* (Eds. Joseph H. Smith and William Kerrigan. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984). For related discussion, see

The notion of play provides an additional occasion for exploring the relationship between mimesis and truth. As has been repeatedly the case with the double, what's apparent in Derrida's discussion is that a secondary register both enables its antecedent and endangers it. Writing or any other secondary register threatens to supplant its forerunner both by placing it under erasure and by revealing that without its counterpart the primary register amounts to nothing. Play like writing has no essence. It merely introduces "difference as the condition of essence, opening up the possibility of the double, the copy, the imitation, the simulacrum…" (*D* 157). As he pointed out in "The Double Session," Derrida concludes "Plato's Pharmacy" by emphasizing that if truth is the origin of value, then truth simply must exist without any ontological status:

> The disappearance of truth as presence, the withdrawal of the present origin of presence, is the condition of all (manifestation of) truth. Nontruth is the truth. Nonpresence is presence. *Différance*, the disappearance of any originary presence, is at once the condition of possibility and the condition of impossibility of truth…. What is is not what it is, identical and identical to itself, unique, unless it adds to itself the possibility of being repeated as such. And its identity is hollowed out by that addition, withdraws itself in the supplement that presents it. (*D* 168)

In this regard, Derrida's interest in *pharmakon* and hymen shares much in common with what Freud discovers with the uncanny. Although the paradoxical terms utilized by Derrida initially evoke ambivalence or contradiction in some strict sense, he goes on to show that their undecidability is symptomatic of something much larger. In each case, these terms are symptomatic of a system that both necessitates and censors perpetual instability. Where Freud hints at this possibility, Derrida makes it the central feature in his analysis of Western thought.

---

Walter Brogan's "Plato's Pharmakon: Between Two Repetitions," *Derrida and Deconstruction* (Ed. Hugh J. Silverman. New York: Routledge, 1989).

Earlier I mentioned that there are two reasons for Derrida's introduction of the term hymen. The first is its double meaning. The second concerns the use of spacing in Mallarmé and more specifically the blank, whiteness of that spacing within his poetry. According to Derrida, the blank spaces serve as a hymen simultaneously uniting and differentiating, a kind of connective membrane that is transparent while rendering emptiness intelligible (*D* 252). Building on many of the key points developed earlier, he compares the empty spaces in Mallarmé to an abyss: "in the act of inscribing itself on itself indefinitely, mark upon mark, it multiplies and complicates its text, a text within a text, a margin in a mark, the one indefinitely repeated within the other" (*D* 265). Without necessarily engaging the poetry in question, it is possible to link "the womblike matrix of whiteness" that Derrida locates in Mallarmé with a similar trope marginally developed in "Plato's Pharmacy."

The second section of that essay is devoted to "The Father of Logos." Through Plato's mythical account of the origin of writing, Derrida introduces a new conceptual series that links father with God and king. All three represent the origin of value. Shortly thereafter Derrida adds the sun to this chain of terms. What this last figure makes clear is that the origin of value is only indirectly accessible: "it is no more possible to look them [the father or God] in the face than to stare at the sun" (*D* 82). That the son here serves as an analogon rendering the father-sun intelligible underscores what I have already discussed as the main thrust of these two essays. Derrida returns to this formulation again at the end of "Plato's Pharmacy," "If truth is the presence of the *eidos* [the thing itself], it must always, on pain of mortal blinding by the sun's fires, come to terms with relation, nonpresence, and thus nontruth" (*D* 166). Adding further, "The absolute invisibility of

the origin of the visible, of the good-sun-father-capital, the unattainment of presence or beingness in any form […] gives rise to a structure of replacements such that all presences will be supplements substituted for the absent origin, and all differences, with the system of presence, will be the irreducible effect of what remains..." (*D* 167). Although oblique in this set of references, Derrida elsewhere explicitly addresses the sun as it relates to whiteness.[13] As in the constellation developed in association with Mallarmé, the sun here shares the logic of the hymen, however, the blankness of spacing has given way to the blindness of light. Within both are strong overtones that can be traced back to the role of castration in Freud.[14]

In "Economimesis," Derrida continues his engagement with mimesis though he changes his point of reference from Plato to Kant's Third Critique on aesthetic judgment.[15] Because he is more explicitly concerned with aesthetics here, a few comments will help the transition as I shift from the main issues developed in

---

[13] See Jacques Derrida, "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy" in *Margins of Philosophy* (Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

[14] These two trajectories come together in Akira Lippit's brilliant development of what he terms 'avisuality'. In the second chapter of *Atomic Light (Shadow Optics)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), he develops this concept in relation to the dream about Irma included in Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). With regard to the white patch that Freud, in the dream, discovers in Irma's throat, Lippit writes: "Freud's X-ray vision locates another opening on Irma's body: a secret orifice hidden beneath her dress, an infiltration, a secret passage to Irma's interiority. It requires a form of perception not yet known, the ability to see through opaque objects and into the body's depths" (37). In Jacques Lacan's analysis of the same dream, the white patch leads "to the apparition of the terrifying anxiety-provoking image, to this real Medusa's head, to the revelation of this something which properly speaking is unnameable, the back of this throat, the complex, unlocatable form, which also makes it into the primitive object par excellence, the abyss of the feminine organ from which all life emerges, this gulf of the mouth, in which everything is swallowed up, and no less the image of death in which everything comes to its end…" (164). See "The Dream of Irma's Injection," in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-1955* (Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Sylvana Tomaselli. New York: Norton, 1988) 146-171.

[15] Derrida, Jacques. "Economimesis," trans. R. Klein. *Diacritics* vol. 11, no. 2 (Summer 1981): 3-25. Hereafter abbreviated as *E*.

*Dissemination* back to film more specifically. Derrida ends "Economimesis" by positing disgust as the absolute other in Kant's system. Disgust, in this formulation, parallels the abjection implicit in Derrida's account of the hymen. However, in contrast to the earlier term, disgust is cast more definitively as a negative category. Despite this more rigid classification, disgust remains determined by the beautiful (*E* 25). It is included in the very system that seems to necessarily exclude it. As a corollary, Derrida disassembles the dichotomy between art and nature or *tekhnè* and *physis*. Art, as he puts it, is nature's relation to itself, further clarifying that, "Mimesis here is not the representation of one thing by another, the relation of resemblance or of identification between two beings, the reproduction of a product of nature by a product of art. It is not the relation of two products but of two productions" (*E* 9). Mimesis, in other words, is not the replication of the thing itself, but the replication of the process that produced the thing. And it is in this regard that, "mimesis effaces the opposition between nature and art" (*E* 9). As with the double and mimesis more generally, what concerns Derrida about the aesthetic realm is the passage that it entails between a "product" and "the producing act" (*E* 7). In tracking the fundamental breakdowns that inhere both in mimesis and beauty Derrida lays the groundwork for examining how similar structural inconsistencies operate within the cinematic image.

That Derrida essentially suggests art *is* nature should recall André Bazin's infamous assertion that the image *is* the object. And, indeed, it is the case that evidence of the double is more forcefully found within the work of realist film theorists than in strict accounts of the doppelgänger. In considering the cinematic image, André Bazin accounts for both the nature of the medium as a form of representation and the principles and

practices for which it is best suited as an aesthetic enterprise. On both counts Bazin privileges the relationship between cinema and reality. Though the standard interpretation understands this relationship as one of transparent fidelity, it will quickly be apparent that without explicitly using either mimesis or the double what Bazin means by this relationship closely follows their logic. By emphasizing this aspect of Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer, I further establish that the uncanny is not only present throughout the history of film theory but ingrained in the cinematic medium itself.

It is apropos to begin with "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" especially considering the recent analysis demonstrating the common ground between Bazin and Derrida.[16] Bazin begins that essay by discussing the nature of plastic arts by which he primarily means painting and sculpture. One reason why it is easy to understand the similarities between aesthetics and the double is that Bazin begins by suggesting that the main purpose of the plastic arts is to serve as a defense against time, "the preservation of life by a representation of life" (*WC1* 10). Bazin, however, quickly shifts between a number of different positions. In the terse history of painting that follows it is suggested that there is a split between the need to express 'spiritual reality' in its essence and the obsession with likeness or "the duplication of the world" (*WC1* 11-12). With the birth of perspective, painting becomes increasingly beholden to the latter, the capacity for illusory resemblance. It is precisely because Bazin so ardently believes cinema to be the liberating force freeing aesthetics from this 'resemblance complex' that has raised the ire of

---

[16] Schwartz, Louis-Georges. "Deconstruction Avant La Lettre: Jacques Derrida before André Bazin," *Opening Bazing* (Eds. Dudley Andrew and Herve Joubert-Laurencin. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Bazin's essay is collected in *What is Cinema? Volume 1* (Ed. and trans. Hugh Gray. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967). Hereafter abbreviated as *WC1*. See also *What is Cinema? Volume 2* (Ed. and trans. Hugh Gray. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971). Hereafter abbreviated as *WC2*.

subsequent film scholars. "For the first time," he writes, "between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a nonliving agent. For the first time an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man" (*WC1* 13). This of course points to a crucial difference with Derrida's position. Where Bazin insists on the specificity of cinematic technology as distinguished from other forms of aesthetic representation, Derrida does not discriminate except to the extent that he views writing as exemplary.[17] However, at the end of the passage just quoted Bazin expands his logic: "Photography affects us like a phenomenon in nature, like a flower or a snowflake whose vegetable or earthly origins are an inseparable part of their beauty" (*WC1* 13). Bazin began the essay by allowing aesthetics and psychology to intermingle. Here he explicitly allows photographic representation to mingle between a referential relationship and a system of substitution no longer dominated by mere resemblance. And it is in the way that he confounds such dynamics that it is possible to more directly return to matters already addressed by Derrida.

The confusion that follows in Bazin between reference and substitution is a categorical feature of the double. As Daniel Morgan has recently pointed out, the referential logic in Bazin leads to a semiotic interpretation of the photographic image as

---

[17] In a brief comparison of painting and writing, Derrida does say that the latter "more seriously denatures what it claims to imitate. It does not even substitute an image for its model. It inscribes in the space of silence and in the silence of space the living time of voice. It displaces its model, provides no image of it, violently wrests out of its element the animate interiority of speech. In so doing, writing estranges itself immensely from the truth of the thing itself, from the truth of speech, from the truth that is open to speech" (*D* 137). At the beginning of this section I discussed various theorists who have considered cinema to be a literal form of writing. The focus of those theorists tended to be on editing or syntactical relations rather than the image itself. Although Derrida implies that the use of images deters from the purpose of writing, it will be possible to read Bazin as granting cinema the same power to denature what it claims to imitate. In this view, cinema's status as writing has nothing to do with conforming to linguistic or semiotic principles, but with the relationship it has with speech or, more generally, *logos* and presence.

an idexical sign.[18] Morgan then usefully illustrates the difficulty of sustaining this interpretation especially at the point cited above where Bazin calls photography a natural phenomenon. Although Bazin draws on a litany of comparisons including the death mask and the footprint which technically qualify as indexical in Pierce's original sense, he never employs these examples in a consistent or systematic way.[19] This allows for the full range of what might be meant by referential to come to the surface. The mummified corpse, for instance, is the object itself albeit in a radically different state. As an index, then, it refers to the individual prior to death in the same way that a relic, souvenir, or memento serves as a token of remembrance. It points, in other words, to the past. The footprint or death mask, on the other hand, is a kind of impression or transcription of the thing itself. These forms of likeness qualify as an index insofar as they preserve (in the form of a mirror reflection) the contiguity that they once had with the thing itself. These signs also point to past, but instead of the thing itself it is the footprint and death mask that serves as an abstraction standing in for what is now absent. In both cases, the referential logic is not necessarily limited to indexicality, but can be applied to representation in the larger sense that to represent means to stand for or in place of something else. Bazin adds yet another variation immediately following the example of

---

[18] Morgan, Daniel. "Rethinking Bazin: Ontology and Realist Aesthetics." *Critical Inquiry* 32 (Spring 2006): 443-481. For another revised account of Bazin, see Philip Rosen's "Subject, Ontology, and Historicity in Bazin" in *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001). Mary Ann Doane offers a much broader engagement with the concept of indexicality in *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, The Archive* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), esp. 92-102. For another recent attempt to consider Bazin and Derrida together, see Seung-Hoon Jeong and Dudley Andrew, "Grizzly ghost: Herzog, Bazin and the cinematic animal," *Screen* 48.1 (Spring 2008): 1-12.

[19] See Charles Sanders Peirce, "Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs" in *The Philosophy of Peirce: Selected Writings* (Ed. Justus Buchler. New York: Routledge, 2000). The application of Peirce to cinema was primarily inaugurated by Peter Wollen's *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, Expanded Edition (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972) esp. 116-130.

the mummified corpse when he mentions the clay effigies found in prehistoric caves that were supposedly designed to ensure a successful hunt (*WC1* 10). Here the model is an index in anticipation and thus reverses the causal order that is so central in the two previous examples. This reversal sets up the latter acknowledgement that "we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually re-presented… Photography enjoys a certain advantage in virtue of this transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction" (*WC1* 13-14). If reality is transferred from the model to its reproduction, the relationship retains a certain referential quality. But because it is no longer subordinate to the traditional confines of causality and chronology, referentiality gives way just as it did in Derrida's account of mimesis to a relational system of more or less impartial substitution and exchange. The result is that the cinematic image is not based on mere approximation, but shares in the process of becoming normally reserved for natural phenomena. It produces the image in the very same way that nature produces flowers and snowflakes.

Because they share in the same process of becoming, the ontological distinction between the model and the image begins to diminish. Bazin further emphasizes this disintegration through different terminological means. Right away he associates the realism facilitated by the cinematic image with the term appearance. On the one hand, appearance is easily associated with deception. On the other hand, insofar as appearance discloses without necessarily being concrete or material, the term can be aligned with essence. The term consequently fluctuates between diametric opposites: an illusory verisimilitude on the one side and presence or *logos* on the other. The ambiguity of this term is likewise evident at the end of the 'Ontology' essay when Bazin in reference to the

surrealists describes photography as "an image that is a reality of nature, namely, an hallucination that is also a fact" (*WC1* 16). This formulation resurfaces again as Bazin describes *The Red Balloon* in "The Virtues and Limitations of Montage." Although the lifelike movements of the balloon in that film are obviously created through subterfuge, the illusion nevertheless "is created here, as in conjuring, out of reality itself" (*WC1* 45). Bazin goes on to add that in such instances, "All that matters is that the spectator can say at one and the same time that the basic material of the film is authentic while the film is also truly cinema. So the screen reflects the ebb and flow of our imagination which feeds on a reality for which it plans to substitute. That is to say, [this type of] tale is born of an experience that the imagination transcends" (*WC1* 48).[20] The film must first contain some documentary value and adhere to cinema's underlining principles. At the same time, imagination and reality are not mutually exclusive especially insofar as the former results from the experience of the latter. Such imaginary undertakings are particularly adept in soliciting belief and thus remain within the purview of cinema's aesthetic objective. What's more, this oscillation illustrates why Bazin links appearance with realism. Appearance literally means to render something visible, to bring it into view. Cinema has the distinct ability to bring both internal (i.e. hallucination or imagination) and external realities into view. Realism for Bazin is confined to neither one or the other. Instead, it is a synthesis of both.

The full force of Bazin's understanding becomes clearer as he develops his thoughts on neorealism and especially in his essay devoted to Federico Fellini's *Cabiria*. In a section titled "A Realism of Appearances," he writes that in cinematic realism "The

---

[20] For a similar analysis, see the section 'Fantasy' (82-92) in Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997). Hereafter abbreviated as *TF*.

relation between meaning and appearance [has] been in a sense inverted, appearance is always presented as a unique discovery, an almost documentary revelation that retains its full force of vividness and detail. Whence the director's art lies in the skill with which he compels the event to reveal its meaning—or at least the meaning he lends it—without removing any of its ambiguity" (*WC2* 87). Between the "Ontology" essay and his considerations of neorealism Bazin acknowledges the degree to which realism is rooted in more than the nature of the cinematic image. Technical and narrative conventions are also taken into account.[21] Still he claims, and here neorealism is exemplary, that cinema is more concerned with the representation of reality than with dramatic imperatives. In this particular formulation appearance is associated with a kind of brute or surface reality. Meaning, on the contrary, must be elicited or exposed through selection and interpretation. In suggesting that an inversion occurs, Bazin implies that meaning is normally concrete while appearance is contrived. The reality that concerns cinema at the very least involves not only a delicate balance between appearance and meaning, but more specifically a relationship in which one determines or passes through the other.

Bazin's position with regard to neorealism demonstrates his understanding of the need for new practices in order to sustain the efficacy of cinematic realism. What Bazin

---

[21] Morgan addresses Bazin's preference for certain cinematic styles by drawing a distinction between 'direct realism' and 'perceptual or psychological' realism. The latter, he says, provides a more compelling lens because it is based on experience rather than visual resemblance (456). The emphasis on the latter is particularly curious considering that psychological realism is frequently associated with what we recognize as classical Hollywood style. And because Bazin was far more critical of this style of editing—more critical than he ever was of Eisenstein—than is typically acknowledged. In "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema," he writes that by 1938 "there was an almost universal standard pattern of editing" best described as 'analytic' and 'dramatic'. Hollywood's invisible editing can be further identified in the following way: "The purpose and the effects of the cutting are exclusively dramatic or psychological" (*WC1* 31-32). In addition to Bazin's broader calls for a departure from this universal style, he also allows for what might be thought of as poetic realism. In this regard, see Bazin's *Jean Renoir* (Ed. François Truffaut. Trans. W. W. Halsey and William H. Simon. New York: Da Capo Press, 1973), esp. 84-85.

extols about neorealism is in effect the nascent principles of modern cinema. In regard to the use of ellipsis, he writes: "The technique of Rossellini undoubtedly maintains an intelligible succession of events, but these do not mesh like a chain with the sprockets of a wheel. The mind has to leap from one event to the other as one leaps from stone to stone in crossing a river. It may happen that one's foot hesitates between two rocks, or that one misses one's footing and slips. The mind does likewise" (*WC2* 35). Again in the essay on Fellini, Bazin comments on the move toward more open narratives:

> it is because, in the absence of traditional dramatic causality, the incidents in his films develop effects of analogy and echo. Fellini's hero never reaches the final crisis by a progressive dramatic linking but because the circumstances somehow or other affect him, build up inside him like the vibrant energy in a resonating body. He does not develop; he is transformed; overturning finally like an iceberg whose center of buoyancy has shifted unseen. (*WC2* 90-91)

The benefits of these innovations should recall what Bazin had already stated in the 'Ontology' essay. Cinema, he claims, has the power to lay bare reality. As has been duly noted, Bazin means something rather unique by laying bare: "Only the impassive lens, stripping its object of all those ways of seeing it, those piled-up preconceptions, that spiritual dust and grime with which my eyes have covered it, is able to present it in all its virginal purity to my attention and consequently to my love. By the power of photography, the natural image of a world that we neither know nor can see, nature at last does more than imitate art: she imitates the artist" (*WC1* 15). A clearer point of intersection is difficult to imagine. Derrida writes of the "analogy between the free productivity of nature and the free productivity of genius, between God and the poet," or in other words between nature and art (*E* 13). Though the effect in Bazin is quite different, it shares Derrida's fundamental thrust. In the final sentence of the passage, the

photographic image is already on the side of nature. Insofar as nature essentially mimics the artist, *logos* relinquishes any claim to ontological priority.

Just as Bazin argues that cinema strips away the obstructions that cloud our vision, Siegfried Kracauer observes that, "Film renders what we did not, or perhaps even could not, see before its advent. It effectively assists us in discovering the material world with its psychophysical correspondences. We literally redeem this world from its dormant state, its state of virtual nonexistence, by endeavoring to experience it through the camera" (*TF* 300). Kracauer elaborates his position through two related examples that are also germane to the current discussion. First, in the introduction to *Theory of Film* he draws on a passage from Proust (*TF* 14). The author compares an unfamiliar encounter with his grandmother to the way in which one experiences a photograph. Photography, for Kracauer, according to this example introduces an alienating apparatus, a lens capable of piercing through the habitual tint that blinds us to the world we in fact inhabit. As he elsewhere explains, the camera both records and reveals. It reveals precisely because we don't have direct access to the brute facts that it records. As Miriam Hansen states in her introduction to the most recent edition of Kracauer's text, the photograph "is disturbing because it alienates both object and beholder, because it ruptures the web of intimacy, memory, and interpretation" (*TF* xxvi). Similar to Bazin's own use of appearance, Kracauer shifts between film's affinity for the visible world and physical or material reality. As in the alternation between record and reveal, what the camera renders is a combination of visible and invisible, concrete and intangible. The effect of this equivocation is that cinema seriously undermines the possibility of ontological priority. In its capacity to lay bare and reveal, the cinematic image cannot be considered a material

effect or subsidiary of reality but rather coterminous with it. In a closely related discussion, Peter Brunette and David Wills argue that the nature of cinematic resemblance places it not on the side of *logos* but of *différance*.[22] They add in regard to cinema's mimetic or analogical status, any representation "whose claim to privilege relies on the idea of its being a faithful copy is caught" in a bind whereby the image cannot conceal the difference it entails (69). The ultimate effect "is to undermine the integrity of [the] original and so to throw off the whole basis of comparison." This in turn leads one "to conceive of the original as composed of an interminable series of minute differences or deferrals" and hence conclude that "the original reality is not the intact notion that it was thought to be…" (73). According to Brunette and Wills, cinema even in its realist conception inevitably opens the possibility of deconstruction.

The second relevant example illustrating Kracauer's position does not arrive until late in the epilogue. He refers to the mythical account in which Athena warns Perseus to never look at the face of Medusa "but only at its mirror reflection in the polished shield she has given him" (*TF* 305). Kracauer continues his analysis:

> The moral of the myth is, of course, that we do not, and cannot, see actual horrors because they paralyze us with blinding fear; and that we shall know what they look like only by watching images of them which reproduce their true appearance. These images have nothing in common with the artist's imaginative rendering of an unseen dread but are in the nature of mirror reflections. Now of all the existing media the cinema alone holds up a mirror to nature. (*TF* 305)

In addition to reiterating the revelatory power of the image, this passage more specifically recalls the association in "Plato's Pharmacy" between sun and father. Both are considered origins of value that cannot be directly addressed because of their blinding power. They

---

[22] Brunette, Peter and David Wills. *Screen/Play: Derrida and Film Theory*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989.

instead must communicate through circuitous means not entirely unlike the polished shield given to Perseus. Derrida returns to the question of the father later in the essay. He asks, "What is the father?" and responds simply that in Plato's account, "The father is" (*D* 146). In contrast, the son or any secondary means of representation cannot answer this question. Being is reserved strictly for the father, the origin of value. The son instead writes and in doing so negates the father, putting him under erasure. As Derrida might have put it, writing is not the father. It is a negation. The problem is that this formulation puts the verb 'to be' in closer proximity to writing than Plato can allow. For Kracauer, when the cinematic image places unseen dread under erasure it cannot be considered a successful or complete negation. It is instead the condition of possibility. Indirection is therefore not detrimental, but simply necessary. We depend "on it for the reflection of happenings which would petrify us were we to encounter them in real life" (*TF* 305). We are allowed to decapitate what would otherwise be gravely debilitating.[23] Although Kracauer implies a greater degree of distinction between the thing and its representation, he does so while claiming that cinema's value "lay in its potential to redirect the spectator's attention to the texture of life which had been lost beneath the abstract discourses which regulate experience."[24] In other words, cinema removes us from the

---

[23] The decapitation of Medusa is followed by a discussion of dismemberment in Georges Franju's *Le Sang des Betes* (*Blood of the Beasts*, 1949). For an interesting parallel, consider Kracauer's analysis of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. The film leads him to recall Joseph Freeman's novel, *Never Call Retreat*. He then writes, "It's hero, a Viennese professor of history, tells of his life in a German concentration camp where, after being tortured, he is thrown into a cell: 'Lying alone in that cell, [he] thought of Dr. Caligari; then, without transition, of the Emperor Valentinian, master of the Roman world, who took great delight in imposing the death sentence for slight or imaginary offenses. This Caesar's favorite expressions were: 'Strike off his head!'—'Burn him alive!'—'Let him be beaten with clubs till he expires!'…" (72). *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1947).

[24] Aitken, Ian. "The Redemption of Physical Reality: Theories of Realism in Grierson, Kracauer, Bazin, and Lukács," *European Film Theory and Cinema: A Critical Introduction* (Bloomington:

alienating conditions of capitalist society and allows for the possibility of once again reclaiming history.

Throughout "Plato's Pharmacy" Derrida compares the divide between speech and writing with the line that separates life and death. If *logos* is on the side of the living, writing exists as kind of "a living-dead, a reprieved corpse, a deferred life, a semblance of breath" (*D* 143). For Freud, the double is likewise associated with death. In the effort to ensure immortality, the double serves not only as an uncanny harbinger of death but also as a vestige an earlier state in which the division between life and death had no currency. These affiliations continue as Bazin associates the plastic arts with similar company, characterizing aesthetic representation as a mummy complex or, rather, a means of embalming the dead. Following Bazin's account I am suggesting, then, that cinematic technologies are fundamentally related to the double. Or, more concisely, the cinematic image is itself always double. As such, the cinematic image, like mimesis in particular and writing more generally in Derrida's account, exists as a second order of being that simultaneously dissolves the partition and incumbent hierarchy that divides signification from its source of meaning. As Bazin and Kracauer make clear, the cinematic image is suited for this task insofar as it hinges on the passage between appearance and imagination, physical reality and subjective belief. Both theorists go on to show that the doubling inherent within the technology is necessarily repeated in the various discursive measures—measures that arise precisely in order to articulate the specificity of the cinematic image. Bazin, like Derrida with regard to writing, was thus drawn to the practitioners most adept at redoubling the double logic of cinema. In the following

---

Indiana University Press, 2001): 170. Aitken's efforts are further developed in his subsequent book *Realist Film Theory and Cinema: The nineteenth-century Lukácsian and intuitionist realist traditions* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006).

section I turn to the appearance of doubles within contemporary Hollywood. In analyzing a series of examples, I show that even as Hollywood largely contains its doubles these figures retain some trace of the double logic that underlies all forms of mimesis and the cinematic image in particular.

## Cinema: Alternate Realities and Twin Illusions

In Hollywood, the double surfaces in numerous and often times indirect ways. Actors, for example, play two or more roles in the same film, films are presented within films, and sequels or remakes seemingly replicate their predecessors. I begin, however, with the predilection within contemporary Hollywood for alternate realities and competing or parallel universes. Films such as *MIB* (1997) and the *Harry Potter* franchise involve incommensurate worlds that briefly or tangentially intersect (human with alien in the former, witches and wizards with muggles in the latter). *The Matrix* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999), more specifically, posits two diametrically opposed registers (the real world and the matrix). Unlike the other films, *The Matrix* uses this dichotomy to more explicitly question the reality it depicts. While the film uses this dichotomy to structure and propel its narrative, it also belies some of the same contradictions that are a facet of cinema's inherent double logic.

At its core, *The Matrix* is organized around the split between the real world and the matrix, an interactive neural simulation through which machines control humans and exploit them as a source of energy. The coexistence of two realities initially creates confusion, which is used to build suspense and push the narrative forward. Hints are provided that something is askew in what might otherwise pass as a realistic diegesis, but

full explanations are not forthcoming. Such hints are apparent both in the gravity defying maneuvers displayed by Trinity (Carrie-Anne Moss) in the film's opening skirmish and as Thomas Anderson (Keanu Reeves) is subject to a surreal interrogation. As the narrative quickly reveals Anderson lives a double life—a software engineer by day, an illicit hacker known as Neo by night—but it remains unclear if or how his online existence relates to these unexplainable incidents. All is finally told when Neo is finally brought to Morpheous (Laurence Fishburne). What appears to be reality, he explains, is in fact an elaborate simulation.

Once Neo is extracted from the matrix further explanations ensue. He joins Morpheous and his cell of enemy combatants aboard the austere Nebuchadnezzar hovering in the subterranean sewer systems of what used to be major cities. Atrophied muscles, ragged attire, and now defunct input jacks are all reminders that the film ascribes ontological priority to the real. Attempts to undermine reality's simulated counterpart, however, are compromised by the fact that Neo and his new friends must repeatedly reenter the matrix in order to stage their daring battles. Indeed, as we learn during Neo's training, he must surpass the combat skills that have been directly uploaded into his cerebral cortex and learn what computer-generated rules he can manipulate or in some cases even break. Morpheous insists that it is his ability to think beyond the computer's logic that will enable him to defeat the matrix. Just as we are lead to believe that the insurgents' only course of action lies within the matrix (not outside of it), Neo's human capacity is ironically only effective within the computer itself.

In effect, the film's insistence on the priority of the real over simulation betrays the simple fact that both are part of the same film and thereby share the same

representational basis. By introducing this double logic *The Matrix* is subsequently forced to belabor the exact relationship of the two registers. The difficulty of this endeavor is evident first in the way the film initially defers explanation and then in the clumsy way it depicts transitions between real world and matrix. Several of these are marked by some of the its most elaborate, yet least memorable, special effects. As Neo is being extracted from the matrix, for instance, the camera follows the metallic substance that has slowly engulfed him as it gushes into his mouth and finally cascades downward into his esophagus. The camera moves rapidly in conjunction with a resounding metallic scream that amplifies the tension that has been accelerating throughout the scene. The shot dissolves to black and then cuts to a POV shot inside the gelatinous pod that holds Neo's body in the real world. Simply put, the film utilizes visual excess in order to conceal or disguise a diegetic explanation for the traffic between its two registers.

Although certain transitions are handled with more conventional tactics, they are equally skillful in obscuring the exact nature of the exchange. For example, when Neo is first inserted into the construct – a simulation used by Morpheous and company to prepare for the matrix – the film simply uses framing to mask the transition. Neo is strapped into a chair-like apparatus as Morpheous inserts a spiked prong into the back of his head. Next there is a split-second long shot of Neo's body clench violently and then a cut-in to his face flinching in a similar manner. After a brief shot of Morpheous attending to Neo, the film returns to the same tightly framed close-up of his face. This time, however, the camera proceeds to pull back to reveal Neo standing upright amid a completely white background. The film has an equally simple solution when the group enters the matrix in order to visit the oracle. The sequence begins with an overhead shot

circling in a clockwise direction in which we first see the operator Tank (Marcus Chong) and then Trinity seated in one of the reclining consoles. After passing by Trinity the film cuts to a medium close-up of a ringing phone in an empty room with the camera continuing in the same direction. The film then alternates between the two continuously moving shots cut to the beat of a prominently featured techno rhythm. The sequence ends when the shot of the phone completes its circle revealing the seven members of the ship now posing at one end of the room outfitted in stylish leather couture. It is only after the film has gone to these great lengths that it can use a straight cut as it does with Neo's last training program or when Cypher (Joe Pantoliano) covertly meets with agents.

Another awkward negotiation is manifest in terms of appearances. For instance, characters look the same, if for no other reason than they are played by the same actors, both in the matrix and the real world. In Neo's initial visit to the construct Morpheous explains this as "residual self-image" or "the mental projection of your digital self." The idea is that Neo's appearance in the construct is anchored in his actual appearance in the real world. This makes little sense considering that prior to escaping the matrix he had no perceptual awareness of his actual appearance. The film acknowledges another continuity between the two registers when Neo learns after failing the jump program that even if the matrix is not real it can have real, namely fatal, effects. The mind makes bodily harm sustained in the matrix real and if the mind believes it has suffered a fatal injury then the body has no choice but to follow. It would seem that since it really is a case of mind over matter in the matrix that these resistance fighters might conjure enough belief so as to easily overcome their computer adversaries. But this poses another kind of peril. If Neo and his cohorts embrace their simulated existence too emphatically they threaten to

abandon the very materiality that is needed in order to privilege reality over its simulated other. And so the anchor of flesh that lays helplessly aboard the Neb returns with a narrative vengeance.

The crew's double existence is further reiterated as Cypher betrays his comrades. He explains to Trinity that while he simply pulls the plug she has to watch one of her friends die. The matrix according to his logic is more real both because while in it they experience the same emotional and psychological impact they would outside of it while their limp, comatose bodies lying already lifeless back in the real world are utterly indifferent. The specter of their material being comes to its final crisis when Neo dies at the hand of agent Smith (Hugo Weaving). Contrary to all prior logical principles, Neo is revived by the physical stimulus of Trinity's kiss. This transgression is followed immediately by its corollary within the matrix—Neo assumes the transcendent powers reserved for the One. Without this material reminder, Neo's ascension might have threatened to diverge too seamlessly from the ontological order to which the film necessarily assigns precedence. Even so, as the final scene illustrates, Neo's transcendent abilities have failed to topple the matrix in one fell swoop. In fact, it is extremely unclear as to how and where the resistance will continue its battle with the matrix. Neo's final message has overtones of a direct address, in effect, shifting the burden from those inhabiting to matrix to the audience members sitting in the theater. For all the energy the film devotes to privileging the real over the simulated dream world of the matrix, it is fundamentally unable to sustain this hierarchy. The same doubling tactics that are utilized as part of the film's own narrative structure tacitly acknowledge the underlying double logic of the cinematic image and its discursive organization. Though the contradictions

that arise in terms of the film's troubled transitions do little to disrupt its overall coherence, they serve as symptomatic reminders that parallel realities are especially liable to recall cinema's double logic.

*Pleasantville* (Gary Ross, 1998) is another film organized around parallel realms. Although more sanguine in its overall tone, the dichotomy the film draws is nonetheless noteworthy. This film has more in common with the Oz and Wonderland to which *The Matrix* makes reference insofar as 'Pleasantville' is a fictional refuge necessarily removed from the world we recognize as our own. Like both *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and *Alice in Wonderland* (1951) before it, this film is decidedly whimsical in its premise and sometimes convoluted to the point of exasperation in the logic it follows. In the film, 'Pleasantville' refers to a television program in the vein of 'Father Knows Best'. The wholesome values of the show make for a black and white utopia that stands in stark contrast to the grim teenage lives of David (Tobey Maguire) and his twin sister Jen (Reese Witherspoon). Indeed, 'Pleasantville' is idealized not because it is a television fantasy but because it represents a simpler and more benevolent time. Whereas *The Matrix* draws parallel realities precisely in order to consider the interaction between them, *Pleasantville* allows for a fantasy escape only to have the logic of one world intrude upon the other. In this case, the division that separates the world of 'Pleasantville' from its modern day counterpart is re-inscribed within the former so as to both reveal the limitations of this fantasy retreat while facilitating the most illusory kinds of transformations.

At the outset, the film stresses that the twins David and Jen are very different. It is not surprising then that when they are magically inserted into the world of the 1950s TV

show, assuming the place of the fictional Parker family's two children Bud and Mary Sue, they respond in diametrically opposite ways. As a huge fan of the program, David shows immediate enthusiasm recognizing every character as well as plot lines from specific episodes. Despite her annoyance, Jen quickly decides to make the most of the opportunity. Without further ado she introduces the town to the joys of sex, initiating first her new admirer Skip Martin (Paul Walker) and then explaining to her TV mother Betty (Joan Allen) that there are ways of offsetting her husband's neglect. David at first tries to preserve the moral sanctity of the idyllic town, but his efforts are in vain. Pleasantville's sexual foray is soon accompanied by rock and roll and then modern art. The two interlopers go on to discover that the town is without basic resources such as books and that its inhabitants have never encountered either fire or rain. As Pleasantville begins transforming before their very eyes, the town slowly sheds its naïve black and white and blossoms into full color.

The film subsequently draws an extremely problematic parallel between those who have become colorized and the treatment of African-Americans in US history.[25] Rather than examine the implications of this allusion or the male sexists who campaign on behalf of the town's status quo, *Pleasantville* instead benignly suggests that color is simply inside everyone. Thus to be 'colored' is to express one's individuality, one's emotional or creative vitality. The film tries to complicate matters somewhat by suggesting that this coming-of-age process differs for everybody, with David and Jen's divergent paths being of course the most conspicuous. It is not sex that adds color to Jen, but her commitment to knowledge. For David, it is neither sex nor knowledge that does

---

[25] See chapter three in Krin Gabbard's *Black Magic: White Hollywood and African American Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

the trick but his willingness to express love for his mother. The film may be entirely unexceptional in its various inconsistencies and confused reversals. However, it is somewhat unusual in the way that it refuses to reaffirm one realm over and against the other. That is to say, in the end David returns to his present day suburban home while Jen remains in Pleasantville in order to pursue a college education. This indecision is even more pronounced in the final scene where Betty sits next to her husband George (William H. Macy). The camera then pans right to a medium close-up of Betty alone before panning back to reveal Bill (Jeff Daniels) the local soda jerk. At first the film suggests that the Parkers have tentatively reconciled but then immediately reverses its position implying that she remains with her new found lover.

In both *The Matrix* and *Pleasantville,* the presence of cinematic technology is always near by, as close as possible to being palpable within their narrative worlds (either as computer generated simulation or fabricated TV fiction), yet never quite explicit. Conversely, *Adaptation* (Spike Jonze, 2002) takes self-reflexivity to its postmodern limits. When screenwriter Charlie Kaufman (Nicholas Cage) has trouble adapting Susan Orlean's *The Orchid Thief* he interpolates himself into the story. His desire to capture the truth of the source material is consequently threatened by his own neurosis and self-doubt, not to mention his bumbling twin brother Donald (also Cage). As part of a growing trend in contemporary Hollywood, *Adaptation* entails a complicated, and at times disorienting, narrative structure, cross-cutting between Kaufman amidst his personal and professional struggles, Orlean as she gathered material for her book, and scenes visualizing parts of the screenplay that Kaufman works on. The film's ability to seamlessly shift not only across temporal and spatial registers but also varying degrees of

fictionalization ultimately serves to further emphasize the role of doubles, a theme already evident due to both the appearance of twin bothers and the idea of adaptation as it is developed within the film.

The film introduces Donald temporarily living with his brother, out-of-work and goofy if not slightly dim-witted. Deciding to follow in Charlie's footsteps, Donald begins developing a script in which the principal characters represent the multiple personalities of the same serial killer.[26] Charlie condescendingly asks how anyone might film such a script, to which Donald blithely answers, "trick photography." As part of *Adaptation's* tongue-in-cheek reflexivity, Donald basically divulges how Nicholas Cage is able to perform as both Kaufman brothers. And indeed, trick photography recalls the basic cinematic sleight of hand that Friedrich Kittler recounts in his discussion of doubles. In his words, the doppelgänger trick is accomplished when "Half of the lens is covered with a black diaphragm while the actor acts on the other half of the picture frame. Then, without changing the camera's position, the exposed film is rewound, the other half of the lens is covered up, and the same actor, now in his role as the doppelgänger, acts on the opposite side of the frame" (*GFT* 154). For Kittler, the use of masks to create a split screen, like superimposition and stop-motion tricks, follows the logic inaugurated by George Méliès. These techniques exploit cinema's ability to chop up reality precisely in order to better facilitate our imaginary versions of it. I have already discussed Kittler's reservations about doubles so closely affiliated with such technology. More recent accounts tacitly concur, noting that although early applications of these practices could be

[26] Garret Stewart sees Donald's script as the inspiration behind *Identity* (James Mangold, 2003). See *Framed Time: Toward A Postfilmic Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007): 106.

quite effective, they quickly became routine and then eventually obsolete at least in their most primitive form.

The basic split screen technique seen in *The Student of Prague*, however, has also undergone several changes or improvements leading up to *Adaptation*. In the earliest cases, the split screen could be produced in-camera. Later the effect would be filmed using masks, but the split screen would then be re-integrated with an optical printer. In 1961 Disney released *The Parent Trap* (David Swift, 1962), another film organized around twins played by the same actor. Though the film primarily relied on a basic split screen technique, it also took advantage of a new traveling matte process that combined the appearance of location shooting with the benefits and flexibility of the studio. Yet, because the film is so fundamentally organized around the twins, it could not use split screen technology exclusively. Instead, the film incorporates an actual double, that is, an actor similar in stature and appearance to the film's star Hayley Mills. The stand-in not only appears in over the shoulder and other shots where one of the twins is obscured, but acted opposite of Mills throughout in order to provide necessary blocking and dialogue cues. The producers knew that the trick shot was really only a small part of the illusion of twins. To sustain the illusion, more conventional methods were more than adequate. Of course, it is true that the effect of the device is a radical departure from the startling or uncanny impression made by its 1913 predecessor. Though the comic route instituted by *The Parent Trap* and subsequently followed by the likes of *Big Business* (Jim Abrahams, 1988) and *Multiplicity* (Harold Ramis, 1996) successfully avoids the perils of the double, it does not mean these films have fully escaped its legacy.

The more immediate precursor to *Adaptation* is David Cronenberg's *Dead Ringers* (1988).[27] The main technological innovation used by this film is the motion control device through which camera movements can be automated. As optical effects supervisor Lee Wilson explains, "Usually with a split-screen optical, the split is already in place at the beginning of the shot and it runs on through to the end. What that does is set up a fairly predictable shot that audiences by now are trained to perceive – you have one character on one side of the frame and another on the other and you split runs somewhere down the middle."[28] For *Dead Ringers*, the filmmakers wanted to introduce dynamic reframing so as to add complexity to the basic trick and thereby enhance the illusion. With the motion control system, more dynamic shots could be duplicated exactly. The use of motion control made it necessary, however, to introduce an elaborate playback system in order to ensure that the split-screen remained aligned. It was also necessary to still employ the services of a stand-in double. What was finally crucial for introducing more complicated split-screen shots was the use of rotoscoping which allowed any traces of the split to be further concealed.

For the most part, *Adaptation* made use of the same methods in shooting Cage as both Kaufman brothers. The one innovation separating the two films is that blue- and green-screens have become the industry standard, in effect replacing the various techniques used for traveling matte shots. As Joe Fordham reports in *Cinefex*, the green-screens were especially indispensable in any scene where Charlie and Donald appear to cross paths or overlap one another, for instance, when the two brothers near the end of the

---

[27] The relationship between these two films recalls the distinction Stewart draws between the European uncanny and its Hollywood cousin (see *Framed Time*, chapter 2). We might also consider David Lynch's *Mulholland Dr.* (2001) along the same lines as it relates to *Adaptation*.

[28] Cited in Doug Shay, "Doube Vision," *Cinefex* 36 (November 1988): 36.

film are in a car together following Susan Orlean (Meryl Streep).[29] However, once again, space restrictions limited when they could use this advantage. True to Kittler, once the basic trick is established the split-screen double is no longer very impressive. As a result, twins are less important at the level of the image than in terms of narrative and theme.

As already mentioned, the double remains prominent because *Adaptation* reinforces it through a combination thematic focus and structural organization. The title of the film refers to both adaptation in the biological sense and to the process in which various source materials are developed for another medium, in this case a book is translated into a screenplay. Insofar as adaptation in the latter sense is considered an artistic endeavor, the film suggests a corollary between the creative process and nature's creative process. In the sense of organic modification, the term suggests a kind of forward progression or evolution. A hierarchy results in which one form of life irrevocably succeeds the now lower form. In contrast to this logic of replacement, there is simultaneously a notion of endless exchangeability. Just as the characters in Donald's script are all facets of the same serial killer, Charlie inevitably returns to the solipsistic logic of ouroboros, the symbolic snake that swallows its own tail. The characters in his screenplays are reflections of him, rehearsing different facets of his personality. In *Adaptation*, he takes this logic to the extreme by making the script literally about himself, about the writing process as he attempts to adapt the source material. The danger of this logic is that difference slowly yields to sameness. Insofar as the different characters created by Charlie are simply substitutions for himself, the world begins to collapse. He is locked within his own mind.

---

[29] Joe Fordham, "Twin Geeks," *Cinefex* 93 (April 2003): 21-22.

The film manages this danger in a number of different ways, primarily though by contrasting how Charlie, Susan, and Donald undertake the craft of writing. Charlie and Susan initially appear quite different, but both share a sense of passion in their desire to capture the truth of their subjects. Their connection is further emphasized by their similar use of voice-over as they recount or work-through material, as well as their separation. Donald, on the other hand, is never shown actually writing. His ideas are clichés, formulaic variations on already existing material. In this regard, Donald bears the brunt of the film's disdain even though Susan and Charlie are no less conventional—Susan typifies the *New Yorker*, hosting dinner parties in her book-lined Manhattan apartment, drinking wine with her bourgeois friends scoffing at more 'common folk'; Charlie appears as the archetypal tortured artist, fraught by awkwardness and sexual inadequacy amidst actual success and delusions of grandeur. Though Donald is differentiated precisely in order to reinforce the linkage between Charlie and Susan, the stratification is never fully complete. Whereas Charlie and Susan necessarily remain spatially distinct until the very end, Charlie and Donald share the same diegetic space throughout much of the film. Initially this proximity serves to annoy or disrupt Charlie's thought-process, his ability to write as well as masturbate. However, by the second half of the film Donald serves as the primary narrative catalyst, Charlie's proxy both for meeting Susan and for completing his script. Charlie and Susan are depicted as kindred spirits despite their differences. Charlie and Donald, on the other hand, are simultaneously completely different while also exactly the same.

Even though Donald turns out to be crucial in terms of bringing the film to a coherent conclusion, there is still a clear distinction regarding the aesthetic merit of his

and his brother's work. As Lucas Hilderbrand notes, the film's continual reference to masturbation is not only another variation on the threat of self-indulgence but also a reminder of the parallel between creative and natural processes.[30] In a certain sense, it is the fact that these two implications are irreconcilable that underscores the contradictory core of the film. Insofar as *Adaptation* is about "characters [that] search not for others but for themselves," it can be understood as an endorsement of masturbation even if the path to self-discovery often necessitates passing through others. That there is a corollary between the unproductive and solitary pleasure of masturbation and the necessary purposelessness of aesthetic production only further corroborates this form of introspection as valid and productive. To the extent, however, that there is simultaneously a direct correlation between the creative process and adaptation as a natural, evolutionary process the film finds itself attempting to preserve something that is untenable.

On three separate occasions the viewer is given access to Charlie's psyche. That is, there are three scenes where Charlie is seen engaging in sexual relations—first, with a waitress, then with Valerie Thomas, a Hollywood executive, and, finally, with Susan. All three are masturbatory fantasies, simultaneously indistinguishable from both the diegesis in general and the imaginary scenes that stand-in for Charlie's script. These scenes offer little in the way of self-discovery, suggesting instead narcissistic repetition. Nor do these scenes have anything in common with the account of nature provided by John Laroche (Chris Cooper). As he explains to Susan in one of the film's internal flashbacks, there is a specific relationship in nature between a flower and the insect that pollinates it. The insect is drawn to its "double" without knowing or understanding what it is doing. Nature persists, then, by doing what it is naturally designed to do. In this sense the double is

[30] Lucas Hilderbrand, "Adpatation," *Film Quarterly* Vol. 58, no. 1 (2004): 36-43.

inextricable with an inherent attraction between two species similar in appearance yet fundamentally different. This attraction, and the unwitting reproduction that it yields, ultimately spawns a world. This logic not only differs from Charlie's masturbation, but from the remaining intertwined plot lines. *Adaptation* poses the possibility that Susan and Laroche share something more than just a professional relationship. After joining Laroche in an effort to finally see the ghost orchid, however, Susan writes in the final lines of her book that the flower, not unlike her subject Laroche and kindred spirits more generally, while wonderful to imagine and easy to fall in love with, is ultimately fantastic, fleeting, and just out-of-reach. Charlie, having coalesced his sense of responsibility to the source material with a desire for Susan, likewise eventually realizes that both are doomed to failure. In the end he takes the advice of a screen writing guru and invents an implausible mad dash ending packed with sex, drugs, shoot-outs and a fatal car crash. These relationships may be productive—Susan has her book and Charlie completes his script, but unlike nature's symbiotic relationships there is little that is aesthetically productive or satisfying about their fictional creations.

Throughout the film, *Adaptation* sets-up an array of replacements and proxies, variations on the double that are to some degree interchangeable and productive. Like a back-stage musical, the self-referential nature of the film further necessitates a perpetual shift in fictional or diegetic levels; between Charlie working in Hollywood, Susan writing in New York, Laroche in Florida. That the film ultimately endorses the fictional work of Susan and Charlie calls attention to the fact that Donald is likewise a completely artificial creation. Donald not only doubles as Charlie, but for the process and effect of Hollywood fiction as well. Again like the back-stage musical, the degree to which *Adaptation*

acknowledges its own process of production remains limited. The film begins on the set of *Being John Malkovich* (Spike Jonze, 1999). We see the actor John Malkovich, an assistant director, the cinematographer, and then Charlie Kaufman as portrayed by Nicholas Cage. The film works hard to establish its back-stage credibility only to seamlessly step into its fiction. Emblematic of the way that the point of enunciation always remains concealed, the director Spike Jonze is conspicuously absent in this constellation. Donald, as a result, not only reinforces the emphasis on aesthetic creation but at the same time stands-in for the part of that process that cannot be acknowledged. That Donald is killed near the end of the film illustrates the degree that the double is contained within the film's narrative and thematic structure. Indeed, it is as if Charlie incorporates him, making literal the idea of adaptation, evolving in order to overcome his earlier neurosis and self-doubt. In this regard, Donald and his eventual effacement reveal the two sides to the film's productive capacity. On the one hand there is creative and aesthetic potential. What is never acknowledged, on the other hand, is that both *Adaptation* and its source material are not driven by natural processes but ultimately by profit. *The New Yorker* and Hollywood's boutique divisions are similar not only stylistically in terms of being sprawling, digressive, distinctive, and idiosyncratic, but in their ability to legitimate commerce as nothing but meaningful art. With the combination of twin brothers, its Hollywood setting, and a conceptual concern for natural reproduction, *Adaptation* provides a clear convergence of the complex issues that as I have shown are intrinsic to the double. The same can be said about the following film even though it is set over a century earlier in time.

Christopher Nolan's film *The Prestige* (2006) ups the ante so to speak insofar as it is a tale of two doubles. By focusing on two competing magicians the film follows the tradition of rival as double that ranges from instances in which one actor plays the role of both protagonist and his nemesis as Charlie Chaplin does in *The Great Dictator* (1940) and Mike Meyers in the *Austin Powers* (1997, 1999, 2002) franchise to its more baroque treatment in John Woo's *Face/Off* (1997). In *The Prestige*, however, it is not simply that the two magicians Alfred Borden (Christian Bale) and Robert Angier (Hugh Jackman) are pitted against one another at first in a professional and then eventually lethal rivalry, but each magician is also himself a particular kind of double. Concealed until the very end, the film's most central ruse is that Borden is actually an identical twin. This is how he performs his acclaimed trick 'The Transported Man'. In his attempt to replicate the trick Angier employs a look-a-like double but remains convinced that Borden's secret eludes him. As a result of his dissatisfaction, Angier travels to Colorado Springs and commissions Nikola Tesla (David Bowie) to build a machine capable of instantaneous transportation. The machine eventually produced is indeed capable of this feat but at the same time produces an exact replica in place of what has been transported (leading the inventor to initially believe he has failed). Angier uses this device to contrive one last deception meant to culminate his escalating feud with Borden. Although it was the on-stage death of Angier's wife that initiated their dispute, by the end of the film it is clear that what really puts them at odds is their divergent understanding of the nature of illusion.

The film explains this difference of opinion by drawing a distinction between magic and showmanship. Borden is the better magician, while Angier excels in the latter

category. Closely related to their abilities as magicians is the notion of sacrifice. For Borden, magic is a matter of total devotion, a life sacrificed for the sake of art. The real performance, as he notes in his observation of Chung Ling Soo, takes place outside of the theater. This is the case, as he and his twin must share one life, forever alternating between being Borden and being disguised as his ingénieur Fallon in order to maintain their secret. Angier understands sacrifice in a very different way. He believes sacrifice primarily involves personal loss as in the loss of his wife and the physical injuries he sustains as part of his feud with Borden. As Todd McGowan further explains, the notion that illusion is grounded exclusively in sacrifice is only partially correct. Whereas "Borden sees Angier's emphasis on spectacle as a betrayal of the art and as a refusal to embrace the sacrifice that the art demands," he fails to appreciate the creative power inherent in illusion.[31] Angier in his dying words reputes Borden's claim that it was all for nothing. He did it for "the look on their faces," the "transcendent belief visible n the spectator's look of awe," the evidence of the creative power of magic, the ability to produce something from nothing, or at least the counterfeit basis of illusion. Although the two magicians maintain these conflicting positions for the most part, the conclusion of the film suggests a reversal. Sentenced for the murder of Angier, Borden must sacrifice one half of himself. Conversely, we learn that Angier is really Lord Caldlow an aristocrat who has devoted his life to appearing as something else. With this final twist, *The Prestige* insists that illusion has less to do with either sacrifice or spectacle than with misdirection and that cinema is better suited to this task than either of its fictional adversaries.

---

[31] McGowan, Todd. "The Violence of Creation in *The Prestige*," *International Journal of Zizek Studies*, Vol. 1, no. 3 (2007): 4.

According to the film's logic, there is a concrete division between what's real and what's false. Illusion simply entails making the real seem to be false in order to conversely make the false seem real. In either case, the manipulation of these categories works in conjunction with the ability to solicit the viewer's consent. Whereas the magician accomplishes this through the combination of performance with the tricks themselves, cinema has both image and narrative at its disposal. *The Prestige*, like *Adaptation*, primarily relies on the latter in order to generate suspense and confusion. This is most apparent in the exchange of diaries that are used to filter much of the film's narration. The diaries serve as the device through which the film toggles forward and backward in time. They allow Borden and Angier not only to entrap one another but allow the film to sustain the enigma that confounds viewers while still advancing the story. The film's decided preference for narrative misdirection belies its reluctance to incorporate the same special effects used in *Adaptation*. There are only two occasions when twinning shots are used. The first in fact occurs when Angier and his *ingénieur* Cutter (Michael Caine) have enlisted the help of Gerald Root (also Jackman) the look-a-like that allows them to replicate Borden's transported man routine. Even though the same actor must play both roles, the film diffuses the scene by having Root speak and behave quite different from Angier. The double is not seen again until the film finally reveals that Borden is a composite made up of two identical twins. As Borden reveals his secret to the dying Angier, the film returns to moments elided earlier in the narrative in which we see both twins. Even here, however, two-shots featuring both brothers simultaneously are kept to an absolute minimum. Instead, the film implies that the twins share the same fictional space through standard editing, blocking, and framing

techniques. *The Prestige* has learned well from such predecessors as *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958) and *Body Double* (Brian De Palma, 1984). The trick only works when the truth is concealed. As soon as the double is revealed the trick is over.

This logic, however, goes against another account also provided within the film. When Cutter shows the judge overseeing Borden's murder trial the machine built by Tesla, he claims that it is the work not of a magician but a wizard. The difference being that it does what magicians only pretend to do. The machine, Cutter elaborates, has no trick; it's real. Thus Angier's trick is to make it seem to be an illusion. But what Cutter does not know is that the machine in addition to teleportation produces a double. On the one hand, there is a clear parallel between magic and cinema based on the fact that both trade on illusion and spectacle. With its reference to the scientific and technological basis of Tesla's machine, however, film's illusory status takes on a different tone. To return to McGowan, he reaffirms that art has the power to reveal truth but only by way of fiction. Meaning that there are two orders connected on a referential basis but which cannot be made simply interchangeable. This also runs contrary to the way the diaries are used by both magicians to fabricate a secret that in fact does not exist. That is, the fiction of the diaries leads not to truth but to the concealment of truth—and in both cases there is an actual secret that is masked. This is likewise the case in the way the film's discursive structure that conceals its ability to produce fictional doubles. In McGowan's assessment, "The problem with making a film like *The Prestige* that reveals the nature of cinematic deception is that the film itself necessary partakes of this same deception. […] As Orson Welles demonstrates in his later masterpiece *F for Fake* (1974), there is no external position from which a filmmaker could expose the cinematic illusion" (20-21). Once

within the realm of cinema, there is no meta-cinema. That is to say, while it is possible to discursively establish different levels within cinema, like language it is impossible to distinguish a separate order outside of it that is not also already part of it.

McGowan continues, "As a result, the film must deceive the spectator in a way that draws attention to the deception, not in order to deconstruct or debunk it, but in order to reveal what it produces" (21). According to this logic, the emphasis of the film is not the elisions created through editing or narration but the desire produced through these gaps. This makes enough sense except that once the enigma is finally revealed the film inevitably betrays the desire engendered until that point. This points to another discrepancy between magic and cinema. As Cutter says in his concluding voice-over, "Now you're looking for the secret, but you won't find it because, of course, you're not really looking. You don't really want to work it out. You want to be fooled." Perhaps the spectators depicted within the film simply want to be fooled. Viewers of *The Prestige*, on the contrary, are offered several explanations implying that while they may have been initially fooled, by the end they too are in on the secret. Borden's trick is revealed in detail just as Tesla's machine is chalked up to science. What the film's various explanations conceal is that its illusions are achieved at a different level. Tesla's machine may be explained as science, but its success is exclusively the result of cinematic technologies. If the film presents the possibility that there is no difference between illusion and fact, its epilogue is entirely devoted to containing this possibility. Cutter not only condemns Caldlow for his scheme, but in his reprisal of magic's three-step principle (pledge, turn, prestige) he approvingly watches as Borden is reunited with his daughter Jess. His speech ends on an image of Angier, or rather one of his replicas, entombed in a

water tank as if to say the film's secret concerns the unspeakable sacrifice of Angier's progeny. In contrast to Borden who has just been reunited with his proper offspring, we are despite Cutter's stipulation made to see the "profound sacrifice" through which magic is produced. At first glance *The Prestige* can be confusing as to the magician that it ultimately endorses. What the film's conclusion makes clear, however, is that it favors the 'real' illusion performed by Borden as opposed to the 'forged' illusion jointly enabled by Angier's money and Tesla's machine. In reinstituting this hierarchy, the film conceals the cinematic illusions that undergird its own realization while disavowing the equivalence it variously suggests over the course of its narrative between deception and reality.

*Adaptation* and *The Prestige* offer two extremely elaborate examples of the cinematic double. More specifically, the two films illustrate multiple variations on cinema's capacity for counterfeit twins: whimsical in the case of the Kaufman brothers, concealed in the case of Borden, and de facto in the case of Angier's unrelated imitator. In all of these examples, however, the double necessarily acknowledges the cinematic technologies that are at their root. In acknowledging the condition of its possibility, the cinematic double, contrary to Kittler's claim, always already defies its visual containment. Though Bazin, in accord with Derrida, values cinema's inherent ability to defer the differentiation between object and its medium, Hollywood would have a very different response. Precisely because the double invariably draws attention to cinema's technical sleight-of-hand it faces severe limitations with regard to serving Hollywood's main objectives. Consequently, whenever the double does appear, Hollywood cinema resorts to narrative measures that both preserve and contain it in its most limited form.

The double is then further dispersed as a thematic function, an ancillary to questions of adaptation, magic, and deception or as alternate realities in, for example, *The Matrix* and *Pleasantville*. In this regard, Hollywood's version of the double flies in the face of the measures Bazin and Kracauer outlined as capable of conveying if not compounding the double logic of the cinematic image. Even as this is largely the case, I have, in foregrounding the symptomatic questions and contradictions that arise in conjunction with the cinematic double, attempted to show that Hollywood fails in its efforts to completely suppress cinema's underlying double logic.

## Coda: Empire of Simulations

By the late 1990s references to Jean Baudrillard had become passé. Perhaps the clearest indication that the impresario of postmodernity had fallen into irrelevancy was that his most famous text had been featured as a sight gag in *The Matrix*. In one of the film's earliest scenes we see a brief transaction in which Neo sells some type of illicit software. The contraband is stored in a hollowed out hardcover copy of *Simulacra and Simulation*. Fittingly perhaps, Baudrillard finds himself in Hollywood reduced to just another simulation, an empty façade. The tongue-in-cheek gag may have been meant as nothing more than a cursory allusion, however, for our purposes it can be used to illustrate several larger points. On the one hand, this type of visual reference recalls Friedrich Kittler's assessment of the cinematic double. The referential gag serves to contain the French philosopher, limiting or neutralizing the full range and depth of his thought. On the other hand, a thorough examination of *Simulacra and Simulation* would

more than likely reveal numerous parallels between the proliferation of simulation and the work of Jacques Derrida as examined in this chapter. As his analyses of mimesis, truth, and representation more generally make clear, Derrida repeatedly finds it impossible to maintain the principles on which western aesthetics fundamentally invoke. As with Baudrillard's own claim that it is no longer possible to maintain the distinction between simulation and reality, between the original and its copy, Derrida shows that it is likewise impossible to maintain the line that divides similarity and opposition. While Bazin and Kracauer follow, or anticipate as the case may be, certain attributes of Derrida's deconstructive strategy, they are more specifically concerned with celebrating the cinematic medium for its ability to take advantage of representation's double logic.

Although contemporary Hollywood has largely elected to disregard the priorities established by these theorists, it has by no means eradicated the double altogether. In fact, it is rather the case that Hollywood operates somewhere in between the two extremes represented by Kittler and Derrida. Even as Hollywood strives to contain the double and all of its ill effects, it permits a number of ploys ranging from alternate realities and competing modes of representation within the narrative to the fabrication of identical twins. And try as Hollywood might representations of the double are never successfully contained within the narrative. There is always a lingering trace; a remnant of what is a far more pervasive double logic. Hollywood, in other words, more closely resembles Freud whose own attempt to engage the double in the uncanny essay likewise belies the degree to which this figure is symptomatic of a much more ubiquitous double logic. To be sure, Freud and Hollywood regularly refer to oppositions and dichotomies so as to suggest a highly structured milieu in which rational order and hierarchal relations prevail.

Nonetheless, both are rife with exceptions that undermine the apparent rule. The divisions they advocate simultaneously faciliate traffic between opposing categories. For Freud the unconscious must be repressed. For Hollywood, what necessarily remains under erasure is the actual process of production—the very thing that for Bazin and Kracauer distinguished the cinema from a mere copying machine. Films featuring explicit doubles are all the more likely to hasten the return of this repressed.

To return to the coy reference to Baudrillard, what is largely forgotten is that his assessment concerning the growing influence of simulation was at a certain level irrefutable. No where is this more obvious than in Hollywood. Remakes and sequels are not necessarily new practices, but the extent to which they currently dominate the industry is staggering. For the past ten years journalists and trade publications have weighed in on the phenomenon.[32] While remakes primarily trade on the recognition —and sometimes the proven record—of a pre-existing title, they also employ a wide variety of strategies ranging from adding star power and amplifying action sequences or special effects to significantly altering the story or updating the premise. Whatever their particular strategy may be, most commentators, not entirely unlike the postmodern critics in their attacks on Las Vegas, have decried the practice as artless and derivative.[33] Of course, the driving force behind remakes is not a lack of creativity or imagination but

---

[32] For example, see: McNary, Dave, "Remakes Need A Makeover" *Variety* July 21 – 27, 2003. Bart, Peter, "Don't Play It Again, Sam" *Variety* August 9, 2004. Bloom, David, "Showbiz Develops Deja View" *Variety* March 4 –10, 2004. Goodridge, Mike, "The Romance of Remakes" *Screen International* April 29, 2010. Zeitchik, Steven and Borys Kit, "Film Studios Ramping Up Remakes" *The Hollywood Reporter* April 6, 2009. Graser, Mark, "Where Do Hit Pics Come From?" *Variety* July 9 – 15, 2007. Lyman, Rick, "Summer of the Spinoff" *The New York Times* April 17, 2002.

[33] See also: Budra, Paul and Betty Schellenberg (eds.), *Part Two: Reflections on the Sequel* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), Forrest, Jennifer and Leonard Koos (eds.), *Dead Ringers: The Remake in Theory and Practice* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), Jess-Cooke, Carolyn, *Film Sequels: Theory and Practice from Hollywood to Bollywood* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

rather the corporate mandate to maximize profits. As part of the rapid consolidation that reshaped Hollywood over the 1990s, studios were pressed to cut costs. The two main targets were development—where projects would regularly languish only to never be made—and marketing. With remakes, studios could draw on materials from their back catalogue, thereby lowering licensing and other pre-production costs while simultaneously adding value to the pre-existing title. Ostensibly posing less risk than an original story, remakes are also easier to promote because they come with "brand equity." More recently, the frenzy for remakes has increasingly turned its attention to foreign films (indicating the growing importance of international markets) while also broadening the trend to include an even wider range of pre-existing properties (e.g. theme park rides, toys, and board games). At the same time, the period between remakes as well as sequels, adaptations, and spin-offs is growing shorter and shorter, with less and less regard for the success of the original. While some of these projects are attributed to the nostalgia of various directors and producers, a more vital factor is that Hollywood's main demographic, teenage audiences, does not remember anything more than fifteen years old. The result is that by the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century Hollywood is already remaking the films from the last decade of the twentieth century. Such irreverent cannibalization of the recent past recalls another postmodern theorist. Nostalgia for Fredric Jameson no longer represents an attempt to recapture the past. As practiced in Hollywood, it is rather a "symptom of the waning of our historicity, of our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way."[34]

---

[34] Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991. 21.

Hollywood cinema is barred from ever fully acknowledging the nature of its own production, yet it makes constant reference to its extra-textual basis, particularly in narratives featuring any variation on the double. The recent embrace of remakes likewise acknowledges the process of production, not as something perfidious or dangerous but as an impetus for accumulating profit. As a result, there is rarely anything interesting or explicitly uncanny about the recent onslaught of remakes and sequels. Instead, it is only in the exception that denudes the logic of the rule that such effects are remotely possible. One example might be *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, a telling film in its own right that in being remade three times has lead one critic to refer to it in less than admirable terms as America's national story.[35]

The two films, however, that most clearly register the latent uncanniness of the remake are Gus Van Sant's version of *Psycho* (1998) and Michael Haneke's American recreation of *Funny Games* (2007). For Van Sant, the decision to remake a film as venerated and original as *Psycho* sparked immediate questioning. Though the newer version was ultimately as similar—having both followed the original script and replicating it shot-for-shot—as it was different—having employed color photography and introducing a few minor deviations, bewildered critics nonetheless described it as misbegotten, weird, and, basically, unnecessary. Haneke's decision to direct a Hollywood version of his own film was cause for even greater consternation. An established director closely associated with a modernist European tradition, Haneke was known for his minimal narratives and austere style as well as his focus on violence and alienating

[35] The original *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956) was remade under the same title by Philip Kaufman in 1978, then as *Body Snatchers* (Abel Ferrara, 1993) and finally as *The Invasion* (Oliver Hirschbiegel). The critic in question is Joshua Clover. See *The Matrix* (London, BFI: 2004), 88, n. 56.

provocation. The original *Funny Games* (1997) had been particularly distinguished as a pointed, if vexing, critique of media violence. Why, then, the decision to remake, like Van Sant's *Psycho*, a virtually identical American version? Was it simply a repetition of the same critique he mounted in the earlier film? Or, perhaps, the whole thing was a nihilistic exercise in pointlessness. Considering the fact that the same critics who had generally approved the earlier version decried the remake as repugnant, no matter what Haneke's motivation he seemed to have struck a cord.[36] In the end, critics' efforts to condemn the film only add to its overall oddity. That it was ever made to begin with belies a lasting strangeness, an irreconcilable incongruity. A feeling that is at the root of every remake, but one that is rarely present as such.

[36] See in particular, A. O. Scott: "A Vicious Attack on Innocent People, on the Screen and in the Theater" *New York Times*, March 14, 2008.

# CHAPTER II
# WAR TRAUMA
# REPETITION, PRIMAL SCENES, TIME-IMAGES

In Freud's most concise definition, the uncanny concerns a frightening element that has been repressed but nonetheless recurs. What's unique about this frightening element is that, "in reality [it is] nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind" (*U* 241). Other than this distinguishing factor however, the uncanny resembles the most basic structure that serves as the foundation of psychoanalytic practice. That is to say, psychoanalysis largely begins as a study of traumatic experiences. Stemming from the Greek word for wound, trauma refers to an overwhelming or shocking event. The inability to adequately respond to this experience results in long-lasting residual effects. If, on the one hand, trauma is what triggers later neurosis, then trauma also accounts for the framework in which the aim of analysis is always to return to this earlier experience, to the root cause or primal scene as it were.

Even while identifying trauma as a key factor in the persistent return of the repressed, Freud never completely resolved the problem of etiology. Questions remained as to whether the original experience was primarily physiological or psychological, whether the influx of stimulation originated externally or internally, whether the residual effects were indeed rooted in the past or part of something constructed entirely in the present, and, finally, whether the inaugural event was real or imaginary. If attempts to analyze and alleviate the effects of trauma risk a collapse of explanatory structures, a further complication arises when considering the relationship between trauma and history. Though Freud makes several references to involuntary repetition in the uncanny essay, there is no indication that he is writing in the immediate aftermath of World War I.

In his contemporaneous *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* however, Freud indicated his awareness that soldiers, tormented by their combat experience, frequently suffered recurring nightmares, epitomizing in effect the compulsion to repeat. Rather than further examine the relation between historical catastrophe and psychological experience, Freud instead exacerbates the indeterminacy of his findings, maneuvering to maintain the centrality of castration and, at times, resorting to more far-fetched speculation in which ontogenesis is replaced with phylogenesis. Following the first section in which I outline the importance of trauma from *Studies on Hysteria* to *Moses and Monotheism*, I examine the elements of Freud's approach that simultaneously lay the groundwork for and problematize the development of trauma studies. In contrast to the development of trauma studies as a critical discourse, I consider Derrida's return to the scene of writing and Gilles Deleuze's account of the time-image as alternative perspectives on trauma and its historical impact. In the third section, I analyze a series of films in which history and trauma come together in a combination of formal and narrative strategies. As with the double in the previous chapter, I focus in particular on how these films mobilize or elicit historical trauma only to circumscribe and suppress their underlying implications.

## Trauma Returns

The return of the repressed is, in effect, one of the most basic principles of psychoanalysis. The central premise of *Studies on Hysteria*, which Freud wrote together with Josef Breuer in the early 1890s, is that the analysis of hysteric symptoms will lead back to a 'precipitating cause', something that occurred much earlier and is generally

forgotten by the patient.[1] Freud and Breuer refer to this as trauma, a kind of accident that provokes later symptoms. They note, however, that, "the operative cause of the illness is not the trifling physical injury but the affect of fright—the psychical trauma" (*SH* 5-6). Even at this early point, there is already a clash between the external and internal etiology of neurosis. Physical trauma may be the trigger that initiates hysteric symptoms, but ultimately it is the psychical trauma that sustains or perpetuates such behavior. "We must presume," they add, "that the psychical trauma—or more precisely the memory of the trauma—acts like a foreign body which long after its entry must continue to be regarded as an agent that is still at work…" (*SH* 6). Despite burgeoning uncertainty, trauma serves as the foundation or nucleus for Freud's new science. To follow the identification of trauma and the debates that it spawned effectively provides a "classic description of the beginnings of psycho-analysis."[2]

Trauma introduces a causal logic in which neurosis is an effect stemming from an earlier catalyst, a point of origin consigned to some past experience. The crux of Freud and Breuer's discovery is that neurosis can be alleviated if not altogether dispatched by returning to this point of origin. Much to their initial surprise, they found "that each individual hysterical symptom immediately and permanently disappeared when [they] had succeeded in bringing clearly to light the memory of the event by which it was provoked and in arousing its accompanying affect, and when the patient had described that event in the greatest possible detail and had put the affect into words" (*SH* 6). In other cases Freud and Breuer found that the effect would continue even after the 'cause'

---

[1] Breuer, Josef and Sigmund Freud. *Studies on Hysteria* (1895). Trans. and ed. James Strachey. New York: Basic Books, 2000. Hereafter abbreviated as *SH*.

[2] Laplanche, Jean and J.-B. Pontalis. *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Norton, 1973. 466. Hereafter abbreviated as *LoP*.

had been vanquished. This was because the affect or charge of the initial trauma would eventually disperse and become ingrained in intermediary links. Although these cases entailed a more complicated approach, Freud and Breuer maintained abreaction as the primary means of surmounting symptomatic behavior. In other words, *Studies on Hysteria* establishes the need to bring to light those traumatic memories that have been repressed as one of the fundamental principles of psychoanalysis. Considering Freud's later definition of the uncanny as everything "that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light," it is unsurprising that he acknowledges psychoanalysis "has itself become uncanny to many people" (*U* 225, 243).

Freud revisits these ideas in a 1914 paper that first announces the concept of repetition compulsion. "Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through" begins with Freud reminding his readers that psychoanalytic technique in its first phase focuses on "the moment at which the symptom was formed" and endeavors to reproduce the original situation so as to discharge it.[3] The process of remembering and abreacting in this first phase was conducted with the help of hypnosis. After abandoning hypnosis, Freud seeks to discover the original trauma through free association. The analyst, he explains, must combat the resistance that hinders this effort through "the work of interpretation and by making its results known to the patient" (*SE XII* 147). The original moment in which the symptom is formed still remains the central point of interest.

In hypnosis, "the process of remembering took a very simple form. The patient put himself back into an earlier situation, which he seemed never to confuse with the

---

[3] Freud, Sigmund. "Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through: Further Recommendations on the Technique of Psycho-Analysis" (1914). *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XII*. 147. The *Standard Edition* is hereafter abbreviated as *SE* followed by the volume number.

present one" (*SE XII* 148). Conversely, subsequent psychoanalytic technique requires that the patient confront "forgotten" events. The patient does not necessarily consider these events to be forgotten. Once recalled they claim that they were known all along just never made center of conscious thought. Though these forgotten events are not characterized as repressed material, they operate in very similar terms. This particular defense serves in a capacity perhaps closer to screen memories. Like the manifest dream-content made available through secondary revision, screen memories provide a memory that conceals the actual memory and, yet, in doing so unwittingly preserve it. As Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis point out in their account, both the interpretation of dreams and the imperative placed on the patient to remember emphasize a constantly receding past event (*LoP* 466). Just as trauma introduces a linear causal chain, psychoanalysis introduces a reverse logic that will be developed in terms of *Nachträglichkeit* or deferred action.[4] There is, however, another more straightforward possibility that Freud considers at this time. Certain early experiences, as with fantasies, cannot be remembered in the strict sense since they were never actually forgotten.

For these various reasons Freud suggests, "the patient does not remember anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but acts it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he repeats it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it" (*SE XII* 150). The analytic procedure is able to resolve the compulsion to repeat through transference. That is, the patient does not need to fully contemplate the reasons why the earlier event was forgotten because the need to recall the past can now be

---

[4] Laplanche and Pontalis define deferred action as the manner in which "experiences, impressions, and memory-traces may be revised at a later date to fit in with fresh experiences or with the attainment of a new stage of development." They go on to further add that what undergoes deferred revision are those aspects of subjective experience that have "been impossible in the first instance to incorporate into a meaningful context. The traumatic event is the epitome of such unassimilated experience" (*LoP* 111-112).

attributed to the analyst. As soon as the analyst impels the patient to remember, the earlier event is returned to the fore thereby alleviating the compulsion to reenact the forgotten event or memory. "We render the compulsion harmless," Freud says, "and indeed useful, by giving it the right to assert itself in a definite field" (*SE XII* 154). By giving it this right, the psychoanalyst allows the patient to 'work-through' not only the repressed origin of the compulsion but also the way that repression necessarily engendered additional forms of resistance in an effort to conceal itself.

In *Studies on Hysteria* and "Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through," trauma is established as axiomatic. Although problems arise regarding cause-and-effect in the strict sense, trauma nevertheless stands as the defining framework for psychoanalytic interpretation. Some of these problems, however, would continue to aggregate throughout later accounts and in the face of war. In 1916, Freud acknowledges the increasing frequency of traumatic neuroses. Though railway collisions and other fatal accidents accounted for some cases, the main reason for their increase was undoubtedly war. Freud further adds that while these instances deviate from what he considered more typical neuroses, they corresponded in that, "a fixation to the moment of the traumatic accident lies at their root. These patients regularly repeat the traumatic situation in their dreams […] as though these patients had not yet finished with the traumatic situation, as though they were still faced by it as an immediate task which has not been dealt with." [5] To explain this situation Freud applies an economic view. The traumatic experience is understood as an excessive increase of stimulus. Because it cannot be adequately dealt

[5] Freud, Sigmund. *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (1916). Trans. and ed. James Strachey. New York: Norton, 1966. 340-341.

with, the excess stimulus carries a kind of balance, which in turn causes the experience to recur.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud somewhat alters this economic view by introducing the reality principle. Whereas the pleasure principle operates on the simple premise of avoiding displeasure while seeking pleasure, the reality principle entails "the temporary toleration of unpleasure as a step on the long indirect road to pleasure."[6] The reality principle is further illustrated through the now infamous game of Fort/Da. Freud observes his grandson playing the game in order to counteract the displeasure of his mother's departure. The game consists of the child making a wooden reel disappear by throwing it over the side of his bed only to then have it reappear by virtue of a string attached to it. According to Freud, the game is an example of "instinctual renunciation." It allows the boy to tolerate his mother's departure. The game also stands as a form of compensation. In re-staging or repeating the disappearance and return of the object, the child moves from being the passive subject of his mother's disappearance to an active arbiter both expelling and restoring the object, an effort which according to Freud, "might be put down to an instinct for mastery" (*BPP* 15). The willingness to experience and repeat displeasure is counterbalanced by the subsequent and mitigated pleasure of being able to manage the situation. What's especially tricky, though, is that the repetition of trauma—the subjugation to displeasure—is at the same time the instinct to master, that is, to afford oneself the pleasure of assimilating that past experience.

Having made the case for the reality principle, Freud nonetheless goes on to consider the possibility of a compulsion to repeat that has no recourse to pleasure. "The

---

[6] Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). Trans. and ed. James Strachey. New York: Norton, 1961. 7. Hereafter abbreviated as *BPP*.

early efflorescence of infantile sexual life," for instance, is doomed to failure (*BPP* 21). Be this as it may, the infant's activities "are repeated, under pressure of a compulsion" (*BPP* 23). Something similar occurs when soldiers relive traumatic situations in their dreams. These dreams operate outside the jurisdiction of the pleasure principle. They are not driven by wish-fulfillment, but instead endeavor, "to master the stimulus retrospectively" (*BPP* 36). The difference between the two cases is that with infantile sexuality the drive for pleasure simply outweighs the consequences of displeasure. In contrast, recurring traumatic dreams suggests an involuntary attraction to displeasure so entrenched that it circumvents both the pleasure and reality principles. The more Freud considers this possibility, the more complicated the case becomes. He realizes that no matter how distressing these dreams may be, they at the same time serve the desire to return to the initial experience, to conjure up what "has been forgotten and repressed" (*BPP* 37). This means that both the pleasure and reality principle remain intimately, sometimes to their own detriment, intertwined with what Freud begrudgingly identifies as the death drive.

In capsizing Freud's economic explanation of human behavior war trauma may very well represent a limit case. However, it is worth recalling that many of Freud's most important case studies were no less convoluted or problematic than what he found in relation to traumatic neuroses. In *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* Freud reviews two of his most famous cases. [7] In the case of 'Little Hans', the boy's hostility for his father is transformed into a fear of horses. First, the hostility is displaced from the father to horses and then it changes again from hatred to fear. Something similar occurs in the case of the

---

[7] Freud, Sigmund. *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (1926). Trans. Alix Strachey. Ed. James Strachey. New York: Norton, 1959. Hereafter abbreviated *ISA*.

'Wolf Man'. Hatred for the father once again must be veiled. This time it resurfaces in the guise of a perpetual feeling of persecution—a sadistic aggressiveness by the father aimed at the boy. In both cases Freud finds that trauma is at the very center of his patient's behavior. Whereas war trauma follows the experience of external danger, however, the traumatic experience for both Little Hans and the Wolf Man is nothing more than the threat of castration.

Castration is likely the most important concept in Freud's account of human sexuality and development. He "met with [it] constantly in analytic experience" and considered it decisive in the formation and operation of neuroses.[8] A clear indication of its significance can be seen in his analysis of 'The Sandman' where the uncanny is specifically traced to castration, exemplifying what has been repressed only to subsequently return. While Freud repeatedly associated castration with trauma so as to suggest that it too functioned as a precipitating cause, the concept would only further complicate the problem of etiology. On the one hand, castration is introduced with the discovery of sexual difference, more specifically when a young boy first encounters female genitalia. In his short essay "Fetishism," Freud explains that following this encounter the boy does not believe that women naturally lack a penis.[9] Instead he believes that she has been castrated and that, by extension, his own possession is in danger. Freud describes this encounter as "uncanny and traumatic," with fetishism serving as an acute form of repression whereby the sight of female genitalia is both

---

[8] Laplanche and Pontalis. *LoP*: 57.

[9] Freud, Sigmund. "Fetishism (1927)." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, vol. XXI (London: Hogarth Press, 1961).

maintained and disavowed.[10] Regardless of the validity of this exact scenario, castration itself is never present but, rather, a misguided projection instituted from an external and belated vantage point.

While Freud makes an effort to situate castration through an actual visual exchange, he is on the other hand prone to more abstract speculation. In *Moses and Monotheism,* he draws an analogy not only between trauma and the formation of Judaism but with the evolution of human civilization in its most general sense.[11] "Mankind as a whole," he suggests, has experienced a series of traumatic conflicts "which were for the most part warded off and forgotten" only to return after a long period of latency, creating "phenomena similar in structure and tendency to neurotic symptoms" (*MM* 101). In effect, his account here parallels his version of the primal horde that he had first elaborated in *Totem and Taboo*. At its most basic, the story suggests that civil society begins only after the primal father has been murdered, that is, after an inaugural trauma that then must be repressed. The implication here, which is basically extended to castration, is that the precipitating cause is phylogenetic rather than ontogenetic, meaning that trauma is a formative structure that is part of the evolutionary trajectory of the species as opposed to a discrete experience within the individual's developmental history. The shift in focus from individual experience to broad social-historical speculation echoes another vacillation. Recognizing the impossibility of completely isolating the root

---

[10] On two separate occasions Freud mentions linkages between female genitalia and the uncanny. First, he suggests that the fear of being buried alive represents the fantasy of returning to the womb. Then, more directly, he claims that the uncanny character of female genitalia is due to the fact that the womb is "the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning" (*U* 245). For an analysis of this relationship in conjunction with the fetish, see Silverman, Kaja, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988): 17.

[11] Freud, Sigmund. *Moses and Monotheism* (1939). Trans. Katherine Jones. New York: Vintage, 1955. Hereafter abbreviated *MM*.

cause of neuroses, Freud concedes that what appeared to be repressed memories may or may not be based on actual experiences and that this distinction is basically "unimportant" (*MM* 111).[12]

In effect, Freud is handcuffed by his own imperative to keep sexuality at the forefront of his agenda. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud flirts with the possibility of a death drive, a force capable of upending the primacy of sexuality, only to discard it following a series of intricate and tortuous detours. In lieu of the death drive, castration remains the most influential traumatic experience. Even as the instability of the traumatic discovery of sexual difference prompts Freud to recast trauma as a trans-historical, universal experience, he never seriously considers abandoning it. This is nowhere more evident than when Freud encounters war trauma, that is, situations in which there is an empirical basis for the symptomatic behavior that follows. In *Inhibitions*, Freud returns to trauma, specifying that even when traumatic neuroses seem to exclusively concern a fear of death, the question of castration still cannot be entirely dismissed (*ISA* 57). He continues by claiming that it is highly unlikely that neurosis could come simply from the objective presence of danger. Something deeper has to be at hand; if for no other reason than the unconscious does not have the ability to represent death. "Castration," on the contrary, "can be pictured on the basis of the daily experience of the faeces being separated from the body or on the basis of losing the mother's breast at weaning" (*ISA* 58). And once again he contends that in traumatic situations, "real dangers and instinctual demands converge. Whether the ego is suffering from a pain which will not stop or

---

[12] Freud makes this deduction as a result of his extended treatment of the 'Wolf Man'. See: Freud, Sigmund, "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis" (1918), *SE XVII*. 1 – 124. This well-known case prompted several subsequent analyses, the most important of which is Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok's *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonomy* (Trans. Nicholas Rand. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

experiencing an accumulation of instinctual needs which cannot obtain satisfaction, the economic situation is the same, and the motor helplessness of the ego finds expression in psychical helplessness" (*ISA* 104).

Similar sentiments would prevail at the 1918 International Psycho-Analytical Congress in Budapest where special consideration was devoted to war neuroses.[13] The growing number of soldiers deeply troubled by their experience had lead doctors to adopt various psychoanalytic principles and Freud saw this as an opportunity to further legitimize his practice. For the most part, however, doctors were motivated by practicality, namely to expedite the return of soldiers to the front, and were uninterested in anything other than Freud's most rudimentary model of trauma. The Budapest congress was seen, then, by Freud as an opportunity to reestablish and advance his core tenets. Two of the key note speakers, Sandor Ferenczi and Karl Abraham, were particularly loyal in their adherence to Freud's overarching agenda. Ferenczi made the case that war neuroses were a symptom of narcissistic self-preservation while Abraham claimed that combat merely activated pre-existing neuroses. The third speaker, Ernst Simmel, provided a divergent view. As the only speaker to have treated soldiers, he paints a rather vivid picture of combat:

> a man after being wounded several times has to return to the front, or is separated from important events in his family for an indefinite time, or finds himself exposed irretrievably to that murderous monster, the tank, or to an enemy gas attack which is rolling towards him; again, shot and wounded by shrapnel he has often to lie for hours or days among the gory and mutilated bodies of his comrades, and, not least of all, his self-respect is sorely tried by unjust and cruel superiors who are themselves dominated by complexes, yet he has to remain calm and mutely allow himself to be overwhelmed by the fact that he has no individual value, but is merely one important unit of the whole. (*PWN* 32)

---

[13] The presentations from the congress were later published as *Psychoanalysis and the War Neuroses* (London: International Psycho-Analytical Press, 1921). Hereafter abbreviated as *PWN*.

Though the cumulative burden of war is simply too much to deal with, in contrast to Freud's economic view, Simmel suggests that the ego declines to process the full impact as a matter of self-defense. The physical symptoms that subsequently manifest are thus understood as signaling the "commencement of the healing process," the implication being that war neuroses are something of a normal response to abnormal circumstances.

If trauma is understood as an empirical cause, and the symptoms that follow a logical byproduct, then reason stands that there should be a methodology for successfully treating neurotic behavior. Freud, in contrast to Simmel, remained wary of such an assumption. He had ample evidence that both the psyche and, by extension, neuroses operated in much more complicated ways. And, more importantly, he remained committed to the belief that sexual forces were at the forefront of these operations. Although trauma remained a central concept and war trauma, more specifically, provided the psychoanalytic establishment with a brief moment of legitimacy, trauma simultaneously posed a threat to what Freud thought were his most valuable insights. The result was a perpetual wavering whenever he broached the topic. According to Paul Lerner, this furthermore leads him to characterize all incidents of trauma as 'relativized' interior experiences. That is to say, by persistently shifting the emphasis away from the external traumatic event, Freud makes "it a function of the patient's mind rather than the properties of the accident experience." Consequently, "the accident itself [is] essentially irrelevant" and attention is drawn exclusively, "to the subject's way of experiencing, processing, and remembering (or fantasizing of) it."[14]

---

[14] Lerner, Paul. *Hysterical Men: War, Psychiatry, and the Politics of Trauma in Germany, 1890 – 1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003): 189.

Freud's penchant for equivocation is perhaps most acute in his only direct engagement with the effects of war. In his 1915 "Thoughts for the Times On War and Death," Freud avoids considering war trauma directly by turning to questions of disillusionment and changing attitudes toward death.[15] With regard to disillusionment, Freud claims that war undercuts society's belief that it has surmounted its base instincts for murder and destruction. In addition to the disillusion that follows this revelation, war further illustrates the extent to which civilization is based on "the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction" (*SE XVI* 282). In terms of how death is perceived, Freud again draws a corollary between primitive attitudes and those held by his own contemporaries. Primitive man "took death seriously, recognized it as the termination of life" while at the time, denying it altogether (*SE XVI* 292). Civilized man shares these attitudes, but only at the level of the unconscious. To the extent that war hastens death, it forces its participants to consider the gravity of mortality. At the same time it encourages those same participants as if they "do not believe in [their] own death… as if [they] were immortal" (*SE XVI* 296). This contradictory imperative likewise represents the general logic of war. While modern war employs society's most advanced technologies, it simultaneously strips away any pretense of civilization, laying "bare the primal man in each of us" both by reviving our base instinct to murder and renouncing the inexorable divide between life and death (*SE XVI* 299). In effect, Freud's remarks illustrate yet another instance in which the repressed returns. However, because of his preference for broad speculation, the repressed here is an earlier stage of mankind, an impossible to specify, abstract category, rather than the tangible, traumatic experience of war itself. In this view trauma remains decisive, the catalyst that initiates a progression of symptoms, yet forever

[15] Freud, Sigmund. "Thoughts for the Times On War and Death" (1915). *SE XVI*. 291.

inaccessible, an indeterminate source that leads further and further a field, dissolving the very structural logic that it introduces.

## Trauma Multiplies

Many of the same questions that plagued Freud's efforts—namely, questions concerning the tenuous distinctions between internal and external, past and present, real and imagined— would persist for those who addressed trauma in the aftermath of World War I. At the same time, these problems grew even more complicated insofar as trauma not only continued to proliferate but intensified in magnitude over the last half of twentieth century. Though many had seen World War I as a culmination of technology's destructive capacity, concluding a path that dated back to at least the introduction of train travel and large-scale industrial factories, brutal violence and its incomprehensible effects would quickly resume with World War II, the Holocaust and the use of atomic weapons in Hiroshima and Nagasaki serving as the most blatant and lasting examples. By the time the American Psychiatric Association addressed the phenomenon, defining it in terms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), trauma had not only steadily expanded to include everything from victims of rape, incest, child abuse to widespread epidemics such as AIDS, genocide and other forms of sectarian or ethnic violence, but had also become increasingly intertwined with various forms of media and representation.[16] Everything,

---

[16] The term was first included in the third edition of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (1980). The fourth edition of the manual defines PTSD as "the development of characteristic symptoms following exposure to an extreme traumatic stressor involving direct personal experience of an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one's physical integrity; or witnessing an event that involves death, injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of another person; or learning about unexpected or violent death, serious harm, or threat of death or injury experienced by a family member or other close associate. The person's response to the event must involve intense fear, helplessness, or horror. The characteristic symptoms resulting from the exposure to the extreme trauma include persistent reexperiencing of the traumatic event, persistent

for instance, from the assassination of President Kennedy, to the explosion of the N.A.S.A. space shuttle Challenger, and, more recently, the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001 have been discussed as traumatic for all those who have witnessed them. As trauma was officially recognized and its basic model applied to an increasingly broad array of circumstances, irreconcilable discrepancies between both cause and effect, problem and solution nevertheless remain.

Just as trauma continued to generate more and more general interest, it began in the 1990s to specifically draw interest as a topic of critical and theoretical inquiry. Cathy Caruth, the most prominent scholar at the forefront of this new field, strikes a balance somewhere between Freud's initial account and the more recent definitions of PTSD, defining trauma as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena."[17] In *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub further characterize this overwhelming experience as a non-existent or blank screen, an

---

avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma and numbing of general responsiveness, and persistent symptoms of increased arousal" (463-464). The manual goes on to provide an extensive list of potential traumatic circumstances and details the ways that traumatic events can be re-experienced (e.g. through recurrent distressing dreams and 'flashbacks').

[17] Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996): 11. Hereafter abbreviated as *UE*. See also, Caruth (ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995). For the growing field, see among others: Edkins, Jenny, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), Ball, Karyn, *Traumatizing Theory: The Cultural Politics of Affect in and Beyond Psychoanalysis* (New York: Other Press, 2007), Bal, Mieke, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer (eds.), *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present* (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1999), Bennett, Jill, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2005). *Trauma and Visuality in Modernity* (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 2006), Baer, Ulrich, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2002), Vickroy, Laurie, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), *Topologies of Trauma: Essays on the Limit of Knowledge and Memory* (Eds. Linda Belau and Petar Ramadanovic. New York: Other Press, 2002), and Kerner, Aaron, *Representing the Catastrophic: Coming to Terms with "Unimaginable" suffering and "Incomprehensible" Horror in Visual Culture* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2007).

absence within the subject's psychic organization.[18] In what is termed dissociation, the traumatic experience remains unassimilated, alienated from what the subject recognizes as their personal history.[19] Although the trauma is considered unassimilated, there are recurring partial references, fragments that both terrorize the subject with traces of the original violence and serve as an imperative to bring that lost experience into full consciousness. In this regard, the field of trauma studies shifts its attention from the causal event itself to its more wide-ranging and convoluted aftermath.

For example, in working with Holocaust survivors Dori Laub stresses the involvement of a third party, someone willing to listen with a certain degree of empathy as well as insistence, someone, in other words, to bear witness. In this particular account and trauma studies more generally, the Holocaust becomes the paradigmatic model, both anchoring trauma as an actual historical event while illustrating its overarching gravity and impact. At the same time, the premium placed on testimony and the ability to recount one's earlier experiences in narrative form draws greater attention to the question of representation.[20] Caruth is likewise interested in how the recollection of trauma is related

---

[18] *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992): 57.

[19] It is along these lines that Laub and Felman characterize trauma as an "encounter with the real" (xvi). Although they do not attribute this particular reference, it is an opportunity, as good as any, to consider the relationship between trauma and the Lacanian category of the real. Jacques Lacan introduces the real to indicate a realm that is both elusive and, yet, insistent. See *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (Trans. Alan Sheridan. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. New York: Norton, 1978), chapters 5 and 6 in particular. The real has subsequently become the central focus in the prolific work of Slavoj Zizek and his various followers. With regard to film theory, Todd McGowan explains that cinema's ability to facilitate encounters with the real endows the medium with a radical potential. One of the main differences in the recent uptake of the Lacanian real is that it effectively celebrates the potential of such encounters. For McGowan's succinct account, see his *The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).

[20] See Friedlander, Saul (ed.), *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992), Bernard-Donals, Michael and Richard Glejzer, *Between Witness and Testimony: The Holocaust and the Limits of Representation* (Albany: State

to narrative. Indeed, she largely pursues her project by locating and analyzing trauma as a textual operation. Identifying key figures, tropes, and words that operate akin to a "forgotten wound," she argues that the various literary and theoretical texts she analyzes—including those authored by Freud—are a product of this structuring absence.

While these scholars variously endorse aims that are analogous to abreaction, their strategies simultaneously accentuate a number of slippages. For instance, there is a shift from those who witness trauma to the witness who enables an account of trauma, from the event as it is individually experienced to the residual collective reception of historical events, from trauma as a singular, acute experience to trauma in its most dispersed and abstract form. In the case of Caruth, there is the related problem of characterizing trauma as unrepresentable only to then focus on forms of representation that are understood as a manifestation of trauma. One of the few explicit critics of trauma studies, Ruth Leys further questions the significance of belatedness in Caruth's work.[21] In its simple sense, belatedness refers to the period of latency or delay that separates trauma and the eventual appearance of symptoms. As Leys points out, however, Freud employed the term *Nachträglichkeit,* which is typically translated as deferral or deferred action, to problematize "the originary status of the traumatic event," to rebuke the very notion of linear determinism (271). And more specifically, *Nachträglichkeit* introduces the possibility that trauma is less the product of an inaugural event than of "the substitutions, displacements and falsifications imposed on it" through repression and later revision. If

---

University of New York Press, 2001), and Rothberg, Michael, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

[21] *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). For another critical view, see Sigrid Weigel's "The Symptomatology of a Universalized Concept of Trauma: on the Failing of Freud's Reading of Tasso in the Trauma of History" (Trans. Georgina Paul. *New German Critique*, No. 90: *Taboo, Trauma, Holocaust* [Autumn, 2003], 85 – 94).

this is the case, "there can be no simple return to the origin […] the origin or trauma does not present itself as a literal or material truth, as Caruth's theory demands, but as a psychical or 'historical truth' whose meaning has to be interpreted, reconstructed, and deciphered" (282).

Around the same time Leys began questioning the conceptual foundations of trauma studies, *Screen* presented a dossier in which several film scholars, largely sympathetic to Caruth's methodology, announced their interest in the new field.[22] In part following Caruth's predilection for textual analysis, film scholars gravitated to the formal mechanisms that allowed narrative film to engender historical or psychological events that had been either marginalized or suppressed. Preference in this regard leaned toward modernist techniques such as those found in *Hiroshima mon amour* (Alain Resnais, 1960), a film that Caruth herself considered in *Unclaimed Experience*. At the same time, film provided a much wider scope for investigation. For instance, numerous formal devices produce shocking, visceral effects that effectively traumatize the audience. Genres ranging from horror to melodrama regularly invoke trauma both through form and content. What's more, trauma need not necessarily be manifest for films to figuratively or allegorically bring it to bear.[23] Meanwhile, traumatic events are routinely presented on television news and in other forms of visual media. Whereas certain documentaries may interrogate the evidentiary basis of these catastrophic images, the ubiquity of such

---

[22] Radstone, Susannah. "Trauma and Screen Studies: Opening the Debate." *Screen* 42:2 (Summer 2001). 190 – 193. The dossier included contributions from E. Ann Kaplan, Janet Walker, and Thomas Elsaesser, all of whom were working on manuscripts somehow related to trauma. For their subsequent work, see Kaplan's *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005) and Walker's *Trauma Cinema: Documenting Incest and the Holocaust* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

[23] *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

material conversely serves to perpetuate a voyeuristic obsession with violence, normalizing traumatic experience for the purposes of facile entertainment.

The consensus is clear throughout the *Screen* dossier that trauma merited the critical attention it had suddenly spawned. While there was little doubt that additional research would follow, there were concurrent debates about trauma's status as a theoretical concept. Elsaesser, for instance, complains that trauma is a vague amalgamation of theoretical leftovers, symptomatic in his mind of a broader loss of focus. Though somewhat facetious, he voices real concerns in warning that trauma is nothing more than "a theory of victimhood and a politics of blame, in which various ethnic, gender or sexual preference groups vie (sometimes with each other) for a place in the sun of righteous indignation (or lucrative litigation)."[24] Kaplan, in contrast, goes on to more tactfully suggest that trauma is the product of "a particular intellectual climate." Namely, in the aftermath of poststructuralism, scholars grew wary of overly abstract or opaque theories while becoming increasingly concerned with issues related to the body. "Addressing the phenomena of trauma must have seemed one way for critics to begin to link high theory with specific material events that were both personal and which implicated history, memory, and culture generally."[25] Ironically, where Kaplan sees trauma studies as a way of escaping or negotiating the perils of high theory, others have linked it to deconstruction—by many accounts, high theory's most sinister peak. The primary reason for this association is that Caruth and others encouraged the dismissal of

---

[24] "Postmodernism As Mourning Work." *Screen* 42:2 (Summer 2001). 194.

[25] *Trauma Culture*: 35. See also: Kaplan, E. Ann and Ban Wang (eds.), *Trauma and Cinema: Cross-Cultural Explorations* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004).

binary categories such as true/false and past/present. That is to say, they advocate deconstructing or dissolving such distinctions.

Despite such overtures, trauma studies has had very little to do with deconstruction in any strong sense. Though by no means the only measure of deconstruction, few if any scholars interested in trauma make reference to Derrida. This is conspicuous only insofar as Derrida has extensively engaged several texts that have a direct bearing on Freud's account of trauma. One possible reason for overlooking his work is that Derrida largely refuses to draw any correlation between Freud's theoretical texts and unrelated examples of historical trauma. Nevertheless, it can be said that Derrida's findings are highly relevant. In "Freud and the Scene of Writing," for example, Derrida explicates the structural affinity between writing and trauma.[26] After considering various metaphors, he reveals that the formulation of the psyche in its most basic sense is fundamentally intertwined with the problem of writing. Indeed, memory and consciousness are themselves the result of a violent act or breach, which, in turn, leaves an impression. Subsequent impressions follow, and according to Derrida, "It is the difference between [these] breaches which is the true origin of memory, and thus of the psyche" (*FSW* 201). Of course, origin as invoked here is intentionally problematic. The notion of a first impression implies that the psychic apparatus was once hermetically sealed, completely virginal. On the other hand, that the psychic apparatus is eventually breached means that same apparatus is simultaneously permeable. The key is not that the psyche is alternately impermeable and porous or that it was once a blank slate, but that

[26] "Freud and the Scene of Writing." *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978. 196 – 231. Hereafter abbreviated *FSW*.

the psyche originates as an oscillation between an impossible prior state and a state of subsequent, undifferentiated repetition.

This oscillation shares broader similarities with what Derrida considers writing. The initial breach serves as a moment of inscription. Inscription is not tantamount to a permanent record. It only leaves an impression or trace which cannot be "reappropriated at any time as simple presence" (*FSW* 201). It is precisely because this initial puncture is ephemeral that the mind requires ongoing repetition in order to maintain any kind of existential status. For Derrida, the essence of Freud's psyche is therefore *différance*. And, paradoxically because "*différance* is not an essence," Freud's psyche is reduced to nothing. To put it another way, Derrida asserts that the mind originates in the "trace before Being" or that which precedes presence, in effect emphasizing the causal logic that both informs and troubles Freud's account (*FSW* 203). What undermines this cause and effect logic is that even before the breach there must already be the possibility that any impression will pave the way for eventual legibility. Consequently, it is neither the external force nor the internal register that constitutes the psyche. It is, rather, a dynamic between the two. *Différance*, Derrida goes on, "must be conceived of in other terms than those of a calculus or mechanics of decision." Not only is this dynamic not subject to logical standards, but any notion that "*différance* is originary" erases "the myth of a present origin." This is why, Derrida continues, "'originary' must be understood as having been crossed out, without which *différance* would be derived from an original plenitude. It is a non-origin which is originary" (*FSW* 203). At this point it is possible to draw a correlation between what is discussed here as memory and trauma more generally. Both serve as an originary psychic event that simultaneously renders the point of origin

indistinguishable and impossible. Both, in other words, inaugurate an unending procession of *différance*.

Derrida's examination of the 'scene of writing' lays the groundwork for his later returns to Freud in both *Archive Fever* and *The Post Card*.[27] The latter work in particular concerns the temporal disorder that informs writing in general and that Derrida claims is likewise explicit throughout *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Conceptually driven by both speculation and a concern for the legacy of psychoanalysis, Freud finds himself in *Beyond* mired in repetition, reproducing a structure without origin, perpetually broaching and preserving this unknown point of conception. It is for this reason that Derrida classifies *Beyond* as 'a-thetic', or without a thesis. In short, the proper object—the death drive—in *Beyond* lies outside the realm of possibility and, yet, it is the impossibility of this object that structures Freud's analysis. There can be no thesis because there can be no way to articulate what it is that lies beyond the system. It's significant, however, that this impossibility is not treated merely as a structuring absence. Recalling his earlier essay, Derrida maintains that the death drive cannot be conceived in terms of an instrumental or purposeful logic. Rather:

> What will return, in having already come, but not in order to contradict the PP [pleasure principle], nor to oppose itself to the PP, but to mine the PP as its proper stranger, to hollow it into an abyss from the vantage of an origin more original than it and independent of it, older than it within it, will not be, under the name of the death drive or the repetition compulsion, an other master or a counter-master, but something other than mastery, something completely other. In order to be something completely other, it will have to not oppose itself, will have to not enter into a dialectical relation with the master (life, the PP as life, the living PP, the PP alive). It will have to not engage a dialectic of master and slave, for

[27] *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Trans. Eric Prenowitz. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). For a relevant review of *Archive Fever*, see Herman Rapaport's "Archive Trauma" (*Diacritics*, Vol. 28, No. 4, Trauma and Psychoanalysis [Winter, 1998], 68 –81).

> example. This non-mastery equally will have to not enter into a dialectical relation with death, for example, in order to become, as in speculative idealism, the 'true master'. (*Post Card* 317-318)

Once again Derrida is adamant in not delineating this other as a counterpart or complement to what is present in Freud's system. The exception to the pleasure principle is not a contradiction, "the exception does not speak against the law: it precedes the law. There is something older than the law within the law" (*Post Card* 350). In rendering death as the absolute other in Freud's system and by claiming that this is what precedes the system, Derrida's account serves to reinforce his earlier argument that the Freudian psyche is borne out of *différance*.

Derrida continues in *The Post Card* by considering repetition more specifically. "Sometimes," he writes, repetition "repeats something that precedes it…" In other words, repetition exemplifies the notion of causal logic in which there is a hierarchy between what is primary and what is secondary and derivative (*Post Card* 351). But there is also a 'non-classical' account of repetition. In this version, repetition can be considered 'original'. Non-classical repetition, as Derrida further observes, "induces, through an unlimited propagation of itself, a general deconstruction: not only of the entire classical ontology of repetition […], but also of the entire psychic construction, of everything supporting the drives and their representatives, insuring the integrity of the organization or of the corpus (be it psychic or otherwise) under the dominance of the PP […]" (*Post Card* 352). Implicit in this deconstruction is the ambivalence that allows Freud to characterize repetition both in terms of mastery and as a force that undermines or haunts the pleasure principle. If, on the one hand, *différance* posits an inaccessible point of origin, repetition is, on the other, its only possible corollary. The proliferation of attempts

to recover what is inaccessible is simultaneously unsuccessful and productive. Repetition's obliquely productive faculty, however, is ultimately undercut by the fact that the repetition's objective always coincides with death. In this regard, deconstruction is not simply interested in breaking down binary oppositions. The focus is instead on the paradoxical logic in which oppositions or other inconsistencies necessarily coexist and how efforts to efface or circumscribe such paradoxes only succeed in multiplying them.

With regard to trauma, Derrida's interventions serve as a marked departure from Freud. In drawing parallels between the role of writing and the originary psychical act that forms subjectivity, Derrida diffuses trauma into a more general instantiation of *différance.* Trauma consequently ceases to function as an individual ailment or malady and, as it becomes aligned with a more general condition of possibility, its causal linkages to specific historical events begin to fade. Even among theorists and philosophers more directly concerned with the traumatic impact of WW II era there is a tendency to treat trauma in more general terms. Giorgio Agamben, for example, claims that bare life—life incapable of bearing qualities—is the nucleus around which the modern state is organized. The paradigmatic example of bare life and the biopolitical logic that it enables is found in Nazi death camps where, "exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and *zoe*, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction."[28] Surely Agamben drew his conclusion only after considering accounts such as Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz.* Deprived of every possession and reduced to a hollow, mechanical shell, the "hours, days, months spilled out sluggishly from the future into the past, always too slowly, a valueless and superfluous material, of which we

---

[28] Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998): 9.

sought to rid ourselves as soon as possible. With the end of the season when the days chased each other, vivacious, precious and irrecoverable, the future stood in front of us, grey and inarticulate, like an invincible barrier."[29] As distinctive as the miserable reality of the camps may have been, Levi's description cannot help but to recall the experience of all combat. In Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, an anonymous soldier mired in the trenches of World War I describes what has become of his existence: "Here, on the borders of death, life follows an amazingly simple course, it is limited to what is most necessary…. As in a polar expedition, every expression of life must serve only the preservation of existence, and is absolutely focused on that…life is simply one continual watch against the menace of death;—it has transformed us into unthinking animals …."[30]

Like Agamben, Gilles Deleuze invokes trauma but only as the point of departure for a much larger project, namely the analysis of the time-image in *Cinema 2*.[31] In response to why he takes the Second World War as a dividing line in his account, Deleuze says that, "the post-war period has greatly increased the situations which we no longer know how to react to, in spaces which we no longer know how to describe" (xi). This, in turn, produces a new kind of character, a veritable mutant, unable to react as a result of this new situation.[32] Other than the loose implication that this paralysis is due to

---

[29] Levi, Primo. *Survival in Auschwitz* (Trans. Stuart Woolf. New York: Touchstone, 1996): 117.

[30] Maria Remarque, Erich. *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Trans. A. W. Wheen. New York: Ballantine Books, 1982 [originally 1928]): 273-274.

[31] Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. (Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

[32] This state may just as well be described as 'shell shock', a diagnosis most closely associated with World War I. In a certain sense, the effects Deleuze describes in relation to WWII are already a repetition of the earlier war. Though this implication is not explicit it wouldn't be out of place in Deleuze's recursive logic

the war and its effects, Deleuze is uninterested in pursuing trauma in any narrow sense. Instead, he tracks the emergence of what he says is something different, "not something more beautiful, more profound, or more true, but something different" (40). Where the classical period had been organized around action and movement, post-war cinema gives way to what characters see. More specifically, there is a break in the causal logic that had dictated classical cinema. Shattered from within, "perceptions and actions ceased to be linked together, and spaces are now neither co-ordinated nor filled." The characters condemned to see without any consolation are "given over to something intolerable," the banality of their everydayness (41). The image that consequently gains prominence is what Deleuze refers to as pure optical (or sound) situations, or opsigns. What the image makes visible in these situations is simply time itself, pure contemplation and the change or becoming that occurs over time. In making time visible, post-war cinema simultaneously makes thought perceptible.

The manner in which this transpires, however, is far from straightforward. According to Deleuze, post-war cinema in its broadest sense is characterized in terms of indiscernibility. That is to say, there is a perpetual inability to distinguish objective and subjective, real and imaginary, physical and mental. It is no longer possible to draw these distinctions both because it is no longer necessary to do so and because it is no longer possible to occupy an external, objective position from which to do so. As Deleuze continues his analysis, indiscernibility is compounded along several different fault lines. Causal relations and false continuities begin to blur. Real objects and their reflections

---

where, for example, Alain Resnais repeatedly gives way to Orson Welles as the primary representative of the time-image. For a more specific analysis of the relationship between cinema and the shock of WWI, see Kaes, Anton: *Shell Shock Cinema: Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

begin to coalesce. Description absorbs and creates as opposed to clarifying or preserving the object. This traffic between opposites comes to a climax in the circuit that forms between the actual and the virtual: "It is as if an image in a mirror, a photo or a postcard came to life, assumed independence and passed into the actual," while "the actual image returned into the mirror and resumed its place in the postcard or photo" (68). Deleuze further reiterates that the collapse in these distinctions is not a matter of confusion. Indiscernibility, on the contrary, "constitutes an objective illusion; it does not suppress the distinction between the two sides, but makes it unattributable, each side taking the other's role in a relation which we must describe as reciprocal presupposition, or reversibility" (69). At the crux of this crisis is of course time itself. The direct representation of time in post-war cinema not only poses the coexistence of the past and future within the present image but a past and future that are never identical or reducible to the present (37).

In conjunction with the deluge of indiscernibility, Deleuze posits the rise of a 'spiritual automaton', a figure who intermingles the viewer with the pure seer inside the film and who is endowed with the capacity to combine "conscious thought and the unconscious in thought" (165). More importantly, this figure provides a basis for contemplating "the shock which arouses the thinker in you" (156). Just as its greatest pioneers had long recognized, Deleuze confirms that cinema's most distinctive feature is its ability to impose shock. Not to be confused with the violence contained within the image, shock as in Eisenstein and Vertov's varying theories of montage is a result of neuro-physiological vibrations, of the cerebral stimulation generated through combinations of cinema's constitutive components. The image that produces shock is,

according to various comments drawn from Antoine Artaud, equal to thought itself. What distinguishes Artaud from the likes of Eisenstein, however, is that cinema advances not the power of thought, but rather its powerlessness, the very "powerlessness to think at the heart of thought" (166). What conveys this powerlessness is that cinema, again like thought, originates not from a preconceived whole but from a point of indeterminacy, a fissure or dissociative force, a 'figure of nothingness', a 'hole in appearances'. In the end, what the cinema communicates is, "the fact that we are not yet thinking, the powerlessness to think the whole and to think oneself, thought which is always fossilized, dislocated, collapsed" (167). This paradox is at once source and obstruction to both thought and cinema.

Post-war cinema is rife with figures "struck by something intolerable in the world" (169). What's intolerable is nothing less than the unthought in thought, and this figure has his corollary in entire populations who found following the Second World War that they were dispossessed of both themselves and the world. The adjective spiritual in Deleuze's spiritual automaton refers not only to cinema's special connection with belief but to the fact that the broken link between the world and its inhabitants can only be restored as a matter of faith. "The reaction of which man has been disposed can be replaced only by belief. Only belief in the world can reconnect man to what he sees and hears. The cinema must film, not the world, but belief in this world, our only link. […] Restoring our belief in the world – this is the power of modern cinema (when it stops being bad). Whether we are Christians or atheists, in our universal schizophrenia, we need reasons to believe in this world" (172).

In this regard, the time-image is as much a symptom of post-war malaise as it is a potential means of overcoming it. That he maintains such a prospect further illustrates that even though there are some similarities with the work of trauma studies, Deleuze's account is ultimately very different in terms of method, orientation, and aim. That is, although both consider the breakdown of binary categories, draw attention to the role of the unrepresentable, and place central emphasis on figures plagued by physical and psychological paralysis, Deleuze has no interest in trauma as an acute ailment. Something very similar can be said about Derrida. In the end, trauma has no currency for either simply because trauma is understood more broadly as the condition of possibility, either for the formation of the subject or of post-war society. In taking this approach, there is no attempt to demarcate or abreact an original traumatic event. This is not say that individual trauma does not exist, but that it is not worth intermingling therapeutic concerns with either textual operations or historical developments on a larger scale. Such endeavors only result in the same interminable equivocation that so often befell Freud.

## Trauma Elides

For Deleuze, the time-image and what he describes in terms of post-war cinema is predominantly associated with European filmmakers. During the 1990s, there are several developments that suggest growing affinities between Hollywood cinema and the time-image.[33] First, the topic of war is made increasingly prevalent as ongoing debates about Vietnam and the legacy of the Cold War compete with the rhetoric surrounding the return

[33] See, for example, David Martin-Jones's *Deleuze, Cinema and National Identity: Narrative Time in National Contexts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006). See also, his "Demystifying Deleuze: French Philosophy Meets Contemporary U.S. Cinema," *Film Theory and Contemporary Hollywood Movies* (Ed. Warren Buckland. New York: Routledge, 2009).

to active military operations in the 1991 Gulf War and a series of commemorative tributes to World War II. Second, a growing array of films dealing with both trauma in particular and history more generally begin to coalesce with experiments involving non-linear plots. In this section I consider a number of films in which temporal dislocation is directly tied to the experience of war trauma. As one commentator observes with regard to the most recent cycle of war films, Hollywood evinces a stylistic and ideological impasse not entirely unlike the one Freud faced in his efforts to delineate and account for the primal scene.[34] In the analysis that follows I demonstrate that comparisons between Hollywood and the time-image are fundamentally misguided as more often than not these films employ unusual formal and narrative devices precisely in order to abreact or mitigate the violence of historical trauma. In addition to examining war films such as *Courage Under Fire* and *In the Valley of Elah*, I consider how trauma extends beyond the theater of war to inform novelty narratives including time-travel and puzzle films. I begin, however, with *JFK* (Oliver Stone, 1991) and *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994), two films that illustrate not only the stylistic and ideological stakes but also Hollywood's preferred methods for negotiating the vicissitudes of historical trauma.

Oliver Stone's film *JFK* sparked considerable controversy amongst historians and film critics alike because of its flamboyant mixture of fictional reenactment and archival footage, its digressive and speculative flashbacks, its paranoid fixation with conspiracy. Chief among its critics' concerns was the use of fast paced editing and the blending of truth and fiction. The fear being that such formal strategies could be used to manipulate viewers and distort or undermine historical truth. These same strategies, however, were

---

[34] Stewart, Garrett. "Digital Fatigue: Imaging War in Recent American Film" *Film Quarterly* Vol. 62, No. 4 (Summer 2009): 45-55.

simultaneously being held up as a means of dealing with the crisis posed by historical traumas not unlike President Kennedy's assassination. More sympathetic critics took *JFK's* modernist flourishes to be an indication of broader disorientation and despair or, conversely, a call for intensified retrospection through alternative formal strategies.[35] While the film's brazen approach raises the possibility of engendering a historical narrative for events that lacked referential clarity, it was at the same time obsessed with corroborating claims that a conspiracy was indeed behind the assassination. Repeated innuendo and flashes of foul play are not enough to prove this point. In the end, the film's only recourse is for its main character Jim Garrison (Kevin Costner) to make his case in the court of law, revealing an "obsessive, nostalgic longing for the explanatory power and precision" of both jurisprudence in general and classical Hollywood narrative more specifically (Nichols 128).

Debates surrounding *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994) were nearly as intense though perhaps only in more critical circles. Whereas *JFK* was deliberately provocative, cultivating controversy by virtue of engaging such a familiar and harrowing historical event, *Forrest Gump* was generally considered innocuous and entertaining. The film follows its guileless namesake through an epic series of vignettes closely intertwined with the ebb and flow of post-WWII American history. Gump's path likewise resembles the events featured in *Born on the Fourth of July* (Oliver Stone1989) but in a totally sanitized and sanguine way. And this is precisely the problem. According to its critics, *Forrest* provides a sense of coherence by de-politicizing and de-contextualizing the

---

[35] See White, Hayden: "The Modernist Event," *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event* (Ed. Vivian Sobchack. New York: Routledge, 1996). And Nichols, Bill: "Please, All You Good and Honest People: Film Form and Historical Consciousness," *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

events that shaped post-war America. For Robert Burgoyne the film revises history through visual technologies and in turn produces a virtual or prosthetically enhanced cultural memory.[36] Other scholars nonetheless took an opposing view. Vivian Sobchack, for example, argues that the film "manifests ambivalent attitudes about the meanings of 'history' and the 'historical event'" precisely because it blurs the distinction between fact and fiction, between the monumental and the trivial.[37]

Stephen Prince, in a slightly different context, makes a further case against the likes of Burgoyne and all others who dismiss the film's coherence because it is artificially manufactured. Just because the images produced within *Forrest*, as with most Hollywood films, are variously synthetic or without a profilmic referent does not necessarily discount them as unrealistic or ineffective.[38] In Prince's perceptual model, not unlike Freud's eventual account of war trauma, realism rests not in the image itself, but ultimately in the viewer's process of reception. Susannah Radstone pursues a similar comparison by relating *Forrest* to Freud's concept *Nachträglichkeit*.[39] By placing emphasis not on the truth of the past, but on the way in which later events prompt a revised account of the past, Radstone suggests that the film neatly parallels *Nachträglichkeit*. And by forcing its viewers to return to a series of traumatic historical events, simultaneously drawing attention to their initial incomprehension and the capacity to eventually reframe these

---

[36] Burgoyne, Robert. *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at U.S. History*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. 108.

[37] Sobchack, Vivian. "History Happens," *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

[38] "True Lies: Perceptual Realism, Digital Images, and Film Theory." *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (Spring 1996), 27 – 37.

[39] "Screening Trauma: *Forrest Gump*, Film and Memory," *Memory and Methodology*. Ed. Susannah Radstone. Oxford: New York, 2000. 79 – 107.

events, *Forrest Gump* provides a mode "of affective identification through which traumatic memory begins to be worked through" (98).

*JFK* and *Forrest Gump* ultimately represent two very different approaches to history and trauma. In *JFK* there is an insistent, never ending return to the past, a return not only to the assassination of Kennedy but more importantly a return to the events that precipitate the assassination. Inevitably there is always an earlier moment that escapes in this effort to return. Moreover, for all of the film's stylistic verve and inscrutable allusion to conspiracy it can never absolutely identify or produce the moment at which the 'plot' begins, the traumatic moment of origin that is both anterior to and analogous with the subsequent assassination. The desperate effort to determine the truth behind the assassination instead reveals the crisis that renders truth impossible. In contrast, *Forrest Gump* is largely composed of precisely these very impossible images. Where *JFK* is organized around lack, *Forrest* is organized around saturation—history is always readily available even if it is both overdetermined and manufactured through special effects. Where *JFK* is guided by a singular, obsessive focus prompting in turn fragmentation, diffusion, and boundary collapse, *Forrest's* sweeping storyline requires historical compression built on images that are equally synthetic and alluring. The desperate drive to capture the moment of origin, the precipitating cause, in *JFK* instead engenders a primal scene that is perpetually displaced. *Forrest*, conversely, provides a kind of historical mastery. It does so precisely by virtue of rendering the primal scene visible, present instead of absent. These hyperreal images in *Forrest* nonetheless evoke the same crisis that afflicts *JFK*. If the surface banality of *Forrest* is indeed a substitute for history

itself, then history in turn risks becoming a mere product or façade, a proposition as disturbing as the ever elusive truth that vexes *JFK*.

Though organized around divergent strategies *JFK* and *Forrest Gump* are both emblematic of a growing interest in the intersection of history and representation. This intersection becomes all the more noticeable as a new cycle of war films emerges in the latter half of the 1990s. A decade earlier films such as *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (George Cosmatos, 1985) and *Top Gun* (Tony Scott, 1986) were considered thinly disguised efforts to re-fight or vanquish the memory of the Vietnam War.[40] Such films were largely conventional, organized around central figures capable of determining their circumstances by virtue of their actions. Following the end of the Cold War and a series of anniversary events commemorating WWII, there was a sudden vogue whereby the participants of the Second World War were celebrated as the greatest generation. Although the rhetoric was predominantly congratulatory and simplistic, the return to WWII could not help but to simultaneously recall the unprecedented violence of war and the indelible trauma that followed in its wake. Traces of this failure can be detected in the temporal organization of the era's most high-profile war film, Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). That is to say, for a film that closely adheres to the celebratory rhetoric surrounding WWII, *Saving* at the same time pursues several unconventional strategies. [41]

---

[40] See Jeffords, Susan. *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989) and *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994).

[41] For an exception, see Janet Walker's "The Vicissitudes of Traumatic Memory and the Postmodern History Film" in Wang and Kaplan's *Trauma and Cinema: Cross-Cultural Explorations*. 123 – 144.

The film begins in earnest with a stunning and elaborate battle sequence following US infantry as they storm the beaches of Normandy. The disorienting realism of the sequence lead some commentators to suggest that Spielberg had de-contextualized the siege, foregrounding all the violence and chaos of combat without any explanation or overarching justification. Be this as it may, numerous forms of rationalization would follow in retrospect as the film shifts its attention to a small patrol charged with finding the eponymous Private Ryan. With the establishment of the mission to find Ryan whose three brothers have all been killed, the film sets up the sanctity of the family as the ideological foundation for patriotic valor. Subsequently, the logic of the mission is obliquely reinforced through various references to the Holocaust and explicitly validated by the patrol's enigmatic leader, Captain Miller (Tom Hanks). With his men frustrated by the hopeless logistics of their mission and on the verge of mutiny, Miller explains that this is their only chance to maintain any sense of humanity in the utterly de-humanizing context of war.[42] If the violence in the opening sequence is meaningless, the remainder of the film works diligently to re-ennoble war not through righteous destruction, but through an ideological framework in which the sanctity of family and life back home merits sacrifice abroad. By back-loading its justification for war, *Saving Private Ryan* reverses the trajectory typically found in films set in Vietnam. It begins with the chaos and confusion of combat in which only survival matters before shifting to a more specific story in which Hollywood conventions take over and the preceding destructive horrors are placed within an explanatory narrative.

Though standard in its overarching ideological message, *Saving Private Ryan* incorporates several noteworthy deviations. As I've just detailed, the film suggests that

[42] Burgoyne, Robert. *The Hollywood Historical Film* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008): 65 – 66.

justification and understanding come only in retrospect, in the aftermath of war's violent chaos. A more startling discrepancy would seem to be the dissymmetry between Captain Miller, the film's ostensible protagonist, and the focus on Private Ryan (Matt Damon), both as the figure around which the mission is organized and for which the film is titled. To some extent their relationship evokes the similarly paternal relations that structure earlier Vietnam films such as *Platoon* (Oliver Stone, 1986) despite the fact that Miller and Ryan essentially barely know or interact with one another. This is further emphasized through the film's flashback framework. Indeed, *Saving* begins with an unidentified, elder Ryan and his family at the Normandy American Cemetery overlooking Omaha Beach in France. As the elder man weeps at the grave of a fellow soldier, the film cuts to the D-Day invasion not according to Ryan's experience, but as it is focalized through Captain Miller. On the one hand, it is as if the memory of war is always dislocated. Conversely, and perhaps more in accordance with film's dominant ideology, it is as if the shared experience of combat is enough to dissolve the differences that separate their personal paths. This extends further as Miller's final invocation that Ryan "earn this," the sacrifice made on his behalf, is addressed less to him than it is to the viewing audience.

Though Spielberg seems to have cleverly mobilized these deviations specifically to maximize the ideological force of his film, the mere presence of temporal discontinuity along with the elder Ryan's tearful questioning of whether or not he has earned "this" is enough to recall certain attributes of the time-image and, more specifically, the debilitating legacy of the Vietnam War. If for Deleuze WWII left the entire continent reeling and cinema's former protagonists reduced to listless voyeurs, it was because Europe was in ruins both structurally and mentally. Though Americans likewise suffered

significant losses, the effects were less destructive if only because the fighting for the most part never took place on the home front and because these efforts always had recourse to an ideological justification. Arguably then, it really wasn't until the Vietnam War that the US began to better understand Europe's post-war situation. At the same time that trauma began to resonate, there was a growing effort to frame trauma within a therapeutic discourse. In the films that subsequently confronted the Vietnam experience, there was certainly evidence of the malaise and paralysis that had long since besieged European cinema. But there was also a growing focus on therapeutic narratives in which veteran's were able to regain some psychological order and, by extension, provide resolution to what was otherwise considered a military defeat.[43] The therapeutic premise and the emphasis on restoring psychological order not only lent itself to the conventions of Hollywood narrative in general but also to the investigative focus and flashback structure that was characteristic of the detective genre.[44] Such attributes are most explicit in *Courage Under Fire* (Edward Zwick, 1996), one of the few films to directly address the first Gulf War, and, as in *Saving Private Ryan*, one that is organized around reconstructing a virtual memory through its two main characters.[45]

---

[43] On the veteran and therapeutic narratives, see: Westwell, Guy. *War Cinema: Hollywood on the Front Line.* (London: Wallflower, 2006). Examples of this are most evident in films featuring disabled veterans such as *Born on the Fourth of July* and *Home of the Brave* (Irwin Winkler, 2006). For a very different notion of therapeutic narratives, see Kaja Silverman's analysis of *Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler, 1946) in "Historical Trauma and Male Subjectivity," *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

[44] For a broader, historical comparative account of the flashback, see Maureen Turim's *Flashbacks in Film: Memory and History* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

[45] See also Yvonne Tasker, "Soldiers' Stories: Women and Military Masculinities in Courage Under Fire," in *The War Film* (Ed. Robert Eberwein. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005. 172 – 189.) and Susan E. Linville, "'The *Mother* of All Battles': *Courage Under Fire* and the Gender-Integrated Military" in *History Films, Women, and Freud's Uncanny* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004).

The film begins with Nathaniel Sterling (Denzel Washington) as his tank brigade initiates one of the first attacks in the ground war in Iraq. In the confusion of battle Sterling authorizes his men to fire on what turns out to be one of his own tanks, killing his best friend Boylar as a result. Although he is cleared of any fault, Sterling is haunted by his combat experience as he returns to Washington D.C. where he must investigate whether another Gulf soldier, Karen Walden (Meg Ryan), deserves to be posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. In contrast to *Saving Private Ryan*, Sterling's initial investigation points to acute discrepancies between what actually happened in Iraq and the official accounts circulated by the Pentagon and mainstream media. In this regard, *Courage* seems to share more in common with *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (John Ford, 1962) echoes of which would also be found in *Flags of Our Fathers* (Clint Eastwood, 2006). Throughout his investigation Sterling encounters parallels between his own experience and the inconsistencies that surround Walden's death. In short, his inability to get to the truth of what happened to Walden corresponds directly with his inability to come to terms with the traumatic effects of his friend's tragic death. His persistence and sheer determination eventually allow him to overcome the various discrepancies that filter even into the flashback segments attributed to the surviving members of Walden's helicopter crew and the stranded patrol that she helped rescue. Eventually Sterling slowly pieces the mystery together, finally coercing a confession from Monfriez (Lou Diamond Phillips) who reveals that he was the one that inadvertently shot Walden following a near mutiny.

In the end, the entire investigation is misleading. Walden deserves the Medal of Honor even though the actual events precipitating her death are never made official. This

incongruity echoes some of the other parallels that had manifest throughout the conflicting web of back-stories. For instance, Sterling like Monfriez is haunted by guilt. Sterling, however, is able to overcome that guilt and avoid the same suicidal fate that claims Monfriez. Ultimately, an audio tape is revealed following the investigation in which we hear what happens after the friendly fire that kills Boylar. Sterling's quick and composed thinking in the immediate aftermath shows that like Walden he acted with courage under fire. The film insists on this connection not only by cross-cutting between the Walden's posthumous medal ceremony and Sterling's confrontation with Boylar's parents, but more pointedly through the final images seen as Sterling finally returns home. Sterling stands at his doorstep facing toward the camera, closing his eyes in a manner that conveys both accomplishment and reprieve. The film cuts to the same shot that followed the tank battle in Iraq. In a seemingly insignificant moment, Sterling stands next to the destroyed tank as a medical helicopter briefly lands in the background before lifting back into the air. This time, however, the film cuts in to a medium close-up of the helicopter, revealing Karen Walden as its pilot. Walden briefly makes eye contact just before *Courage* cuts back to Sterling on his doorstep. Over the course of the investigation it is tacitly revealed that Boylar and Walden's death occurred on the same date. But this is more than mere coincidence. The shot/reverse-shot that flashes across time creates a virtual exchange that makes their bond all the more emphatic.

*Courage Under Fire* employs a fairly complicated temporal structure, constantly moving from the past to the present and shifting between multiple perspectives. Its structure is partly necessitated by the topic of trauma, but also a simple hermeneutic ploy. Just as Sterling displaces his traumatic fixation onto the mystery surrounding Walden's

death, the film requires this supplementary plot in order to generate suspense. While the film is keen to acknowledge the changes that accompanied the first Gulf War, namely the increasingly prominent role of technology and the growing tension between soldiers' actual experience, media coverage, and the official version of events, the film is fundamentally organized around the drive to return to an earlier event, the truth of what happened to Walden. Insofar as Sterling is able to uncover this truth he is able to save himself from the paralysis that threatens to destroy him and his family.

Though the emphasis on multiple flashbacks and shifting temporal relations draws on a long history, *Courage* also clearly coincides with what Deleuze classifies as the time-image or, more precisely, Hollywood's version of the time-image. Extreme cases such as *Groundhog Day* (Harold Ramis, 1993) and *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000) contrive formal stunts as literal corollaries to the helplessness that their main characters experience at the hands of time. The former film is exemplary in the sense that the protagonist eventually overcomes the temporary crisis, reasserting his ability to dictate causal relations. The latter film, however, is more of an exception with its main character Leonard Shelby (Guy Pearce) seemingly embracing his condition of involuntary repetition precisely for the purpose of pursuing a life of murder without remorse—an example of the death drive indeed. The relationship between these strategies and trauma is further evident in films such as *Vanilla Sky* (Cameron Crowe, 2001) and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Michel Gondry, 2004), where temporal confusion is a sign of the protagonist's liminal or unstable state of mind.

Another extreme case with regard to temporal disorientation can be found in films concerning time-travel. As with all Hollywood variations on the time-image, the temporal

crisis ignited through the time-travel premise ultimately gives way to a reassertion of temporal mastery. This is certainly the case in *Back to the Future* (Robert Zemeckis, 1985) and, to a lesser extent, *The Terminator* (James Cameron, 1984), two films which prompted Constance Penley to suggest that time-travel is always associated with a return to the primal scene.[46] It is not as much the case, however, in *La Jetée* (Chris Marker, 1962), the film that remains the locus classicus of the entire sub-genre. In contrast to the Oedipal implications that are Penley's main concern, the common feature that links *La Jetée* to a more recent time-travel cycle ranging from *Déjà vu* (Tony Scott, 2006) to *The Lake House* (Alejandro Agresti, 2006) and *Premonition* (Mennan Yapo, 2007) is the centrality of death. Of course these more recent films, in contrast to *La Jetée* and the rare exception such as its remake *Twelve Monkeys* (Terry Gilliam, 1995) and *The Butterfly Effect* (Eric Bress and J. Mackye Gruber, 2004), all use their time-travel capabilities to ultimately avert death. A closely related film, *The Jacket* (John Maybury, 2005) is the only one to bring the time-travel premise explicitly together with the trauma associated with combat.

*The Jacket* begins with images filtered through the same green night-vision filter that was seen in the opening credits of *Courage Under Fire*. Unlike its predecessor, however, *The Jacket* leaves the battle field for good shortly after its main character Jack Starks (Adrien Brody) narrowly escapes a gunshot to the head. Starks is next seen hitch-hiking in the wintry cold of Vermont where he is suddenly involved in the murder of a police officer. His inability to recall what happened is diagnosed as post-traumatic stress disorder and he is subsequently committed to the Alpine Grove Psychiatric Hospital, an

---

[46] "Time Travel, Primal Scene, and the Critical Dystopia." *Close Encounters: Film, Feminism, and Science Fiction* (Eds. Constance Penley, Elisabeth Lyon, Lynn Spigel, and Janet Bergstrom. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.), 63 – 80.

institution for the criminally insane. He soon thereafter becomes part of an experimental treatment that involves being restrained in a straitjacket and confined inside a morgue drawer, what Dr. Becker (Kris Kristofferson) refers to as the apparatus. While confined Starks finds himself in 2007, fifteen years in the future, where he learns that he will die only a few days later in his present, 1992 existence. Starks enlists the help of Jackie Price (Keira Knightley) while in 2007 so that he might change his fate. As in *The Terminator* and *Back to the Future*, Starks uses information provided by Price in the future to initiate corresponding events in the past. This is what is known as a time loop paradox: something in the future triggers what happens in the past. In this case, Starks prompts the medical breakthrough made by Dr. Lorenson's (Jennifer Jason Leigh) after speaking with her about it in 2007.

Significantly, unlike either *The Terminator* or *Back to the Future*, *The Jacket* entails not a return to the past but, instead, a foray into the future. This means that Starks' efforts are less motivated by Oedipal desires, that is to initiate sexual relations with one's mother as in Penley's account, than by another forbidden desire. While hitchhiking in 1992, Starks helps a woman and her young daughter who are having car trouble. The young girl turns out to be the same woman, Jackie Price, Starks meets and eventually falls in love with in 2007. The fact that Starks' object of desire is a pre-pubescent girl dictates that the film leap forward into the future instead of the past. This injunction against retreating to the past provides a convenient alibi for avoiding the other past events that Starks has yet to assimilate or deal with. Indeed, while confined in the morgue drawer at Alpine Grove there is a flash of subjective images just before Starks travels forward in time in which the shooting of the police officer becomes increasingly

confused with the near fatal gunshot that he suffered in Iraq. In the shot that immediately follows the shooting, Starks says in voice-over, "I was 27 years old the first time I died." This is ultimately misleading, however, since he's not referring to the gunshot wound he suffers while on active duty. Instead, as we learn only at the film's end when he repeats the same line again, he is referring to the fatal accident that takes place at Alpine Grove.

Even as the film attempts to establish the two events as temporally distinct, it simultaneously insists on their correspondence. When Starks slips and hits his head on the icy ground just outside the hospital there is a quick cut to the gunshot in Iraq. Though the film is never explicit in saying so, Starks escapes death not once but twice. Whereas he eludes the first by mere chance, in the second he is able to interpret his circumstances and devise a plan of escape thereby making himself the source of his own reprieve. In this regard, *The Jacket*, like *Déjà Vu* and the others, subjects its protagonist to disorientation precisely so that temporal mastery prevails in the end. *The Jacket* may be the most explicit but certainly not the only film to draw a parallel between war trauma and temporal displacement. In contrast to Starks, Harry Angel (Mickey Rourke) in *Angel Heart* (Alan Parker, 1987) and Jacob Singer (Tim Robbins) in *Jacob's Ladder* (Adrian Lyne, 1990) are both veterans who despite their various efforts are utterly incapable of mastering their circumstances. Angel and Singer attempt to alter the past, alleviating the traumas that date back to experiences associated with combat, however, the narratives that comprise both films prove to be totally illusory. Both Angel and Singer are already dead at the outset, their subsequent actions mere fantasy or delusion distending the final moments before they decease. Attempts to return to the events that precipitate their later situation only serves to seal their demise. Time is utterly out of their hands.

*Atonement* (Joe Wright, 2007), well outside the realm of the science-fiction or fantasy, similarly invokes temporal discontinuity along with foregrounded formal divergences as part of its insistent return to various primal scenes. Set in the months leading up to World War II, the film begins at the Tallis home, a lavish estate in the English countryside, and focuses on the family's youngest daughter Briony (Saoirse Ronan) as she unwittingly observes two separate acts of coitus. In the first, she finds her older sister Cecilia (Keira Knightley) and Robbie (James McAvoy), the son of their housekeeper, in the family library tangled in a sexual embrace. Later the same night, Briony discovers her cousin Lola (Juno Temple) being raped in the woods outside their home. Despite the fact that she had not clearly seen the perpetrator, Briony willfully blames Robbie who is quickly imprisoned until we later find him enlisted as a soldier in the war. The accusation very nearly destroys the nascent love between Cecilia and Robbie. However, they are seen reconciling after a brief meeting in London where they then make plans to reunite after he returns from the battlefront. Conversely, the rift between the two Tallis sisters appears beyond repair even when four years later Briony (Romola Garai) reconsiders her accusation and attempts to contact Cecilia in London.

Throughout the film, *Atonement* engenders suspense and mystery through disorienting ellipses and, at times, chronological deviation. This strategy is specifically used to foreground the way certain vantage points are restricted or obscured. For instance, an early exchange between Robbie and Cecilia is initially filtered through Briony. From her point of view, it seems that Robbie has assaulted or humiliated her older sister. The film, however, immediately replays the same incident both in a broader context and with details (i.e. their dialogue) that had been omitted in Briony's view. The

discrepancy in how the same incident is understood draws attention to the subjective motivations, including jealousy, that lead Briony to accuse Robbie in the rape. Although Briony later writes to her sister that she is "now beginning to grasp" the full extent of her earlier testimony, it is only later, after seeing newsreel footage that includes an announcement of the upcoming wedding between Paul Marshall and her cousin Lola, that she confronts the truth of what happened. She finally realizes in a flashback no less that Marshall (Benedict Cumberbatch), who had been a guest of Briony's older brother the night of the rape, was in fact the one responsible.

Four years after the fateful night Briony is completing her nurses' training, having yielded the chance to continue her education at Cambridge for a more practical vocation. Her willingness to engage both manual labor and the physical trauma of wounded soldiers is meant to demonstrate the penance she is ready to pay. After finally recognizing Marshall as the actual perpetrator, we see Briony meet with Cecilia and Robbie apologizing and promising to do anything she can to rectify her mistake. Her efforts seem to be in vain until the film then suddenly cuts to an interview seemingly set in present day with Briony (Vanessa Redgrave) as an older woman, who we learn has become a famous author. She explains that the book that we have in effect seen visualized is autobiographical except that Cecilia and Robbie were never reunited. Her sister died in a London bombing and Robbie died on the French coast awaiting his return. In addition, Briony was never able to confess what really happened. Rather than include their ill-fated deaths, Briony decides that the truth would serve no purpose in her novel. Indeed, the fictional account allows for the two lovers to finally join together and have

the time they were forced to forfeit while still alive. This provides the atonement that Briony could never achieve within the internal narrative.

Between Robbie's brief time as a soldier and the wounded soldiers Briony encounters as a fledgling nurse, war trauma is obliquely manifest. These incidental reminders reiterate that both in terms of the tragic circumstances that tear Robbie and Cecilia apart and in the residual effects that follow the witnessing of primal scenes, *Atonement* is fundamentally beholden to the structural logic of trauma. In her interview at the film's end, Briony in fact announces her purpose as a variation on abreaction. That is, her literary account is meant to dispatch the repressed trauma of her adolescent indiscretion and the real consequences it had. However, she pushes this logic to its limits, deciding that an entirely faithful account is not enough. Indeed, it is not the fidelity of representation that allows for catharsis, but the virtual possibilities and, ultimately, deceptive capacity of representation that sutures over and dispatches the traumatic past in a satisfactory way. In *Atonement's* final images Robbie and Cecilia are seen frolicking joyfully along the French coastline.

The effort to fictionally conceal or disguise the traumatic horrors of WWII had been taken to the limit in *Life is Beautiful* (Roberto Benigni, 1997), a film that was broadly panned for having trivialized the most significant of historical events. *Atonement* may be no less brash in its conceit, however, in following the precedent variously set by *Forrest Gump*, *Saving Private Ryan*, and *Courage Under Fire*, the merits of a contrived or virtual image of history have been better established. In fact, *Atonement* in its sudden shift in narrative frame effectively dramatizes the ambivalence that lingers over such endeavors. Despite her ability to provide Robbie and Cecilia with the happy ending that

had in fact eluded them, Briony appears nonetheless anguished with unrelenting guilt. This ambivalence reverberates in the juxtaposition between the restricted point-of-view that troubles Briony as a young girl and the unhindered mastery that allows her to rewrite history as well as in the images of Robbie and Cecilia's death that are inter-spliced with their fanciful reunion.

A similar sense of ambivalence permeates *In the Valley of Elah* (Paul Haggis, 2007), the film that most directly concerns the effects of war trauma. The film follows Hank Deerfield (Tommy Lee Jones) as he is notified that his son Mike (Jonathan Tucker) is AWOL just days after returning from active duty in Iraq. Hank, a retired military investigator himself, heads to Fort Rudd, New Mexico where Mike is stationed. Two days later his son is found dead and Hank turns his attention to solving the murder. As *Valley* shifts into a full fledged criminal investigation its structure resembles *Courage Under Fire*, though in terms of its southwest local and the sordid details that begin to emerge the overall tone of the film seems to share as much in common with *Lone Star* (John Sayles, 1996). Although initially unclear, the various photographs Mike emailed his father while still in Iraq as well as the damaged video footage subsequently recovered from his cell phone become important clues in Hank's search. Though these images are at first so vague and obscure that they seem to hinder rather than help the investigation, they nonetheless coincide with and help generate a series of partial flashbacks that eventually help to decipher the past.

As the investigation takes its disjointed course, Hank finds himself at an impasse wedged between the military's disinterest, the petty feuds that hamper the local police, and the changing accounts provided by Mike's fellow soldiers. Finally, though, with the

help of Detective Emily Sanders (Charlize Theron), Hank learns that Corporeal Penning (Wes Chatham) killed Mike and that the other members of his patrol helped cover-up the murder. The revelation not only completely contradicts Hank's 'band of brothers' understanding of war, but confounds the deductive reasoning that informs his investigation. After peeling away several layers to the case, we learn that details about drugs and prostitutes were omitted so as to spare Mike's family. Beyond that, however, there is no real motive behind their actions. According to Penning's confession, the murder was a kind of culmination of irrational behavior. They all did stuff, he says, that made no sense. It was their only way of coping with the stress of combat. Penning goes on to explain that immediately after killing Mike, he and the two other soldiers with him, Bonner and Long, stopped at a fast food restaurant across from their base. In the same way that the soldiers could go from laughing to fighting, Penning suggests that killing and eating were likewise interchangeable. This explains, in part, why the case proved to be so difficult. Mike's fellow soldiers appear genuine in their condolences. However, the film goes on to suggest that beneath the appearance of civility the soldiers harbor a kind of inhuman indifference to Mike's murder. They avoid earlier suspicion both because the soldiers lack any legitimate motive and because they show no guilt or remorse.

Ultimately, the murder mystery is only one component in the film's final revelation. The way that Penning indiscriminately kills and then lies about Mike demonstrates the psychological damage that he and the other soldiers have suffered. During Penning's confession Hank asks about something he saw in the video footage recovered from Mike's cell phone. It appears to him that Mike is torturing a prisoner in the back of a Humvee. Penning explains that Mike had pretended to be a medic, poking at

the wounded prisoner and asking repeatedly whether it hurts. He recalls that it was pretty funny and this is how Mike earned the nickname, Doc. This is why Penning reasons that on another night Mike could have been the one with the knife and himself the one dead in the field. If on the one hand, the film suggests a parallel in the numbness or dehumanization that Penning and Mike undergo as a consequence of their duty in Iraq, there is on the other hand a correlation drawn behind what happens to Mike and the victims of US violence in Iraq. After killing Mike, the other soldiers decide to cut up and burn his remains. There is a direct correspondence between his dismembered and scorched body parts and another episode of the recovered video footage featuring dead Iraqi civilians, apparent victims of an incendiary device known as white phosphorus.

It is another member of Mike's unit, Private Ortiez (Victor Wolf) that provides the final piece to *Valley's* puzzle. Following Penning's confession, Hank asks Ortiez about a photograph that Mike had sent him. The solider explains that there were standing orders to not stop vehicles while in transit. While driving during his first week in Iraq, Mike follows the order and runs over a young boy. Over the course of the film, several fragments from the incident were included as part of the recovered video footage. But it was never clear enough to know what exactly had happened. Immediately following impact, Mike stops and gets out of the vehicle. He takes a photograph looking back at what just happened. This is the photograph that Hank asks about. After speaking with Ortiez, Hank gets into his truck and as he prepares to make his way back to Munro, Tennessee there is another flashback to the accident in Iraq, this time untainted by the pixilation that distorted the cell phone footage. The flashback appears to be from Hank's perspective, a comprehensive reconstruction based on all the information that he has

gathered. This reconstructed account is immediately followed by another flashback. Hank answers the phone and Mike, emotionally distraught, begs his father to help him get out of Iraq. Hank dismisses his son, telling him its just nerves talking. Some of the same audio from the accident, we now realize, is also used in the opening, image-less, credit sequence. The audio cuts from the end of the accident to Mike's first words on the phone, 'Dad… Dad." The film's first image is of Hank on the phone apparently replying, " I can hardly hear you." Mike, however, is not on the other line. Instead, it is the phone call from the military base explaining that Mike is AWOL.

In this last flashback *Valley* suggests Hank's unwillingness to acknowledge his son's call for help not only redoubled the traumatic effects of combat but ultimately redoubles the overarching ambivalence with which the film concludes. By its end the film also acts as a kind of compilation combining features from many of the narratives discussed throughout this section. First and foremost, *Valley* begins with temporal discontinuity and disorientation that, in turn, prompts narrative fragmentation through conflicting accounts and multiple flashbacks. Following an investigative model, the film exhibits an insistent drive to return to the past, to an earlier moment that promises to explain everything that ensues as a consequence. As the pursuit for this earlier moment intensifies, the past proves more and more elusive, always deferred, nested within half-truths and alibis that simultaneously screen and reveal what really happened. The film simultaneously provides a number of composite or virtual renditions of the primal scene itself. *Valley* in particular dramatizes the way that such images are technologically mediated and the stalemate that accompanies the combination of too much information with too little explanatory power. With regard to its investigative structure, the film

allows Hank to restore some degree of order but only at the expense of acknowledging a larger quagmire. Indeed, the hermeneutic payoff that comes with the resolution of Mike's murder and the virtual restoration of the precipitating trauma as it transpired in Iraq belies larger epistemological and ideological angst. When Hank raises an upside-down flag in the film's final scene, indicating a state of general distress, *Valley* implies a more sweeping if still vague critique of US military policy. But Hank's gesture is just as likely to recall the zombie-like figures that for Gilles Deleuze proliferated throughout the post-war period in conjunction with the time-image. That is, Hank's gesture is as much an indication not only of his failure to act in time to help his own son but his more fundamental inability to react to the larger quagmire that his son's murder helps to reveal.

I have suggested in this section that the proclivity for temporal displacement in the recent cycle of war films and Hollywood more generally is symptomatic of both historical violence and the various efforts devised to abreact and contain the effects of that violence. Although loose parallels indeed exist between some of these films and what has been described as the time-image, Hollywood necessarily circumscribes the crisis that time according to Deleuze poses in the post-WWII era and ultimately undercuts cinema's ability to respond to these circumstances. Hollywood, in other words and in contrast to the European filmmakers cited by Deleuze, experiments with non-linear narratives precisely as a means of intensifying its ability to manipulate and control of time. The full extent of this divergence is apparent in the protagonists who even while tainted by failure and impotence prove to be successful in their effort to locate and reclaim primal scenes.

Freud made repeated efforts to sidestep the impasse he encountered in his own attempts to secure the primal scene. Derrida, in contrast, exponentially expands its scope. As Ned Lukacher explains it, Derrida makes explicit the attributes already implicit in Freud's account:

> The primal scene is constituted in an unlocatable, undecidable zone of temporal difference, a zone of *différance* which differs from itself, a difference which lacks identity or self-sameness. The primal scene is Freud's category for the originary function of nonoriginary temporal difference. It is a (non-) event whose indeterminant temporality precipitates the temporal ordering of subsequent events.[47]

The ability of Hollywood's protagonists to navigate the perils of time and eventually, if only virtually, reconstruct select primal scenes symptomatically recalls this fundamental indeterminacy. If one of the dangers of trauma studies is an all too cavalier endorsement of historical representation, Hollywood demonstrates the degree to which these dangers metastasize when combined with its own ideological and economic imperatives. In creating its own primal scenes, Hollywood detracts from the possibility of deciphering the intolerable conditions that plague the modern era. More specifically in the case of the recent films set in Iraq and Afghanistan, Hollywood's fabricated accounts of causal logic obscure not only history and politics, but also that, as Randolph Bourne once noted, war is nothing less than "the health of the state."

---

[47] See Lukacher, Ned. *Primal Scenes: Literature, Philosophy, Psychoanalysis*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986.

# CHAPTER III
# THE UNDEAD
# SPECTERS INSIDE THE HEAD, NARRATION BEYOND THE GRAVE

Freud allows that for many people what is most uncanny is death, dead bodies, the return of the dead, spirits and ghosts. Indeed, he adds that, "some languages in use today can only render the German expression 'an *unheimlich* house' by 'a haunted house'" (242). Having drawn this inextricable correlation between the uncanny and haunting, it is feasible to think that the undead would figure significantly within Freud's essay. Instead, Freud casually avoids death with a few blithe excuses, and thereby relegates it to the margins. The ostensible reason for such evasion is that death is simply too profound of a topic. As has been noted in the first two chapters, death inevitably entails a return to an earlier state, a state in which death remains a structural lynchpin but without the same absolute force. The second excuse Freud offers is that the resuscitation of the dead is all too ubiquitous in fiction, particularly fairy tales. Though he acknowledges that there is tremendous potential for the uncanny within literature, the common usage of this particular theme and the overarching banality of endeavors such as fairy tales render any possible uncanny effect entirely null and void. Even "the supernatural apparitions in Shakespeare's Hamlet" while appearing "gloomy and terrible enough," lose any uncanny effect because the reader adapts to the imaginary reality imposed by the writer (250). Interchangeable with every other fictional character, such ghosts have lost their capacity to properly haunt. While this may very well be the case, I nonetheless claim in this chapter that certain fictional ghosts retain traces of the uncanny not in spite of but because of their containment within the text.

In contrast to Freud, Jacques Derrida is more enthusiastic in his embrace of the fundamental paradox embodied by phantoms, ghosts, specters, and all other varieties of apparitions. They are both present and not present, material and non-material. They dissolve the distinction between being and non-being and, as such, can be counted as another example of what he terms *différance*. Though the focus of Derrida's most extensive case of 'spectrology' primarily concerns the relationship between the legacy of Marx and current political concerns, the more conspicuous focal point to which he returns again and again is Hamlet's famous line, "time is out of joint."[1] Like the dramaturgical revenant that visits young Hamlet, Derrida takes the reference to temporal disjointedness as a sign of infectious spectrality that simply cannot be contained within the text itself. It is also the case that with the proliferation of technology and media, this temporal disjointedness intensifies and the dissymmetries signaling the presence of specters further multiplies.[2] In this chapter I focus on the 1999 film *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes), examining a series of textual dissymmetries—interiority/exteriority, story/plot,

---

[1] Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. New York: Routledge, 1994. Hereafter abbreviated as *SoM*.

[2] Several scholars have examined the intersection between media (or some facet of technology), modernity, and haunting. See Derrida, Jacques and Bernard Stiegler: *Echographies of Television* (Trans. Jennifer Bajorek. Malden, MA: Polity, 2002). Also, Friedrich Kittler's *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), Jeffrey Sconce's *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), Terry Castle's *The Female Thermometer: 18th Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), John Peters's "Phantasms of the Living, Dialogues with the Dead" in *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), James Lastra's *Sound Technology and the American Cinema: Perception, Representation, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), and Tom Gunning's "Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations: Spirit Photography, Magic Theater, Trick Films, and Photography's Uncanny" in *Fugitive Images: From Photography to Video*, ed. Patrice Petro (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995) and "Uncanny Reflections, Modern Illusions: Sighting the Modern Optical Uncanny" in *Uncanny Modernity: Cultural Theories, Modern Anxieties*, eds. John Jervis and Jo Collins (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

surface/depth, true/false, life/death, etc.—as evidence of what Derrida considers spectral effects.[3] Throughout this analysis another line from *Specters of Marx* is of utmost importance, "*Mensch, es spukt in deinem Kopfe*."[4] The German expression *es spukt* provides the most explicit illustration of what Derrida means by spectral effects. In his view, the expression must be translated as: "it haunts, it ghosts, it specters, there is some phantom there, it has the feel of the living-dead […] The subject that haunts is not identifiable, one cannot see, localize, fix any form, one cannot decide between hallucination and perception, there are only displacements…" (*SoM* 135-136). In so many words, what haunts is and only is in one's head. In this regard, Derrida exponentially expands the purview of spectrality, observing that there is no being "without the uncanniness, without the strange familiarity of some specter" (*SoM* 100). Though vampires, zombies, and various other undead monsters are an ever present force within the horror genre, this chapter aims to show that this strange familiarity is most haunting in Hollywood's more unexpected and benign specters.

## Speaking of Mid-Life Crises

*American Beauty* begins in earnest with its main character Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey) announcing his own death. "In less than a year I'll be dead," he observes.

---

[3] For other examples along these lines, though primarily interested in literature, see Jodey Castricano, *Cryptomimesis: The Gothic and Jacques Derrida's Ghost Writing* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001) and *Julian Wolfreys, Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny and Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002).

[4] The phrase is originally Max Stirner's (in *The Ego and His Own*) and the subject of extensive interrogation throughout Karl Marx's *The German Ideology* (co-written with Friedrich Engels [New York: Prometheus Books, 1998]). It is "commonly translated as 'Man, there are specters in your head!'" (172).

Adding in a moment of temporal disorientation, "Of course, I don't know that yet. And in a way, I'm dead already." Speaking from an impossible future point in time, he decrees himself 'already' dead prior to the death he is in the midst of foretelling. Aside from the blurring of chronology, Lester's opening voice-over initiates several questions pertaining to the conventional boundaries and implicit hierarchy of Hollywood narration. That is, while Lester speaks as a character-narrator, embodied in the sense that he inhabits the diegesis, he is simultaneously situated outside of or beyond the story world alternately speaking with degrees of self-reflection and omniscience.[5] The problem of locating Lester's voice-over raises questions not only about the specific dynamic between interiority and exteriority in *American Beauty*, but about their broader relationship in narrative cinema. The instability between interiority and exteriority will serve to illustrate not just the ambiguities that surround binaries such as life and death, but, more significantly, the effectiveness with which contemporary Hollywood allows for traffic between contradictory categories precisely in order to preserve them as irreconcilable. This section will show that even while *American Beauty* succeeds in rehabilitating Lester's initial ineptitude, the impossible place from which he speaks lingers as an indelible specter that undermines not only his own position but much more broadly calls into question propriety as such.

---

[5] There are many terms used to classify character-narration. Gerard Genette uses intradiegetic, homodiegetic, or heterodiegetic narrator. Sarah Kozloff uses embedded narrator. For an overview of these various terms, see *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics: Structuralism, Post-Structuralism, and Beyond*. I try to maintain the designation character-narrator throughout, though at times it will be interchangeable with other terms. Making matters even more difficult, as we will see, is the fact that there is not always a direct correlation between voice-over and the narrator position.

Kaja Silverman places great emphasis on the dynamic between interiority and exteriority in her well-known book *The Acoustic Mirror*.[6] While subscribing to the Lacanian premise that all subjects experience castration upon entry into language, Silverman shows that both Hollywood cinema and film theory associate lack with inferiority and disproportionately assign it to the female gender. Or to be more specific in the case of Hollywood, films discursively construct interiority and exteriority, aligning women with the former and men with the latter. The exteriority, however, with which male characters are associated merely marks Hollywood's larger effort to link the male (and his voice in particular) with the point of discursive enunciation. It is a strategy that Silverman and feminist film theorists more generally consider to be part of an ideological endeavor to conceal the lack that equally informs male subjectivity. The strategy is completely spurious insofar as the exteriority ascribed to male characters is a fabrication erected exclusively within the diegesis. Not only is this exteriority fictitious, but it is equally reliant on Hollywood's corollary ability to bind female characters to interior spaces.

In Silverman's argument, then, interiority and exteriority are primarily locations established within the diegesis. She identifies three primary procedures in which this is accomplished in conjunction with the voice. The first involves folding the female voice into an "inner textual space" such as a film-within-a-film. This serves to "doubly diegeticize" her voice, rendering her overheard not only by the film viewer, but by another audience within the diegesis as well. The second operation concerns the solicitation of involuntary speech. This procedure closely adheres to the psychoanalytic

---

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

model of the "talking cure" in which the female character is obliged to articulate her inner dimensions. The third method entails a disproportionate emphasis on the correlation between voice and body. This "identification of the female voice with an intractable materiality" consequently serves to enforce an emphatic "alienation from meaning" (61).[7] In all three cases Hollywood cinema establishes interiority as a spatial category either within the diegesis or within the individual subject. Although Silverman is primarily concerned with the voice, further analysis of *American Beauty* will demonstrate the extent to which these strategies remain fully operational on both the image and sound track alike.

There are three main female characters in *American Beauty*: Lester's wife Carolyn (Annette Bening), their daughter Jane (Thora Birch), and Jane's best friend Angela Hayes (Mena Suvari). All three characters are undercut by their affiliation with images that, in a manner similar to what Silverman terms "intractable materiality," pigeonhole them as static and superficial. Carolyn, for instance, repeats the adage: "In order to be successful, one must project an image of success at all times." This informs both her professional ambitions as a real estate agent and the domestic sphere where she manages appearances with a meticulous fervor. Angela, on the other hand, aspires to be a model. Because of this she brazenly flaunts her capacity to solicit the male gaze. Though Jane does not necessarily share either of these predispositions, she is even more forcefully identified with the image. She is repeatedly filtered through the camera of her

[7] Silverman's strict division between materiality and meaning is somewhat unclear here and will be the subject of further discussion below. Namely though, classical Hollywood embodies males and females alike. Females may very well be more stringently aligned with an inert materiality, but it is a matter of scale requiring analysis on a case-by-case basis.

neighbor Ricky Fitts (Wes Bently), appearing either as a slightly grainy or pixilated video image or framed within the camera's viewfinder.

The numerous occasions in which Jane appears as the object of Ricky's camera-gaze illustrate the way interiority can be created through staging and composition. On two different occasions Jane is relegated to a continually receding locus within the mise-en-scene. First, Ricky records Angela and Jane from his bedroom in the house next door. Angela, of course, delights at the prospect and begins fawning for the camera. Jane meanwhile sits behind Angela with her back to the window that serves as Ricky's visual frame. The mirror on her vanity where she sits, however, captures Jane's face and her demure downward stare. The video camera zooms in, bypassing Angela, to focus exclusively on Jane. At the point where Jane reveals a subtle smile, her face is framed not only within an individual window pane, but within the circular mirror as well. Jane is once again in her room when she sees Ricky recording her from across the way. After exchanging nervous waves, Jane begins to disrobe. The film cuts-in as it reverses angles, framing Ricky in a medium shot that reveals a television monitor on his right-hand side. The TV makes visible the video image from his camera. This time Jane is triply framed, first by her own bedroom window, then by the TV, and finally by the cross-sections that divide Ricky's bedroom window. As Jane removes her bra it is clear that she is performing for the camera, just as she will do again following her and Ricky's later sexual rendezvous. This reminds us that these scenes simultaneously serve to doubly diegeticize Jane, producing an inner textual recess not only through composition but in terms of narrative as well.[8]

---

[8] For a different analysis of this scene (and the later scene in which Ricky and Jane talk while also recording one another), see Jacqueline Furby's "Rhizomatic Time and Temporal Poetics

Both Carolyn and Angela are even more explicitly defined as performers, so much so, that they are eventually considered phonies. It is implied, for example, that Carolyn treats her open house as an elaborate theatrical routine. She begins her endeavor announcing aloud, "I will sell this house today." She adopts the same posture as she welcomes her prospective buyers, this time more directly addressing the camera while introducing herself. The framing in both shots present her as though she were a kind of master of ceremonies and the house she markets as her stage. The montage that follows features clips of Carolyn's sales pitch and her indifferent clients unimpressed by her overly contrived efforts. As the day ends in failure, Carolyn stands in front of the patio entrance where the vertical blinds behind her strongly suggest a proscenium-like backdrop. Amid cries of frustration, she suddenly admonishes herself, screaming, "Shut up! Stop it! You weak… you baby… Shut up!" Carolyn's aptitude for adopting an external voice is even more explicit, however, on two later occasions. The adage that one must always project a successful image, in fact, originally belongs to her competition, the "King" of real estate, Buddy Kane (Peter Gallagher). The adoption of his slogan suggests a form of ventriloquism. His ability to dominate Carolyn is further confirmed as her infatuation leads to a brief affair. After her standing as a serious professional is completely shattered, Carolyn once again assumes the voice of another. She repeats over and over, "I refuse to be a victim." The origin of this phrase is a self-help cassette tape

---

*American Beauty*" (*Screen Methods: Comparative Readings in Film Studies*, eds. Jacqueline Furby and Karen Randell [New York: Wallflower, 2005]). A similar Deleuzian approach can be seen at the outset of Patricia Pisters' *The Matrix of Visual Culture: Working with Deleuze in Film Theory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003). She extols Ricky in particular for his filming style, asserting that he "has managed to loosen his gaze from what Deleuze calls the segmental lines of the fixed structures of society and representation" (2). For an equally positive account based on Ricky's 'filmmaking', see Annalee Newitz's "Underground America 1999" (*Underground U.S.A.: Filmmaking Beyond the Hollywood Canon*, eds. Xavier Mendik and Steven Jay Schneider. [New York: Wallflower, 2002.]).

that she listens to in her car toward the end of the film. In Silverman's account, the 'talking cure' films of the 1940s oblige women to confess an inner ailment that corresponds with what the doctor has already diagnosed. This second instance of ventriloquism in *American Beauty* similarly amplifies the slippage between inner and outer. Enraptured with appearances, Carolyn commits herself to being an image to such a degree that she becomes, like the objects she overvalues, something to be manipulated by others. With regard to her internalization or performance of victim-hood, Carolyn is furthermore made to bear another double burden. Already humiliated after her affair with Buddy is revealed, Carolyn is soon thereafter framed as the primary murder suspect – assuming the inauspicious burden previously ascribed to her daughter – when it is implied that she plans an armed confrontation with Lester. Even when it is revealed that she did not kill him, she remains guilty for having even contemplated such a confrontation, condemned for the mere desire to act.

Although Angela in passing accuses Carolyn of being phony, it is she who is the film's ultimate fraud. Angela is introduced as Jane's teammate on the high school cheer squad where she takes center stage during a halftime routine. The real performance, however, is her precocious bravado. After a fight with Jane, Angela takes comfort in the arms of Lester. But as their intimate encounter escalates she informs him that she is still a virgin, revealing finally that all of her graphic bragging about illicit trysts with famous fashion photographers has been an elaborate façade. Angela's ability to vocalize what she assumed males wanted to hear demonstrates a performance that has been internalized to an even more insidious degree than Carolyn's more blatant acts of ventriloquism. When Lester declines to continue his advances it also becomes evident that her revelation

seemingly serves to cancel out the alluring powers that she had wielded throughout his visualized fantasies. At the same time that Angela is divested of her sensual powers, she is re-inscribed with another kind of corporality, that is, she is associated again with the virtue and purity that intrinsically accompanies her virginal innocence.

As Silverman indicates, the film's effort to confine or restrict its female characters goes hand in hand with the corollary project of endowing Lester and Ricky with the pretense of exteriority. To some extent this proves to be a precarious enterprise, however, as both Lester and Ricky are repeatedly exposed as inept or vulnerable. For instance, Ricky is at the mercy of his boorish, and frequently violent, father. He similarly endures the malicious rumors spread by Angela that question his psychological health. Most startling though, Ricky shows a willingness to mimic his father's homophobic bigotry in a way that is not entirely unlike Carolyn's ventriloquism. However, as with his willingness to take menial jobs, the difference is that Ricky's mimicry is a calculated means to an end – it is necessary to conceal his true occupation. What's more, the financial independence afforded by his drug dealing provides a considerable degree of agency and power that Carolyn (and Angela) ultimately lacks. Of course, the close identification between him and his video camera is the most explicit manifestation of this power and the most clear example of the film's attempt to align Ricky with diegetic exteriority, the fictional proxy Hollywood offers in lieu of actual discursive agency.

Lester, on the other hand, is even more overtly prefigured as a pathetic loser.[9] Even as the vast majority of *American Beauty* is devoted to rehabilitating his character

---

[9] Lester's general ineptitude resembles the futility experienced by many male ghosts. See Katherine Fowkes' *Giving Up the Ghost: Spirits, Ghosts, and Angels in Mainstream Comedy Films* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998). Throughout the book Fowkes draws on Silverman's later work in *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992), though

there are several occasions on which he threatens to further regress. The film begins with Lester at work, where in his own words he is a "whore for the advertising industry," both snubbed by his client and menaced by the newly hired efficiency expert. That night at dinner he continues to whine about his day while Carolyn and Jane disparage his various laments. Lester's fortunes begin to change only after he instigates a series of erotic fantasies involving Angela Hayes. Although these reveries, like his new found inclination for smoking marijuana and listening to classic rock, suggest an adolescent retreat, they also show a new found ability to negotiate desire by virtue of manipulating his own fantasized images. When Lester is subsequently caught masturbating, he reverses an otherwise embarrassing moment by quickly rebuking Carolyn for both her utter lack of sexual appetite and suggesting that she might divorce him (proving that the law would be on his side). Lester's resurgent influence is next confirmed as he successfully blackmails his employer – he threatens to pose as the victim of sexual harassment. Soon thereafter he again turns the tables by sternly reprimanding his wife and daughter during the course of another family dinner. After deriding Carolyn for her conspicuous preference for consumer goods, his ascent culminates when he exposes his wife's affair. By this point the film has made it abundantly clear that there is a categorical incongruity between Carolyn who is consumed by images and Lester who, even as he makes the inane admission that he simply wants to look good naked, is able to overcome obstacles and achieve his goals by virtue of manipulating images and appearances. The purging of responsibility that Lester undertakes in the second half of the film is not, then, a sign of weakness or regression. Rather, on the contrary, a sign of regained masculine authority.

---

her point is that while Hollywood's male ghosts suffer an initial masochistic state they are typically also able to recuperate some degree of power either by correcting their legacy and/or mastering the transcendent powers afforded by the afterlife.

While the film works to re-establish and prop up Lester, he is never explicitly coupled with discursive agency in the same way that Ricky is in his affiliation with the cinematic apparatus. In contrast, Lester's primary association with the point of enunciation is the voice-over narration that he provides throughout the film. Though this device certainly adds another dimension to his character, the exact nature of the embodied voice-over remains a matter of dispute.[10] Unlike the disembodied voice-over, which because of its complete separation from the diegesis – prompting its characterization as 'the voice-of-God' – provides an impression of knowledge and superiority, the embodied voice-over is unable to clearly maintain any distinction between interiority and exteriority. In Silverman's analysis, embodiment is always coded as feminine. And insofar as the embodied voice-over is characterized as internal dialogue, the device is understood as providing unfettered access into the most interior realm of all.

---

[10] Of course the voice itself is no stranger to similarly contradictory views. As Jacques Derrida has shown, the voice has been aligned throughout western metaphysics with being and presence, a privileged figure of what he refers to as logocentrism. See *Speech and Phenomena And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*. (Trans. David B. Allison. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973) and *Of Grammatology* (Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974). In contrast, the voice and sound more generally has been treated with skepticism in the field of cinema studies. Indeed for a long period of time many scholars privileged the visual over the aural perpetuating what Rick Altman specifies as a dual (historical and ontological) fallacies: "Instead of treating sound and image as simultaneous and coexistent, the historical fallacy orders them chronologically, thus implicitly hierarchizing them. Historically, sound was added to the image; ergo in the analysis of sound cinema we may treat sound as an afterthought, a supplement which the image is free to take or leave as it chooses." The ontological fallacy, on the other hand, "claims that film is a visual medium and that the images must be/are the primary carriers of the film's meaning and structure" ("Introduction," *Yale French Studies*, No. 60, Cinema/Sound [1980], 3-15). The fact that cinema scholars have reversed the hierarchy Derrida ascribes to metaphysics only serves to cloud the status of specific uses of the voice-over. This perhaps explains why even as greater critical attention has been devoted to sound the voice-over has remained relatively under-studied. In addition to Silverman, see Sarah Kozloff's *Invisible Storytellers: Voice-Over Narration in American Fiction Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) and Britta Sjogren's *Into the Vortex: Female Paradox in Film* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

That is, to borrow Mary Ann Doane's phrase, it turns the body inside out.[11] To hear a character's inner thoughts, then, reveals a state of defenselessness. It is in this view as much an unwelcome penetration as it is an outward expression of subjective command. Silverman furthers her case by citing Michel Chion's equation of embodiment with castration. In his own study, *The Voice in Cinema*, Chion compares the visual disclosure of a character that had been audible but unseen – what he terms an *acousmêtre* – with the point of a striptease when a woman's genitals are exposed to the male gaze.[12] Thus the process through which sound is synchronized or anchored to a particular body – in other words, embodied – is rendered inextricable with the designation of female genitalia (which in turn constitutes sexual difference). Beyond the fact that embodiment carries such connotations, Silverman simply contends that this type of voice-over was "largely confined to a brief historical period, stretching from the forties to the early fifties" (52). This period and film noir in particular featured embodied voice-overs from male characters either fatally injured or scarred by major traumas and subject to involuntary confession. But outside of this aberrant period, she maintains that Hollywood props up its male population with the illusion of exteriority while circumscribing its female inhabitants within increasingly restrictive interiors. If the embodied voice-over is the

---

[11] Doane, Mary Ann. "The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space" in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology,* ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

[12] Chion, Michel. *The Voice in Cinema*. Ed. and trans. Claudia Gorbman. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999. While Silverman is justified in questioning Chion's somewhat off-colored analogy, the two scholars likely share more in common than not. It seems that Chion likens the *acousmêtre* to 'having the phallus' and that in his view the pretense of having the phallus is contingent on it remaining concealed. The revelation of the phallus always serves to expose the phallus as an impossible or nonexistent possession. In this sense Chion's position shares much in common with Silverman's discussion of the fetish in an earlier chapter of *The Acoustic Mirror*.

exception that proves what she believes is the overall rule, then it is unnecessary to attend to the full range of implications that this exception entails.

Even as Silverman provides a powerful critique of how Hollywood uses sound in conjunction with the image to preserve a patriarchal ideology, the embodied voice-over in general illustrates the possibility of traffic between Hollywood's interior and exterior realms. Furthermore, her contention that the embodied male voice-over is an historical aberration is untenable and *American Beauty* is a case in point of how the fluidity between interiority and exteriority breaks the pattern she describes while still upholding the dominant ideology.[13] It is also worth noting that it is precisely the fluidity between these opposing dimensions that leads Chion to develop his account of the *acousmêtre*. As Doane had shown in her early analysis, sounds originating from an off-screen space – and the voice-off in particular – do not disrupt Hollywood's preference for synchronous sound. In fact, they serve to enhance and expand the diegesis. Although, as she notes, there "is always something uncanny about a voice which emanates from a source outside the frame," Hollywood uses the device – in conjunction with other strategies[14] – to engender an expectation that what is initially absent can always be made visible either through reframing, editing, or some other means. For Chion, this virtual off-screen space

---

[13] While it is certainly the case that the embodied voice-over enjoyed an unusual prevalence during the 40s and 50s, the device has remained something of a standard convention. In addition to well-known films such as *The Shawshank Redemption* (Frank Darabont, 1994 and *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999), many well-established directors including Martin Scorsese, Terence Malick, Francis Ford Coppola, Stanely Kubrick, Woody Allen, and the Coen brothers have prominently used the device on several occasions.

[14] The play between presence and absence here most closely resembles the method of editing known as suture. The primary example of this method is the shot/reverse-shot formulation in which the camera is elided in order to maintain the fiction of temporal and spatial continuity. See Stephen Heath's "On Suture" in *Questions of Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981) and Kaja Silverman's *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

that supplements the diegesis is both haunting and rife with potential power. Neither inside nor outside, this "place that has no name" affords anyone within its domain the prospect of omniscience. At the same time, the potential of the *acousmêtre* depends on its possible inclusion within the diegesis, meaning that even as it flirts with the heights of omniscience it is simultaneously always subject to the threatening depths of total impotence.

Just as Silverman emphasizes that exteriority manufactured within classical Hollywood is purely a fabrication and artificial construction (and therefore completely precarious), Chion attends to the *acousmêtre* to highlight the extent to which cinema hinges on a similar paradox. At several points Chion advances this claim by drawing parallels between the *acousmêtre* and the undead.[15] He suggests that the existential line separating life from afterlife, like the boundary that temporarily divides off-screen space from what's on-screen, is not only permeable, but contingent on a certain degree of circulation between the two. It is for this reason that "the voice of the *acousmêtre* is frequently the voice of one who is dead," or alternately, the voice of someone almost dead, "the person who has completed his or her life and is only waiting to die" (46-47) as in *D. O. A*. (Rudolph Maté, 1950), *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944), *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (Max Ophuls, 1948), or, most famously, *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy

---

[15] In his discussion of *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) Chion offers several incisive observations regarding the dead mother's voice: As Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) sits alone in a police cell at the end of the film, his mother's voice delivers a monologue that "vampirizes both Norman's body and the entire image" (52). Her "exiled" voice can neither be fully ascribed to the mother's mummified body nor to her son's living body. That is, the failure to embody her voice signifies a failure to properly entomb or bury the mother. As is typical of ghosts, she is instead condemned to wander, unable to either firmly anchor herself within the diegesis or ascend to an entirely transcendent position. The only glimpse of her comes at the very end as her grinning skeletal visage is superimposed over Norman's face. Simultaneous with this superimposition, the image dissolves to one of a car being dredged from the swamp behind the Bates' motel. The film offers yet another instance of excavation emphasizing its lack of closure.

Wilder, 1951). Perhaps more to the point, death simply captures the paradoxical status of the *acousmêtre* – to be dead suggests both a freedom from or transcendence over material constraints and, at the same time, the irrevocable loss of material significance and agency within the world. That *American Beauty* employs the embodied voice-over specifically in order to allow Lester to speak from beyond the grave proves to be too unconventional for Silverman's more straightforward account. That is, while Lester's embodied voice-over alternates between implying interiority and exteriority, his mortal demise oscillates between elevating and inhibiting his status as a representative of Hollywood's patriarchal ideology. Silverman not only downplays this kind of traffic between opposing categories, but effectively misconstrues the degree to which this traffic is essential to the overarching system.

In the same way that the chauvinist overtones of Chion's striptease analogy were enough to discard his account, "the forces of deconstruction" are deemed unnecessary because of Derrida's similarly ambiguous relationship with feminism. Silverman takes particular issue with his use of the term invagination. Defined as an "inward refolding" within a text or the "inverted reapplication of the outer edge to the inside of a form where the outside then opens a pocket," Silverman seeks to reappropriate the term because in Derrida's use it has "tended to obscure rather than to foreground the ways in which texts engender their readers and viewers; as is frequently the case in his work, it is exploited primarily as rhetorical currency, as a 'fertile' metaphor through which to theorize writing."[16] In terms of introducing Derrida in this context, it is worth making two

---

[16] *The Acoustic Mirror,* 70. The definition of invagination quoted by Silverman is from Derrida's "Living On/Border Lines" (*Deconstruction and Criticism*, eds. Harold Bloom et. al. [New York: Seabury Press, 1979]), 97. In support of this interpretation, Silverman cites Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Displacement and the Discourse of Woman." For a different perspective, collected in

preliminary points. First, while Silverman considers the idea of "inward refolding" to closely accord with what she identifies as the tendency in Hollywood to inscribe women within interior spaces, Derrida refuses to characterize absence or lack as categorically negative terms. Instead, his entire oeuvre is based on privileging forms of *differánce* such as the supplement and the trace, forms that undercut presence but do not necessarily oppose it. He conversely rejects the role of a transcendental signifier not just as an absolute exteriority but as the focal point necessary in organizing any hierarchy.[17] With regard to the trace, he says that it is the impossibility or non-origin that "becomes the origin of the origin."[18] In this sense the interior recesses that Silverman delineates are not only an utter and ruinous abyss, but just as easily function as the unlikely, if not uncanny,

---

the same volume as Spivak's essay, see Elizabeth Grosz's "Ontology and Equivocation: Derrida's Politics of Sexual Difference" (both in *Feminist Interpretations of Jacques Derrida*. [Ed. Nancy J. Holland. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997.]). Though Silverman clearly has justifiable reasons for making this move, it can also be considered as an example of what Herman Rapaport terms "deconstruction in eclipse." See his *The Theory Mess* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

[17] Whether this point appears as a transcendental perch or as an inherent essence, the structural function it serves is always grounded in just that, an appearance. It is on this basis, generally speaking, that Derrida deconstructs the metaphysical function of the voice. In *Speech and Phenomena* he writes that the phenomenological value of the voice "is only apparent" and that "this 'appearance' is the very essence of consciousness and its history, and it determines an epoch characterized by the philosophical idea of truth…" (77). Here essence and appearance forfeit their typical opposition and, instead, are rendered interchangeable. In *Of Grammatology* he writes again that, "Speech never gives the thing itself, but a simulacrum that touches us more profoundly than the truth…" (240). Because speech is not itself truth, it is necessarily a dislocation from truth. On the one hand, it is this orientation – in which both ends of the spectrum, internal and external, are made to collapse or at least blur – that distinguishes Derrida from Lacan who must maintain the inaccessibility of both the lost object at one end and the phallus on the other. On the other hand, because Derrida attempts to collapse any structural hierarchy it is easy to misconstrue his position, either as simply overstating the value of what is typically subordinate or endorsing what he is actually critiquing. This seems to be part of the problem in Mladen Dolar's *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2006) where he takes the premise that, "the voice, far from being the safeguard of presence, [is] considered to be dangerous, threatening, and possibly ruinous" (43). Rather than reputing Derrida, Dolar is more or less repeating his very point.

[18] *Of Grammatology*, 61.

source within the production of meaning. Second, as Silverman aptly notes, "the seemingly transcendental position from which that subject so frequently speaks, listens, and looks in classic cinema is itself a product of the same textual fold" (71). The illusion of exteriority on which Hollywood hangs the phallus has nothing to do with actual exteriority, but is rather a totally contrived position inscribed within the text. More succinctly, what appears to be an exterior position is actually well within the enclosed boundaries of the diegesis. It is this aspect of Silverman's account that has far more in common with Derrida's notion of invagination than she acknowledges. This is in fact the pocket that opens when the outer edge – or appearance of exteriority – is reinserted within the enclosed space. This in turn produces a hole or gap or point of indetermination along the margin of the diegesis rather than at its center. The embodied voice-over in suggesting both an interiority and exteriority that can never be pinpointed as one or the other is a primary example of this type of pocket. As a result, the embodied voice-over exemplifies the paradoxical status of the privilege that Hollywood endows its male characters. This privilege is at best virtual and as such in perpetual jeopardy of total collapse. No matter how tenuous it may be though, this privilege is nevertheless able to support if not sustain Hollywood's overarching patriarchal ideology.

This contradiction points to the heart of the matter. How can Hollywood films be clearly patriarchal at the same time that they are completely rife with contradiction – so much so that upon careful inspection it is difficult to see them as anything other than either vapid and confused or simply incoherent? Again, there is perhaps no better formal representative for this situation than the embodied voice-over. It variously provides interiority, exteriority, a means of transitioning between the two, and the ability to claim

one or the other or both as its proper and exclusive domain. The limit of Silverman's analysis is that she assumes interiority and exteriority are discrete as well as stable enough to sustain a hierarchy between the two. This forecloses the very paradox that Hollywood relies on. In this regard, invagination is not merely a rhetorical flourish on Derrida's part. But, rather, one of many terms he deploys precisely in order to address this kind of paradox. The following section will further examine the implications of a structural composition that allows for interiority and exteriority to be interwoven into one another including the French author that prompts Derrida to introduce the term.[19] It is also necessary to further develop the relationship between invagination and spectrality. As Derrida puts it toward the end of *Specters of Marx*, the genesis of the ghost once again raises the "question of the head." That is to say, is the ghost only in one's head – a subjective hallucination? Or do ghosts always necessarily or simply also exist outside of one's head? In returning to *American Beauty*, I will show that in a film that begins with its protagonist announcing his own death, the origin of the ghost is of less interest than his eventual disappearance. While the traffic between interiority and exteriority that accompanies the voice-over indeed conjures traces of spectrality, the remainder of the film, and the uncanny incorporation that concludes Lester's final voice-over in particular, labors strenuously to evacuate any lingering sense of dissymmetry. Despite these efforts, Lester's posthumous voice-over raises questions that cannot be overlooked about narration more generally. That is, by speaking from an impossible place beyond the grave Lester's voice-over symptomatically manifests that other ghostly presence that resides

---

[19] "Living On" considers two short texts by Maurice Blanchot: *The Madness of the Day* (Trans. Lydia Davis. In *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader* [Ed. George Quasha. New York: Station Hill Press, 1998) and *Death Sentence* (Trans. Lydia Davis. New York: Station Hill Press, 1978).

behind all narrative cinema, that figure that haunts an entire system better known for its pristine seamlessness.

## Echo Chambers

There is no better way to invoke specters and haunting than to simply announce that time is out of joint. This is the case, as *American Beauty* begins not only with Lester announcing his own death *avant la lettre* but even prior to that, with Ricky's video footage of Jane first ridiculing and then threatening her father. This brief prologue is exceptional insofar as the film is otherwise presented in sequential order and very conscientiously framed within Lester's bookend voice-over. In foregrounding a discrepancy between plot and the chronology of the story world, this temporal aberration not only indicates that something is generally askew but more specifically reiterates the same tension that was seen between interiority and exteriority. This tension is still more forcefully rehearsed in terms of the film's main thematic concern, the dichotomy between surface and depth. That is, the rehabilitation undertaken on behalf of Lester is deeply intertwined with the film's simultaneous claim that beauty exists just below the surface and that it can be seen only by looking 'closer'. Supporting this claim, however, is not just – as it proves to be with the incriminating footage of Jane – a matter of peeling away the erroneous or misleading surface. Instead, *American Beauty* exploits alternating relations between surface and depth, just as it had encouraged traffic between inner and

outer forces, to the point of indeterminacy. This section explores how these dynamics are related to the restriction and release of narrative information and how such irregular fluctuations underscore the film's convoluted sense of beauty. Ultimately, while the film makes every effort to privilege an outward, transcendental trajectory, the corollary inward or abyssal – what is fundamentally related to what was previously discussed as the structure of invagination – is just as instrumental in producing Lester's appearance of mastery even as it leaves an underlying spectral residue.

As with the initial footage of Jane (and her off-screen companion, Ricky), Lester is not what he first appears to be. But what lies beneath the surface is less clear. He forsakes his sedate and comatose existence as a white collar, suburban family man, but only to adopt the superficial trappings of a retrograde adolescent. The film carefully avoids endorsing this transformation – refusing to enlist it among its various other embodiments of beauty, and in the end it is considered barely or not at all representative of Lester's 'true' inner soul. For most of the film the true or meaningful interior behind Lester's exterior is instead established by contrasting him with the even more flawed interiors of his two main counterparts. Lester's obvious counterpart is first and foremost his wife Carolyn. On the surface she is composed and professional, meticulous and stylish. But beneath the surface she is exposed as petty and vain, lustful and even vulgar, and, above all, materialistic and on the verge of total hysteria. Although the above section detailed the similarities between Angela and Carolyn, the second, and ultimately more important, of Lester's counterparts is his new neighbor Col. Frank Fitts (Chris Cooper). Whereas Carolyn's ineptitude is made apparent early on and repeatedly, Frank's true identity – like Angela's – remains suppressed for dramatic effect. Unlike Angela,

however, whose undisclosed virginity ultimately mitigates the damage of her fraudulent promiscuity, Frank's closeted homosexuality is treated as an extreme hypocrisy. Frank is a retired colonel, a life-long patriot devoted to structure and discipline. He is additionally identified as an ardent conservative staunch in his traditional family values. After Frank makes a pass at Lester (mistakenly assuming that he is gay), he is exposed as the very thing he hates with such fervor. In both cases, there is a pronounced incongruity between what Carolyn and Frank appear to be on the surface and their true identities. They are both condemned not only for this discrepancy but for their willingness to act on their otherwise suppressed desires. Lester, on the other hand, is portrayed as transgressing while also maintaining moral limits. He acts on his inner desires precisely in order to escape his listless life and, yet, by refraining from having sex with Angela, contrary to his two counterparts, avoids any taint of decadence or abnormality.

While this gives Lester the moral high ground, his virtue is necessarily supplemented through discursive means. After growing suspicions concerning Ricky, Frank randomly samples his son's video collection, finding footage of Lester lifting weights naked in his garage. Similar to our own viewing of the beginning of the film, Frank views the footage entirely without context and assumes the worst about both Lester and Ricky. Because the viewer has been privy to the earlier scene in which Ricky recorded this 'weird' moment, we know that Frank's perspective is entirely wrongheaded. Frank's errant point of view is further emphasized in what he thinks is an illicit engagement inside the Burnham's garage. Though the scene is predominantly filtered through Frank's point of view, the limitations of his perspective are at the same time made explicit. Following a brief medium close-up of Frank in profile looking screen

left, the film cuts to an over-the-shoulder shot. Two equal sized windows, separated by intermediary storm shutters, provide visual access to the Burnham garage where Lester is seen affectionately greeting Ricky. The film cuts to a reverse shot of Frank looking intently, followed by a shot from inside the garage providing complete access to Lester and Ricky's conversation. As had been implied through a previous scene, Lester has called Ricky in order to procure marijuana. Having completed the transaction he persuades Ricky to roll a joint for him so that they can smoke it together. Because Frank's vantage point is obscured he only sees Lester sinking into a lounge chair in the right-hand window while Ricky with his back to the left-hand window leans forward toward Lester. Frank infers that Lester had paid Ricky in exchange for oral sex. By providing the counterpoint to his limited perspective the film not only dramatizes his misperception but suggests that Frank's inability to comprehend the situation stems from something other than his visual limitations. That is, his inability to fully understand the transaction leads him all too quickly to see what he wants to see. It's only later, however, that we learn that what distorts his view is less the sadistic desire to punish and condemn Ricky than his own suppressed homosexual desire.

Frank's faulty focalization stands in direct contrast to Lester's ever expanding field of vision.[20] The opening aerial shot that accompanies his inaugural voice-over

---

[20] This distinction might also be thought of in terms of Edward Branigan's distinction between internal and external focalization. In his account, when characters become storytellers that "character has a new and *different* function in the text at another level, no longer as an actor who defines, and is defined by, a causal chain, but as a diegetic narrator (i.e., a narrator limited by the laws of the story world) who is now recounting a story within the story: he or she as an actor in a past even becomes the object of his or her narration in the present" (*Narrative Comprehension and Film* [New York: Routledge, 1992], 100). Whereas focalization with regard to Frank is restricted to his point-of-view, Lester focalizes both in the sense that his voice-over frames the entire narrative and we are, especially in the film's final scene, provided access to his subjective thoughts.

marks him as one who literally oversees all. When he subsequently elects to not have sex with Angela, it is likewise because, figuratively speaking, he can see the bigger picture. Within the diegesis proper, Lester has the ability to overhear and extrapolate otherwise unseen details. The first inkling of this occurs when he clumsily obtains Angela's phone number from his daughter's notebook. He is later, by this time with impeccable savvy, able to parlay company hearsay into an extremely favorable severance package. He is also seen eavesdropping on Jane and Angela, again providing him with insights that serve to his later advantage. Finally, he confronts Buddy and his wife after overhearing their flirtatious chatter at Mr. Smiley's, the drive-in restaurant where he works.[21] Conversely, despite Frank's every effort to scrutinize and monitor Ricky, his powers of surveillance are utterly defective. Ricky deceives his father in every way possible – from the catering jobs he uses as a cover for his drug operation, to the urine samples that he trades for in order to maintain the appearance of sobriety. At the same time, Ricky is able to gain access to his father's inner sanctum (through another trade with a locksmith), signaling the vast difference that separates them.

Although the film relies heavily on dichotomies such as surface and depth, the dynamic between these opposing categories often remains inconsistent or dissymmetrical. For instance, even as *American Beauty* wants to privilege depth unconditionally, it is only able to constitute Lester's inner probity by casting Carolyn and Frank's hidden identities as utterly negative. In other words, no sooner than depth is privileged it is partitioned into good and bad versions, the latter defining and propping up the former. Meanwhile, the film's corollary visual economy insinuates a contrasting logic. Whereas surface is

---

[21] For more on the role of surveillance and technology, see Marcel O'Gorman: "American ~~Beauty~~ Busted: Necromedia and Domestic Discipline," *SubStance* #105, Vol 33, no. 3, 2004.

generally derided, especially as it is linked to female characters such as Carolyn, Lester's field of vision is largely associated with exteriority – he sees from an external, nearly omniscient, position. On the other hand, while depth or interiority is generally privileged at a thematic level, Frank's flawed focalization clearly condemns his subjective or internal perspective. What makes this all the more problematic is that his inability to properly comprehend narrative information parallels the viewer's initial inability to correctly infer the film's forward trajectory. Indeed in both the case of Frank and Angela's hidden identity, the film suppresses any inclination that pertinent information has been occluded. In this regard, the opening video footage flaunts a gap in the story – and thereby sanctions an incorrect assumption – precisely in order to minimize or obscure the later, more subtle suppression of information. It's not the wrong assumption that tricks the viewer, then, but the failure to formulate certain hypothesis (precisely because the necessary cues have been either excessively subtle or removed entirely).[22] While Frank is made to pay the price for his errant assumptions, the film makes every effort to re-position its viewers on the right side of knowledge. This, however, entails a precarious task. In effect, the film asks us to embrace what is revealed as Lester's inner goodness while discounting the fact that every other character whose interiority or hidden identity

---

[22] Another, perhaps more obvious, 1999 film featuring the undead – *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan) – operates on a similar form of misdirection. Related films include: *The Others* (Alejandro Amenábar, 2001), *Vanilla Sky* (Cameron Crowe, 2001), and *A Beautiful Mind* (Ron Howard, 2001). Although this technique seemingly adheres to Freud's formulation in which the uncanny involves a conflict or mistake in judgment, the twists and turns found in such films are often relatively predictable and have more to do with the demands of the marketplace than anything else. Conversely, we might consider a film such as Michael Haneke's *Caché* (2005) for an example of how similar methods can be used to produce more unsettling effects. For more on this comparison, see H. Porter Abbott's "Garden Paths and Ineffable Effects: Abandoning Representation in Literature and Film" (in *Toward a Theory of Narrative Acts*. Eds. Frederick Aldama and Patrick Colm Hogan [Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009]) and, more generally, Garrett Stewart's *Framed Time: Toward A Postfilmic Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2007).

is made visible immediately suffers disgrace or condemnation. Once time is out of joint, it is impossible to entirely restore. Consequently, *American Beauty's* out of order beginning casts a heavy shadow despite the fact that the footage appears to be easily dismissed as marginal or superfluous. In fact, for the film to reach its proper conclusion the opening footage of Jane must be situated in a way that compensates for and obscures the restriction of information otherwise needed for the film to progress.

The footage of Jane is eventually situated in two ways. First, the footage is re-contextualized as it is repeated within the story's proper chronology. This provides information that had been initially suppressed and serves to erase doubts about Jane, her apparent threat is revealed as more playful than insidious. Second, and more tacitly, the footage is reframed within Lester's death sequence. Following the gunshot that kills him, his voice-over returns to the sound track. Recalling the cliché that one's life flashes before one's eyes, the film promptly follows with a measured and introspective montage of Lester's most poignant memories. The camera pans rightward over black and white images first of Lester as a boy looking at falling stars, then autumn leaves, his grandmother's wrinkled hands, and his cousin's brand new Pontiac Firebird. The penultimate image, however, is more difficult to situate among Lester's cherished memories. Lester says that he could be angry about being dead, but "it's hard to stay mad when there is so much beauty in the world." Here he is not only quoting Ricky's earlier account of beauty verbatim, but the image track features his video footage of an empty plastic bag floating before a red brick wall, what Ricky had introduced to Jane as the "most beautiful thing" he had ever filmed. Lester continues, "sometimes I feel I'm seeing it all at once and it's too much. My heart fills up like a balloon that's about to burst." This

slightly reverses Ricky's account. As he had put it, "there is so much beauty in the world I feel like I can't take it and my heart is going to cave in." The alternation between the inward and outward force of beauty is appropriate considering the film's broader ambiguity regarding these categories. Ricky's video of Jane by this time has not only been incorporated into the film's proper chronology, but what had initially seemed to be more generally outside or beyond Lester's grasp has been folded both into the dead man's voice-over commentary and what is treated as his optical perspective.

As a character-narrator Lester is embedded within the diegesis. However, the montage that follows his death, implying that his field of vision includes video footage the he had otherwise never seen, seemingly elevates him to a higher level of narration. Inklings that Lester possesses omniscient knowledge are further supported by the curious organization of the film's final scene. As Lester's voice-over returns, the film cuts back to Ricky and Jane in her bedroom and we hear the gunshot repeated. In the film's only other temporal disjunction aside from the pre-title video footage, we hear the deadly gunshot repeated three more times, each time synchronized so as to show the whereabouts of Jane, Angela, and Carolyn at the time of Lester's murder. The repetition of the gunshot is interspersed with the black and white images that form Lester's memory montage. Interwoven in this way, as well as subsumed by his voice-over, the disjunctive repetition is closely associated with if not explicitly attributed to Lester. That the threefold repetition of gunshots recalls the repetitions within Lester's three fantasy scenarios with Angela stands as further evidence of this linkage. That is, for example, at the basketball game where Lester first sees Angela, the moment she motions to her sweater to expose her bosom is repeated three times in quick succession. The intersection

of his subjective or focalized reveries with what can only be described as the film's stylistic excess provides the basis for endowing Lester with some kind of discursive agency.[23] Whereas the repetitions within the fantasies are, like the entire plot line involving Angela, seemingly superfluous, the death montage resolves the film's organizing enigma – who killed Lester. Within the same pattern that alternates between Lester's subjective memories and the whereabouts of Jane, Angela, and Carolyn, the film cuts to Frank covered in blood, revealing that he is in fact the murderer. By framing this disclosure within Lester's final voice-over, the film once again aligns Lester with the restriction and revelation of narrative information. The proximity of Lester's inner most reflection and the disclosure of the film's most important hermeneutic detail serve to combine his subjective slant with the overall film's objective or impersonal outlook. The combination, or confusion, of these two vantage points only further encourages the illusion of Lester's omniscience.

Whereas Silverman resembles Derrida in holding that there is nothing 'outside' of the text per se, narratologists are more likely to contend that there in fact must be an external figure that discursively determines the narrative. Though scholars such as David Bordwell and Seymour Chatman differ widely in their exact terminology, both concede that narrative entails someone or something outside of the text and that this function is

---

[23] David Bordwell defines narration as the formal system that cues and constrains the viewer's construction of the story. In this system, the syuzhet or plot controls the distribution and arrangement of information albeit in conjunction with 'style' or, rather, "the systematic use of cinematic devices." The repetition in Lester's fantasies clearly suggest a stylistic flourish, one in which Lester is again linked to a role that extends beyond or outside of the diegesis. See, Bordwell's *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

not reducible to any one character within the diegesis.[24] While Hollywood commonly exploits this erroneous convergence, *American Beauty* illustrates the way that any ambiguity between objective and subjective, similar to the traffic between interiority and exteriority, can be made to enact or support this convergence. André Gaudreault has more recently drawn additional attention to the voice-over as a telling source of confusion in the slippage between the character-narrator and its abstract counterpart.[25] The most significant feature of the voice-over, he claims, is that it allows for the use of the first-person or deictic pronoun 'I', which in turn allows the character-narrator to "pose as the apparent illocutionary source" of the narrative. While literature uses the same device, it is less problematic because all of its narration is confined to the same linguistic register. In film, conversely, it "is ontologically impossible for the agent fundamentally responsible for film narrative" to use the first person pronoun 'I' (139). The cinematic narrator 'speaks' in sounds and images and other stylistic interventions. The narrator or discursive origin of the narrative, in other words then, occupies a different ontological order. While the character-narrator is clearly a subordinate agent, he or she appears to be a materialization or metaphor for this other figure and hence allows for the slippage between the two.

While it will be necessary to come back to Gaudreault's specific point about the use of the 'I', it is worth noting for the time being some similar slippages within the more specific debate between Chatman and Bordwell. Bordwell believes that it is unnecessary

---

[24] For more on the debates surrounding these terms see Bordwell's *Narration in the Fiction Film* and Chatman's *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

[25] Gaudreault, André. *From Plato to Lumière: Narration and Monstration in Literature and Cinema*. Trans. Timothy Barnard. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009.

to attribute the process of narration to any particular locus (i.e. a narrator). Chatman, however, takes issue with his definition of narration "as the organization of a set of cues for the construction of a story" (62). In his view, the use of the term 'organization' fails to completely evacuate the subject-verb predicate still implicit in the definition. That is, someone or something is still responsible for the organizing. If it is necessary, according to Chatman, to allow "that 'narrator' names only the organizational and sending agency," then "we are spared the uncomfortable consequences of a communication with no communicator—indeed, a creation with no creator" (127). Chatman takes further exception to Bordwell's claim that it is the plot alone that decides how and when to suppress pertinent narrative details, thereby granting it not only a range of knowledge but a degree of self-consciousness and willingness or unwillingness to communicate that knowledge. To know when and why it is necessary to suppress narrative information implies that there is an overarching logic. Gaps are not whimsical and scattershot, but premeditated and calculated precisely to maximize dramatic effect. For Chatman, this confirms the presence of an implied author, an organizing agent outside of the diegesis and privy to the story in its entirety. As the term itself suggests, however, the implied author does not possess the same sovereign authority that Gaudreault grants his narrator. 'Implied' instead suggests the appearance of an agent, not an actual agent. Even as he claims that every creation entails a creator, narration entails a fundamental dissymmetry whereby disparate agents are simultaneously present and not present. It is not for nothing that both Chatman and Bordwell invoke the term ghostly to account for this figure.[26]

While Derrida is not especially known for addressing such issues, his account of Edgar Allan Poe's short story 'The Purloined Letter' nonetheless takes narration as his

[26] *Coming to Terms*, 74 and *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 62.

primary focus.[27] Prompted by Jacques Lacan's Seminar devoted to the same story, Derrida is initially interested in the "curious place of the narrator" and, more specifically, Lacan's failure to address the "problem of framing, or bordering and delimitation," which in his view serves to foreclose precisely what is uncanny about Poe's work (428, 431). The problem of framing here highlights for Derrida a much larger problem, and that is the tendency within psychoanalysis to focus exclusively on uncovering the 'truth' regardless of whether it is to be found in dreams or in literary examples. Texts, like dreams, Derrida counters, always entail a secondary elaboration and the unabated drive to decipher their meaning leads the analyst all too often to neglect "a fold in the text," or rather, an enveloping "structural complication" that, similar to invagination, calls into question any logical coherency (417). Akira Lippit has more recently elaborated on this point noting that dreams interrupted by that anonymous voice that announces "this is only a dream" bear the trace of *différance*. That is, the intrusion of this voice, what Freud views as the initial evidence of secondary revision, marks a place both within and beyond the dream, there and not there, "a trace of exteriority, inside and out, inside-out."[28] Secondary revision entails the same dissymmetry that both concerned and confounded narratologists. In this regard, the elusive narrating presence begins to further resemble Derrida's account of the specter. The 'visor effect' specifically refers to the ghost in

---

[27] "*Le facteur de la vérité*" in *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). An abridged version of the essay titled "The Purveyor of Truth" is included in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading* (Eds. John P. Muller and William J. Richardson. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), which also includes Lacan's Seminar on "The Purloined Letter" as well as Poe's short story.

[28] Lippit, Akira. "The Only Other Apparatus of Film (A Few Fantasies About Différance, Démontage, and Revision in Experimental Film and Video)," in *Derrida, Deleuze, Psychoanalysis*. Eds. Gabriele Schwab and Erin Ferris. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.

*Hamlet* who sees but who cannot be seen seeing because of the visor that conceals his face. This same incongruity comes to account for the specter more generally: "the specter first of all sees us… it looks at us even before we see it or even before we see period. We feel ourselves observed, sometimes under surveillance by it even before any apparition" (*SoM* 100-101). Something similar can be said about any underlying narrator: it sees the viewer, so to speak, accounts for their presence, while remaining unseen by the viewer.

In addition to questioning the role of framing in Poe's story and literary analysis more generally, Derrida's analysis in "*Le facteur*" tracks two different trajectories. First, he claims that Lacan's final assessment – that "the letter always arrives at its destination" – overstates the value of the signifier. The notion that any letter has "a single *proper* itinerary," for Derrida at least, "permits the scene of the signifier to be reconstructed into a signified…" (432). He has elsewhere examined this as the inherent logic of the sign and generally considers the procedure to be part of what he terms logocentrism.[29] This emphasis tends to elevate the signifier to a transcendental level, endowing it with many of same characteristics such as "spontaneity" and "self-presence" typically associated with the voice. In effect, Derrida is saying that the effort to decipher truth in any given text runs the risk of re-inscribing a transcendental signifier. Because this truth can be both the origin of the text and its end, it inevitably implies a circular logic. To counter Lacan's claim that the letter always reaches its destination Derrida imagines all the ways in which a letter fails to reach any final destination, one that remains in perpetual limbo. This interpretation is part of his broader contention that writing precedes the letter, that is, that the system producing meaning precedes any singular truth produced within that system.

---

[29] See Part I in *Of Grammatology*.

While Derrida is wary of what he sees as the surreptitious return to transcendental signifiers, he shows that any such effort necessarily calls upon what he refers to as "abyss effects" (467). In *Of Grammatology* Derrida writes that presence is "born from the abyss" (163). The abyss, in this regard, refers to "an indefinitely multiplied structure." Closely related to the way framing works in conjunction with narration, the abyss here generates perpetually receding interior planes of meaning and in so doing simultaneously establishes an outside, exterior realm. In making this process explicit, the abyss foregrounds the way that framing is both arbitrary and infinitely repeatable. With regard to Poe's short story, Derrida claims that the most vivid example of this *mise-en-abyme* or abyss effect is the title itself. Indeed 'The Purloined Letter' both refers to the story itself and the stolen letter within the story. In doubling the significance of the letter, Derrida sees it as a pointed example of how the letter "evades every assignable destination, and produces, or rather induces by deducing itself, this unassignableness at the precise moment when it narrates the arrival of a letter" (493).

There is nothing particularly uncommon about this type of practice. In fact, such ploys are relatively ubiquitous throughout Hollywood cinema and actually quite explicit in self-referential films such as *Singin' in the Rain* (Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, 1952). This film is particularly relevant since Silverman among others uses it to exemplify Hollywood's practice of embodying the female voice, locking her within the film's interior realm. While this is undoubtedly the case, *Singin' in the Rain* simultaneously utilizes such a dizzying array of diegetic levels that any definitive partition between interior and exterior is inevitably problematic. Although the film is rife with recursive digressions, none are as straightforwardly evident as the title itself. *Signin'*

*in the Rain* refers to the pre-existing song that in many ways prompted the film as well as the musical number that Don Lockwood (Gene Kelly) performs midway through the narrative.[30] In the final scene, it appears within the diegesis as part of a billboard announcing a new film featuring Don and his new partner Kathy Selden (Debbie Reynolds). The film that has just been seen tells the story leading up to another film of the same name, thus dividing *Singin' in the Rain* between the already materialized fiction and the infinitely deferred future possibility of another fiction. The abyss effect identified by Derrida refers precisely to the instability created through this maneuver – the trace of shifting, reversing, collapsing meanings that persists even as convention inexplicably dictates that one definitive meaning is agreed upon.

The title, *American Beauty* poses something of a similar problem. Does this phrase refer to Lester's midlife crisis and the process of self-discovery that follows? Or does the film aim to posit some account of beauty in the broad, abstract sense? If so, what is the relationship between the primary signifiers of beauty within the diegesis and the narrative undertakings that enframe or mediate those signifiers? On the one hand Ricky's video footage of the plastic bag might be taken as the film's ultimate example of beauty. At the same time, however, both Angela and, more tangentially, Carolyn's roses remain potential candidates as they are linked to varying notions of beauty over the course of the film.[31] As disparate as they first seem, all three possibilities are organized around an

---

[30] See Peter Wollen's discussion of the film's production history in *Singin' in the Rain* (London: BFI, 1992).

[31] All three are featured among the film's para-texts. While Ricky's footage may be the most iconic or memorable from the film itself, it is the image of Angela's naked midriff surrounded by a bed of rose petals that takes center stage on promotional posters and the DVD packaging. The title itself refers to a particular type of rose, which Carolyn appears to be adept at cultivating. Subsequently though the rose is more closely affiliated, both metaphorically and metonymically,

intersection between nature and artifice. Carolyn's ubiquitous roses, for example, are artificially enhanced, as mentioned in the film's opening scene, through her special fertilizer. Though Ricky's video, in contrast, is presented entirely as a natural phenomenon it, of course, is also completely contrived. Contrived not only in sense that the composition and duration of the footage are just as important in creating its aura, but more so in the sense that no scene, particularly one as critical as this, is left to the kind of chance encounter that explains it within the diegesis. That is, whereas Ricky attributes the image as a random combination of unusual weather and incidental debris, the footage is necessarily every bit as, if not more, produced as every other instance within the film's fiction. Angela is undoubtedly more complicated, her beauty residing somewhere between the straightforward materiality of the roses and the discursive lyricism of Ricky's footage. Once again reversing the nature-artifice dynamic, Angela's precocious facade is foregrounded while her true status, her natural, physiological innocence, remains concealed. Though Lester appears to relinquish her as his object of affection as soon as this is revealed, the abruptness with which he both retreats to his family and endorses Ricky's footage in his final monologue leaves some lingering doubts.

Earlier in the film Lester is encouraged by Angela's flirtatious body language and salacious comments, both of which seem to further confirm her status as sexually experienced and available. Even at that early point, however, Angela alternates between complete accessibility and persistent inaccessibility. On the one hand, Lester is able to access Angela as an erotic fantasy no sooner than their first meeting. On the other hand, throughout these fantasies, he is unable to consummate his desire. Permissive at the level

---

with Angela. The fact that the publicity materials so prominently focus on this conjunction seems somewhat contradictory since both Carolyn and Angela are eventually dismissed as superficial and disingenuous.

of the image, Angela remains taboo and elusive as an object of complete acquisition. In the end, Lester ostensibly terminates his pursuit both because the desire generated in the process has already been enough to revitalize his life and, more tenuously, because he realizes that desire is best sustained through the inaccessibility of the object. Considering, however, that Angela is so central to Lester's notion of beauty throughout most of the film it is necessary to investigate the possibility that this entire sub-plot is more than the misleading dead end that it is made out to be. Angela, in fact, curiously recalls what Derrida details as the two values of truth attributed to the signifier in 'The Purloined Letter'. The first he terms 'adequation', "the circular return and proper course, form the origin to the end, from the signifier's place of detachment to its place of reattachment" (463). The second is referred to as 'veiling-unveiling' and comprises the structure of lack whereby, as in Freud's account of castration, "the proper site of the signifier… shows nothing in unveiling itself. Therefore, it veils itself in its unveiling" (463). Beauty for the film, like truth more generally, exists in some abstract sense to which all examples are made to support regardless of the detours and deviations that may suggest otherwise. Angela's function as a signifier, circulating freely amid Lester's fantasies, is indissociable with the ideal of revitalizing beauty that she remains inextricable with even at the film's conclusion. Indeed, as that signifier is rendered naked, Angela is violently detached from the pretense of feminine allure that both she and Lester had propagated, but only to embody feminine virtue in a more ideal and pure sense. Her apparent fall from grace, merely serves to re-instantiate her true beauty, what previously seemed to have been limited to her surface appearance and promiscuous affectation. That is, the unveiling of Angela's artifice does nothing to undo her correlation with beauty. In fact,

on the contrary, the revelation veils the fact that her status as such is rooted in an abstract value system that can only exist outside the twists and turns of the text itself. The implication that Angela radically transforms at this dramatic moment conceals the way that she functions the same throughout the film.

A similarly circuitous quality underlies Ricky's various elaborations. Initially Ricky's thoughts concerning beauty are contiguous with death. At one point he is seen recording a dead bird. When Angela and Jane question why, he answers "because its beautiful." When Jane subsequently walks home with Ricky, their conversation again turns to death as a funeral procession passes by. Ricky recalls the dead homeless woman that he once encountered, adding that he recorded her as well. When again asked why he says, "because it was amazing." He continues his explanation, "when you see something like that it, it's like God is looking right at you and, if you're careful you can look right back." When Jane asks what he sees when he does, Ricky responds "beauty." Though Ricky initially associates beauty with death in particular and the abject or prosaic more generally, his explanation insinuates a reversal of terms. What death reveals is concomitant first with God and later with life itself. He says to Jane that the footage of the floating bag lead him to realize that there is an entire life behind things and this life can likewise be attributed to a benevolent force. Finally, then, beauty is equated with a force of presence, a life beneath things that is only amplified as death runs its course. This, however, entails another apparent contradiction. If, on the one hand, beauty is pervasive, even omnipresent, it, on the other hand, is necessarily anchored within or embodied by Ricky's various representations. This tension belies the way in which Ricky's definition closely resembles Derrida's own critique of truth, that is, that its

underlying value resides in its "self-sameness" or "presence," something that is at once abstract or external and innate, an internal essence or locus. It is only by way of this contradiction that Ricky's video serves, not to dislocate beauty from its natural existence within the world, but as the means by which it is delivered, first to Jane, then Lester, and, of course, to the viewer as well. Even as it effaces this contradiction, the mere trace of potential dislocation is enough of a threat that the film prefers to conclude with the "idealizing effect of speech." *American Beauty's* last impression is that of Lester's voice alone, his presence having dissolved into its final, completely ethereal form.

As noted earlier in this section, the film's effort to engender Lester's true inner character is largely achieved by contrasting him with his more negative counterparts. Whereas that dichotomy is coded in terms of opposition, Lester's supposed transformation from middle class morass to revitalized baby boomer, in light of the film's convoluted account of beauty, begins to look like a far less dynamic trajectory. In fact, Frank's ghastly hypocrisy seems entirely intended to ward off the linkage between Lester and sameness. The implication, for example, of incest in Lester's attraction to Angela is dwarfed by Frank's suppressed homosexuality, the evil of which is punctuated by his similarly closeted Nazi paraphernalia.[32] As the analogy makes clear, Frank's suppressed desire for the same sex blurs with his pathological fascination with fascist ideology, structure and discipline taken to its absolute extreme. The threat of sameness for Lester is, perhaps unsurprisingly, most perilous during the sequence surrounding his death. Not

---

[32] For more on the implication of incest see Kathleen Rowe Karlyn's "'Too Close for Comfort': *American Beauty* and the Incest Motif," *Cinema Journal* 44, No. 1, Fall 2004. Vincent Hausmann expands Karlyn's analysis, arguing that the film's investment in sameness conversely entails a fundamental aversion to "strangeness or Otherness." See his "Envisioning the (W)hole World "Behind Things": Denying Otherness in American Beauty," *Camera Obscura* 55, Vol. 19 No. 1, 2004.

only does Lester ultimately embrace the same family that was so clearly responsible for his misery at the beginning of the film, but in his appropriation of Ricky's footage and thoughts on beauty there is the implication that he has figuratively brought to fruition the oral transmission that Frank feared he had witnessed. That is, in putting Ricky's words (and images) into Lester's mouth there is the implication of some kind of intimate exchange or intercourse between them with all of the same homoerotic connotations that informed Frank's obscured vantage point.[33] Just as Lester reverts to his family among his most cherished memories, this transmission tacitly recalls his other defining characteristic at the outset of the film, his penchant for masturbation.

For Derrida, masturbation, otherwise known as auto-affection, constitutes 'the most dangerous supplement'.[34] Indeed, in accordance with his definition of the supplement, masturbation over the course of *American Beauty* is both a replacement or substitute (a pejorative one at that) for Lester's lack of sex life and an auxiliary resource, instrumental – vis-à-vis his fantasies of Angela – in his escape from his mid-life doldrums. The risk of masturbation is that it may redirect desire from its "natural," hetero-normative course – re-routing desire not necessarily to the same-sex, but to an even more troubling kind of sameness, back upon oneself. The deeper peril, then, and the reason why masturbation is considered such a perversion, is its potential to undermine the very autonomy and self-sufficiency that onanism, and presence more generally, supposedly implies. Indeed masturbation is associated with supplementarity because it

---

[33] This oral fixation may be considered a variation of what Hausmann identifies as the trope of anality in the film. That is, he argues that Ricky's, and by extension the film's, interest in the "whole life behind things" is indicative of a more insidious and problematic homoerotic subtext. The fact that Frank approaches Lester from behind, for instance, marks "his desire to enter Lester sexually from behind" (133).

[34] See Chapter 2, Part II in *Of Grammatology*.

trades in images and representations that are unnatural, that is to say, not identical with nature itself, but somehow removed from and distinct from nature. Of course it is precisely through the image – subjective or otherwise – that masturbation renders the object of desire present. The pleasure that masturbation provides stems not from the thing itself, but from an absent presence that both holds the thing itself "at a distance and masters it." Hence the danger of such a supplement, it "transgresses and at the same time respects the interdict" (155). Auto-affection, for Derrida, is not simply a bad habit or vice that must be outgrown or done away with. It is, on the contrary, representative of "the universal structure of experience," insofar at least as it portends the attempted "suppression of *différance*" (166-67). If masturbation provides all the same pleasure even in the absence of the thing itself, it effectively illustrates the way that "supplementarity has always already *infiltrated* presence" (163). The effort to retreat or isolate from the world, only succeeds in demonstrating that what is outside is already also inside.

The lingering threat of auto-affection, then, poses a far more dangerous perversion than the implication of homosexuality. That is, more dangerous than the manner in which Lester appropriates Rickys' footage is the possibility that his own ideas are already not his own. In the sense that the film's notion of beauty resembles supplementarity, it suggests that what appears to be the "property of man" always originates elsewhere. As in auto-affection, what appears to be solitary and self-contained is in fact always already contaminated by something other. Still, as Derrida notes, the impossibility of "self-proximity" or "pure presence" only intensifies the desire to claim these characteristics (*Of Grammatology* 244). At the very moment that the film acknowledges the dislocating potential of beauty, Lester is paradoxically characterized as

having finally ascended to a state of self-possession and wholeness. This final development is, of course, surrounded by ambiguity and contradiction. Lester's ability, on the one hand, to appropriate Ricky's video footage and assume narrative powers that are not his own – posing as the film's "illocutionary source" both in terms of his voice-over and the manipulation of time throughout the final sequence, stand as efforts to suppress *différance.* These efforts are distorted, however, by Lester's final comments in which he belittles his 'stupid little life' and claims to lack the ability to fully articulate his experience, promising the viewer that they will understand but only when it is too late. In this regard, Lester seems to feign powerlessness at the precise moment that his power is greatest. Having just detailed the manifold ways in which his life is full of meaning, his ability to successfully convey the meaning of his life is only further punctuated by his final disavowal. The suppression of *différance* entails not only effacing all signs of multiplicity and otherness but also augmenting and consolidating what inheres in presence. In the end Lester authors his own transformation, he is the proprietor of his own self-discovery, he is rife with the power to give birth to new ideas and ultimately himself.[35] The problem with this power of self-production is that it shares too much in common with his earlier affinity for masturbation. His ability to reproduce himself anew,

---

[35] Herein lies perhaps the most significant difference between *American Beauty* and the precursor to which it is most often compared, *Sunset Boulevard*. The earlier film focuses on two characters directly linked to cinematic authorship: Joe Gillis (William Holden), an out-of-work screenwriter, and Norma Desmond (Goria Swanson), a star of the silent cinema struggling with her departure from the limelight. Both, in the end, are rendered completely illegitimate. Whereas all of the principle characters in Wilder's film are subject to ridicule and cynical wit, *American Beauty* primarily reserves its scorn for Carolyn, Frank, and Angela precisely in order to legitimate the likes of Ricky and Lester. For related accounts of *Sunset Boulevard*, see Julian Wolfreys's "Uncanny Temporalities, Haunting Occasions: *Sunset Boulevard*" (in *Occasional Deconstructions* [New York: State University of New York Press, 2004]) and Andrew Gibson's "'And the Wind Wheezing Through That Organ Once in a While'" Voice, Narrative, Film" (*New Literary History* 2001, 32: 639-657).

in other words, fundamentally adheres to the same logic as the means of imaginary escape or remedy that he possessed at the film's beginning. Lester's powers of transformation, like beauty in the film more generally, cannot be created or invented. They already exist and therefore only need to be claimed as such. Despite the fact that these powers have no creator, claiming them as such serves to reinscribe he who claims them as their creator.

The film's effort to suppress *différance* necessarily fails to eradicate all evidence of supplementarity. One last related example is worth further examination. So far I've discussed the appearance of Ricky's footage at the end of the film in terms of appropriation. However, it would be just as prudent to think of it in terms of incorporation not necessarily in the psychoanalytic sense but in the way Derrida interjects the term within his account of the specter.[36] In his overview of the dispute between Stirner and Marx, Derrida discusses the ghost as a byproduct of an exchange between spirit and specter. Spirit, in this regard, is associated with Hegelian idealism and entails an autonomization in which thought is detached from any kind of material support. For any ghost to return requires not just a return to the material realm, but more specifically it needs a body to occasion that return. "Once ideas or thoughts are detached from their substratum, one engenders some ghost by giving them a body. Not by returning to the living body from which ideas and thoughts have been torn loose, but by incarnating the latter in another artifactual body, a prosthetic body, a ghost of spirit, one might say a

---

[36] Derrida's reference to incorporation resonates with the work of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok. See Abraham's "Notes on the Phantom: A Complement to Freud's Metapsychology" as well as, more generally, their collected work in *The Shell and the Kernel* (Ed. and trans. Nicholas T. Rand. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). For more on this particular allusion as well as an overview of hauntology, see Colin Davis's "*État Présent*: Hauntology, Specters, and Phantoms" (*French Studies*, Vol. LIX, No. 3, [2005] 373 – 379).

ghost of the ghost…" (*SoM* 126). The case of incorporation in *American Beauty* suggests that its specter is most explicitly manifest in the reappearance of Ricky's footage. Inside Lester's head is a camera that had been inside Ricky's head.[37] Initially, Ricky rendered the abstract ideal, beauty, into something tangible, a particular, discrete image. When Lester's voice-over reframes the footage, he effectively "incorporates the initial incorporation by negating or destroying, by deposing the previous position from its objective exteriority…" (*SoM* 128). In this case what the specter inhabits, the abstract body that occasions its return, is the image, the video footage in particular and perhaps cinematic representation more generally.[38] For Derrida, the dynamic between spirit and specter can never be fully resolved; there will always be an endless play between the two. Even as Ricky's footage (not unlike the film that both frames and exceeds him) so to speak haunts Lester, he remains the film's privileged figure. He is "the ghost that engenders ghosts and gives birth to them from its head in its head, outside of it inside of it, beginning with itself, departing from itself…" (*SoM* 159).[39] This finally recalls the

---

[37] Hausmann claims that the tracking shot that follows Lester's murder – the high-angle shot in which the final moments of his life are replayed together with the final images that flash through his mind – are from his disembodied point-of-view. This may very well be the case, though the shot is only figuratively or metaphorically coded as subjective. As a result, this shot provides a sublime rather than unsettling effect. In contrast consider the most famous example of an undead point-of-view in *Vampyr* (Carl Theodor Dreyer, 1932), Orson Welles's plans for his unmade adaptation of *Heart of Darkness*, and, more recently, *Robocop* (Paul Verhoeven, 1987). With regard to Dreyer's film, see Mark Nash's "*Vampyr* and the Fantastic" (*Screen* 17.3 [1976]: 29-67). On Welles's plans, see Guerric DeBona, "Into Africa: Orson Welles and "Heart of Darkness" (*Cinema Journal*, Vol. 33, No. 3 [Spring, 1994]: 16-34). For an interesting precursor and related analysis, see Akira Lippit's discussion of Cecil Hepworth's *How It Feels to Be Run Over* (1900) in *Atomic Light (Shadow Optics)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

[38] Hausmann, on a related note, pursues the film's allusions to cinema and relations among the arts.

[39] Although Derrida is, at this point, referring to Marx's discussion of the commodity, the phrasing equally recalls a strangely relevant passage from Stirner that both he and Marx qouote in full:

film's fleetingly cryptic reference to *The Re-Animator* (Stuart Gordon, 1985). Ricky and Lester joke about the reanimated corpse that carries his own decapitated head.[40] They only mention the laughable living-dead and not the other 'head' for which the film is titled, the 'mad scientist' figure behind the outlandish experiments. *American Beauty* needs no such distinction. Lester is the author of his own reanimation. He is his own re-animator, the head that directs his lifeless body to pursue more life. He is a presence that needs no mention just as it no longer needs material support.

This final bevy of reversals and dissymmetries once again evokes the structure of invagination—the inward folding of an outward protrusion. The essay "Living On" in which Derrida develops the term invagination considers the work of Maurice Blanchot and, more specifically, the abyssal structure in two of his texts explicitly concerned with the permeable borders between life and death.[41] Derrida notices that the doubling within the short story 'The Madness of the Day' – the repetition of various sentences, once again

---

> "How I find myself" (it should read: "how the youth finds himself") "behind the *things*, and indeed as *spirit*, so subsequently, too, I must find myself" (it should read "the man must find himself") "behind the *thoughts*, i.e., as their creator and owner. In the period of spirits, thoughts outgrew me" (the youth), "although they were the offspring of my brain; like delirious fantasies, they floated around me and agitated me greatly, a dreadful power. The thoughts became themselves corporeal, they were specters, like God, the Emperor, the Pope, the Fatherland, etc.; by destroying their corporeality, I take them back into my own corporeality and *announce*: I alone am corporeal. And now I take the world as it is for me, as my world, as my property: I relate everything to myself." (qtd. in *SoM* 130)

[40] Hausmann observes that this reference again bears homoerotic overtones: the notion of 'giving head' as an allusion to fellatio.

[41] Derrida further considers Blanchot's work in "The Law of Genre" (*Acts of Literature*. Trans. Derek Attridge. New York: Routledge, 1992) and in "Demeure: Fiction and Testimony" (collected with Blanchot's *The Instant of My Death* [Trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000]). Whereas *American Beauty* allows for extensive permeability between life and death, in the end the film limits the 'meaning' of life and reaffirms the binary logic that underlies these two categories. For more on the deconstruction of these terms as they relate to cinema, see Louis-Georges Schwartz, "Cinema and the Meaning of 'Life'" (*Discourse*, 28.2&3 [Spring and Fall 2006]: 7-27).

recalling what was earlier discussed as abyss effects – "creates an exceedingly strange space" (96). This strange space prompts his definition of invagination as a "reapplication" or repetition of an outer edge – in this case the first sentence of the story – to create an inner pocket. It is not invagination per se, however, that leads Derrida to extol Blanchot's text, but, rather, the double invagination whereby what "is folded back 'inside' to form a pocket and an inner edge, comes to extend beyond (or encroach on) the invagination of the lower edge…" (98). In effect, double invagination engenders a dissymmetry that fundamentally problematizes the borders and limits that define any given text as such. As Derrida establishes at the outset of the essay, these boundaries are already palpable in any writing about or representation concerning life. That is to say, how does one speak about life while still living? There is no position outside of life from which one can articulate what it is. In the case of authors such as Blanchot who so explicitly utilize the interminable iterability of language, what interests Derrida is not only the blurring of life and death but that double invagination is tantamount to "*the structure of a narrative in deconstruction*" (100). The difference between *American Beauty* and Blanchot is, of course, that whereas the latter mobilizes this abyssal structure to proliferate dissymmetry to the point of indeterminacy the former illustrates the extent to which invagination always already exists within standard conventions, playing an important role in organizing its central meaning and ideological force.

For Blanchot's part, in an essay referenced throughout "Living On," he spells out why Gaudreault paid such particular interest to the deictic 'I'.[42] In any written text the 'I' inevitably calls into question the boundary between the character and the author as well

---

[42] Blanchot, Maurice. "The Narrative Voice," *The Infinite Conversation*. Trans. Susan Hanson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

as the speaker within the fiction and the reader of the fiction. The deictic, and the 'I' in particular, serve to illustrate how language is always already divided. The 'I' represents "an indiscreet and awkward intrusion," albeit one that provides a certain distance between the reader and the text and, in so doing, authorizes a certain contemplative pleasure. As soon as this notion of distance becomes the substance of any given story, however, the reader "cannot properly situate himself" (384). Blanchot refers to this as bringing the neutral into play. The neutral simply refers to the sense that "what is being recounted is not being recounted by anyone" (384). Anytime that this narrative voice intrudes upon the text it unleashes an "irreducible strangeness," lingering as "a kind of void in the work." This voice, Blanchot continues, "speaks the work from out of this place without a place, where the work is silent" (385). On a whim he says, let us

> call it spectral, ghostlike. Not that it comes from beyond the grave, or even because it would once and for all represent some essential absence, but because it always tends to absent itself in its bearer and also efface him at the center: it is thus neutral in the decisive sense that it cannot be central, does not create a center, does not speak from out of a center, but, on the contrary, at the limit, would prevent the work from having one; withdrawing from it every privileged point of interest, and also not allowing it to exist as a completed whole, once and forever achieved. (386)

Blanchot's account of the narrative voice, finally, bears out more emphatically the intersection between the undead and narration.

As observed earlier, Derrida highlights the expression *es spukt* because it illustrates that the "subject that haunts is not identifiable." He later adds that the German idiom names the ghostly return through its verbal form: "It is a matter, in the neutrality of this altogether impersonal verbal form, of something or someone, neither someone nor something, of a 'one' that does not act" (*SoM* 172). Similar to the narrating presence discussed earlier, this verbal form conveys something "more intimate with one than one

is oneself, the absolute proximity of a stranger whose power is singular *and* anonymous (*es spukt*), an unnameable and neutral power, that is, undecidable, neither active nor passive, an an-idenity that, *without doing anything*, invisibly occupies places belonging finally neither to us nor to it" (ibid). In bringing this specter into focus Lester's voice-over from beyond the grave in *American Beauty* marks a unique exception in contemporary Hollywood. Though spectral effects are not entirely uncommon, they in large measure remain transparent, consigned to the margins. While *American Beauty* goes to great lengths to rehabilitate Lester's dilapidated presence, the film cannot escape the fact that the qualities that bear out his moral and ideological authority are the same qualities that categorize him as undead. As is typically the case, it is not so much the presence of the undead that leaves an uncanny trace. Instead, it is the desperate effort to suppress such matters that ensures an indelible vesitge.

## Disjointed History

Despite all that has been said about *American Beauty*, it is not yet clear what is specifically American about its account. It is certainly the case that what the viewer discovers beneath the film's surface is little more than a reiteration of the most superficial and banal tenets of middle class normalcy. This final section shifts gears to consider two marginally related films. In their own encounters with ghosts, both provide speculative reasons for America's invariable bond with the undead.

*Field of Dreams* (Phil Alden Robinson, 1989) is, like so many ghost stories, about reconciliation or, rather, an outstanding debt that needs to be paid. The twist is that the

exact nature of what needs to be set right remains unclear. Ray Kinsella (Kevin Costner) owns a family farm in the middle of Iowa. The story begins when he hears a mysterious voice emanating amidst his cornfields, incanting "If you build it, he will come." Ray surmises that if he builds a baseball field on his farm land, his favorite player Shoeless Joe Jackson, who had been suspended for life following the 1919 'Black' Sox scandal, will come and play baseball again. And, sure enough, no sooner than Ray and his family complete the unlikely field Shoeless Joe (Ray Liotta) returns from beyond the cornfields to play once again. Ray is mistaken, however, in thinking that the field is simply a means for Joe's redemption. The mysterious voice returns with an even more enigmatic message that prompts Ray to track down a reclusive novelist whose writing had personified the counter-culture spirit of the 1960s. It is only as he and that writer, Terrance Mann (James Earl Jones), return to Iowa together that Ray reveals his own past missteps that likewise demand redemption. Growing up Ray resented his father and eventually abandoned him in favor of the 1960s zeitgeist. The last thing he ever said to his father turned on an insult to the game he so dearly loved. He said that he couldn't respect a man whose hero, in reference to Shoeless Joe, is a criminal. Mann says to Ray, that this entire undertaking is his penance.

Ray finds redemption only when he learns from Shoeless Joe that the catcher joining the undead greats that day is a young John Kinsella. The "he will come" referred not to Joe, but to Ray's father. Ray's magical field not only gave his father another chance to play the game that he adored and gave up to raise his family, but to reconcile with his son. After meeting Ray's wife and daughter, Ray asks his dad if he'd like to play catch, the very token of familial bonding that Ray had refused as a belligerent teenager.

The redemption experienced by Shoeless Joe, if not a complete tangent, pales in comparison to the reconciliation between Ray and his dead father. While the voice prompted the idea, it was Ray's own midlife doubts that ultimately compelled him to build the field. Fearing that he is destined to follow his father footsteps, forsaking his dreams of grandeur for the mundane demands of everyday life, he decides that the only way to escape this path is to do something completely illogical. In building his dream field, however, Ray does not escape his father. The field allows his father to live out his own dream of playing baseball again and Ray becomes more like his father, replicating his love of the game and endorsing the sanctity of the familial bond.

Equally important is the historical reconciliation filtered through the author Terrance Mann. Having originally embodied the spirit of the sixties, Mann became deeply embittered not only by the failure of the counter-culture but also the lasting idealism and misplaced nostalgia of that generation. Ray's intervention allows Mann to reconnect with what he subsequently asserts is a more natural and unadulterated representation of goodness, "the one constant through all the years," a reminder of "all that once was good and could be again." Baseball, like beauty in *American Beauty*, basically serves as a transcendental signifier, which as I have shown entails a particular type of paradox. With regard to Mann, the refusal to return to one era is supplanted by the desire to return to an earlier and more innocent era. An era, as the reference to the Black Sox scandal makes evident, which cannot be part of the past, but instead is outside of history. As a result, the purity of Shoeless Joe's love for the game can never be enough. Instead, the film must resort to a fictional player, Archibald "Moonlight" Graham whose professional integrity is so virtuous that he is able to win over even the most disagreeable

of disbelievers. Similar to the generational and familial reconciliation facilitated by the field is another, perhaps more interesting, union of sorts. On several occasions, the ghostly baseball players ask Ray if his field is heaven. He responds each time, "No, its Iowa." Despite his denial, the film offers various formulations that lead to the opposite conclusion. One of the baseball players suggests that heaven is where dreams come true. And, since as another player puts it, Ray's field is a dream come true, it is implied that the field and Iowa with it are tantamount to heaven. Reminiscent of the circular logic that, according to Derrida, inheres in the suppression of *différance*, this apparent paradox is perhaps best illustrated through one of the film's references to classical Hollywood. As the baseball players exit the field, passing into the corn stalks, they dissolve. One of the players quips in jest as he crosses this threshold, "I'm melting…," a reference to *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939). When Dorothy Gale (Judy Garland) is asked at the end of journey what she has learned, she replies: "If I ever go looking for my heart's desire again, I won't look further than my own back yard. And if it isn't there, I never really lost it to begin with."[43] What she learns, in other words, is that what she was looking for never really existed and that this realization comes at the price of looking in vain. Reconciliation in *Field of Dreams* implies the healing or restoration of two or more incongruent parts, yet its equation of Iowa and heaven suggests that life and the afterlife are already co-present, there is no conflict needing to be resolved. This may well be the case, but in claiming that heaven is where dreams come true what's suppressed – and this

[43] The film likewise makes reference to 'Rosebud', the infamous sled from *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941). For an analysis of the sled as lost object in the psychoanalytic sense, see Mulvey, Laura. *Citizen Kane* (London: BFI, 1992). Kaja Silverman's analysis of film theory and the lost object in the first chapter of *The Acoustic Mirror* is also relevant.

is why the reference to *The Wizard of Oz* is telling – is that dreams, in this sense, come true not in Iowa, but, rather, in Hollywood.

Baseball, not entirely unlike beauty as discussed in the previous section, is treated as if it is an abstract ideal beyond any kind of reproach. At the same time, *Field of Dreams* goes to great lengths (i.e. its opening montage accompanied by Ray's voice-over and featuring archival materials) to show how baseball is interwoven into American society – bridging not only family feuds, but broader generational and geographical gaps as well. However, by romanticizing baseball, emphasizing primarily its sentimental value, the film obscures the way in which the sport impacts society as a form of entertainment and commercial enterprise. Both of these elements are brought to the forefront in Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* (2000), albeit in relation to contemporary television rather than baseball. Like both *American Beauty* and *Field of Dreams*, Lee's film begins with a voice-over from its protagonist, the television writer Pierre Delacroix (Damon Wayans), and like Lester his words loom ominously as he too will be dead before the film is over. Frustrated by his superiors at the CNS network, Pierre decides to create a new minstrel show that will satire TV's general penchant for both reproducing and perpetuating racial stereotypes. Whereas *American Beauty* and *Field of Dreams* must provide certain characters exemption from the very contradictions that structure their narratives, *Bamboozled* refuses any kind of reconciliation or redemption, leaving, as one commentator puts it, no one including Spike Lee anywhere left to stand.[44]

---

[44] Rogin, Michael. "Nowhere Left to Stand: The Burnt Cork Roots of Popular Culture." In "Race, Media and Money: A Critical Symposium on Spike Lee's *Bamboozled*," *Cineaste* Vol. XXVI No. 2 (2001). See also, W.J.T. Mitchell's "Living Color: Race, Stereotype, and Animation in Spike Lee's *Bamboozled*" in *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) and, more generally, Rogin's important earlier work,

The two main architects behind the 'New Millennium Minstrel Show', Pierre and his assistant, Sloan Hopkins (Jada Pinkett Smith), are as confused as they are divided in their underlying principles. The idea for the show begins when Pierre's efforts to produce positive representations appealing to educated and middle class black audiences like himself are stymied. Pierre plans to get himself fired by forcing the network to face its own tacit racism. Sloan who prides herself on her professional integrity, is horrified by the idea altogether yet, either out of loyalty to Pierre or concern for her career, she continues in her position providing detailed research for the show so as to ensure historical accuracy. When a vice president at CNS, Dunwitty (Michael Rappaport), loves the idea and the show, much to its creator's initial chagrin, takes off, Pierre decides to embrace its success rather than quit – as he explains to Sloan, he has a mortgage to pay. Both think they know what they are doing, that they are just in their actions, that they maintain their principles and that there is a certain rational to their logic. Despite their best laid plans, their complicity in what results is totally reprehensible. The new minstrel show has the opposite effect of what Pierre intended and everyone that he and Sloan care about ends up dead, including Pierre. The satirist unsuspectingly becomes the satiree.

*Bamboozled* is full of characters that are just as problematic as Pierre and Sloan. Dunwitty, the despicable corporate bully who only cares about ratings and profits, claims greater authority over African-American culture than his own African-American employees, thus sanctioning his otherwise blatant racism. Big Blak Afrika (Mos Def), Sloan's brother and the leader of the revolutionary rap group, the Maus Maus, is the strongest critic of racism in America, yet he and his crew are guilty of the same

---

*Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

stereotypical behavior that perpetuates and romanticizes certain misperceptions. On the other hand, Junebug (Paul Mooney), Pierre's father and stand-up comedian, would rather perform his vulgar routine for audiences he can relate to – and who share his self-aware sense of humor about racism – than pander to sanguine demands of mainstream media. The principle talent recruited for Pierre's new minstrel show, the street performers Manray (Savion Glover) and Womack (Tommy Davidson), likewise battle the legacy of racial stereotypes. Their theatrical talents are undoubtedly brilliant, yet their roles are simultaneously descendent from minstrelsy. Of course stereotypes are never entirely stable. There is usually the possibility of nuance – a certain degree of flexibility that allows the performer to undermine or transcend the stereotype. When there is no possibility for nuance, the question becomes whether the success afforded by the show is worth the symbolic emasculation their roles entail. In other words, is it possible to keep their performance separate from their identity? Womack decides the answer is no and leaves the show. Manray, in contrast, is held hostage and murdered by the Maus Maus before he can follow suit.

In its emphasis on the production of the new minstrel show within the film and its blurring of performance and identity, *Bamboozled* inevitably refers back to Spike Lee. In general, the director has devoted much of his career to questions concerning race and racism; the same questions that Pierre and Sloan face in their production of the new minstrel show. More specifically however, there are two points where the director explicitly intrudes upon the diegesis. First, Dunwitty mentions Lee pejoratively as he justifies to Pierre his use of the 'N' word. Second, and more interestingly, while meeting with his team of writers Pierre explains why they cannot ask Denzel Washington to

perform in blackface. Just as the actor's name is mentioned the film cuts to Lee's earlier film *Malcoml X* (1992), in which Washington had played the lead role, just at he utters something about being 'bamboozled'. One of Lee's harshest critics denigrates the film precisely for this reason, contending that regardless of the specific content the discussion always "comes back to the confounding spectacle of Lee himself."[45] Lee, on the other hand, laments that he is being unfairly singled out on the basis of race. He claims that critics are able to distinguish directors such as Woody Allen and Martin Scorsese from their work, while the same critics are unable to accurately distinguish his identity as a director from the fictional worlds he authors.[46]

Of course there is something of a double logic working on both sides of the argument. On the one hand, cinematic authorship hinges on the director's ubiquitous presence even while technically absent within the image. Every renown director, then, could be accused of drawing viewers back to the spectacle of themselves. Lee's counter claim, on the other hand, seems particularly problematic considering the implication in *Bamboozled* that performance and identity can never be fully separate and distinct. If critics were to follow through with Lee's challenge, then he might find that he indeed has nowhere left to stand. The reason that there is no clear cut answer to this exchange is that the question of authorship in this instance coincides with the problem of black labor, both as it is depicted within the film and as it relates to the legacy of slavery as an American

---

[45] White, Armond. "Post-Art Minstrelsy," *Cineaste* Vol. XXVI No. 2 (2001).

[46] Crowdus, Gary and Dan Georgakas. "Thinking About the Power of Images: An Interview with Spike Lee" *Cineaste* Vol. XXVI No. 2 (2001).

institution.[47] Just as the history and commodification of black labor forcefully dissolves the demarcation between performance and identity, fundamentally problematizing notions of propriety and property, history itself can never properly come to terms or disinherit this particular legacy. This legacy, like debates surrounding Spike Lee's status, has instead taken on an uncanny life of its own, one that is equally entertaining and haunting, one that remains disturbing and polarizing if only because it will never be truly vanquished.[48]

The common link between the three films may be an oblique allusion to the popular 1960s phrase, 'the personal is the political'. In Lee's film, the personal decisions made by Pierre and Sloan, as well as others at the CNS network, not only have fatal consequences but are portrayed as shaping the highly politicized discourse on race. In *Field of Dreams*, the breach between Ray and his father is made inextricable with the upheaval associated with the turbulent 1960s. To repair one breach he must also overcome the other. Even in *American Beauty*, we must assume that a late baby boomer like Lester must have been vaguely acquainted with the phrase despite his infatuation with marijuana and muscle cars. Although the phrase won widespread embrace, particularly by feminists, as a progressive mantra, Peggy Kamuf shows that it rests on an

---

[47] Another key text to consider here is Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (New York: Penguin, 1987). For analysis of Morrison's novel, see Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). More broadly, consider the peculiar intersection between slavery and zombies. On this intriguingly wide ranging topic, see Susan Buck-Morss' "Hegel and Haiti," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (Summer 2000), Joan Dayan's "Amorous Bondage: Poe, Ladies, and Slaves," *American Literature*, Vol. 66, No. 2 (June 1994) and "Poe, Persons, and Property," *American Literary History*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Autumn 1999), and Marina Warner's "Our Zombies, Our Selves," analysis of early – pre-dating the better known Romero cycle – zombie films such as *White Zombie* (Victor Halperin, 1932) and *I Walked with a Zombie* (Jacques Tourneur, 1943) in *Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors, and Media into the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[48] Brown, Bill. "Reification, Reanimation, and the American Uncanny" *Critical Inquiry* 32 (Winter 2006).

extremely precarious fault line.[49] In effect, it assumes that the two categories – personal and political – are definable and distinct as opposed to divisible and unstable. In suggesting that the two categories are necessarily compatible, even inextricable, the phrase implies that the subject is at its core, "shaped and determined by the version of the subject as self-presence" (119). The problem with this formulation is that as Derrida's analysis of Husserl demonstrates, the subject is likewise shaped and determined by what is not present. Kamuf adds that, "the 'I' must be able to function with the same meaning in my absence," and in turn, then, death "is structurally inscribed in the possibility of [the I's] repetition, the ideality of its meaning" (114). Derrida continues in his analysis of Husserl, asserting that, "The statement 'I am alive' is accompanied by my being-dead, and its possibility requires the possibility that I be dead…"[50] As I have already demonstrated, Derrida returns to this point in *Specters of Marx* claiming that no one is not haunted by one's own specter. Kamuf's more specific point, however, is that any politics based on the subject as a stable and individuated being proper to itself are doomed to fail.

Both *Field of Dreams* and *American Beauty* invoke the personal is the political, but only to reconcile a false or illusory difference. And both films invoke the boundary between life and death as part of their efforts. As I have suggested with regard to the various textual operations in *American Beauty,* it is possible to detect within such dichotomies traces of the spectral effects that for Derrida survive every attempt to

---

[49] Kamuf, Peggy. "Deconstruction and Feminism: A Repetition" in *Feminist Interpretations of Jacques Derrida*. [Ed. Nancy J. Holland. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997.]).

[50] Derrida, Jacques. *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*. (Trans. David B. Allison. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973). This passage turns on a quote from Poe's "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" which also serves as one of the book's epigraphs.

suppress *différance*. Conversely, *Bamboozled* fundamentally disrupts and dislocates the ingrained assumptions of propriety and property. This is nowhere clearer than in the film's opening moments. In contrast to the omniscient aerial shot that accompanies Lester's inaugural comments, Pierre's introductory voice-over is quickly followed by a shot of him continuing his remarks while directly addressing the camera. Although Pierre remains stationary, the background moves behind him and he appears to float throughout his condominium, amongst his possessions, thus compounding the unsettling, spectral connotations of the voice-over.

Although I have already noted the specificity of spectrality in *Bamboozled*, the dissymmetry evinced in the film's opening scene recalls the beginning of another coy ghost story. Laurence Olivier's 1948 adaptation of *Hamlet* begins with the camera descending on a funeral procession high atop Elsinore. The identity of the corpse is initially unclear and it is only at the conclusion of the film that we discover that it is Hamlet dead *avant la lettre*. The inauspicious opening suggests that the young Prince is from the very outset a ghost, an undead vestige "doomed for a certain term to walk the night." Time, indeed, is already out of joint. So much so that Hamlet, fittingly in a film where the director Olivier also stars in the title role, redoubles questions concerning Shakespeare and authorship, what Marjorie Garber terms 'uncanny causality'.[51] Both *Bamboozled* and *Hamlet*, in their separate ways, evoke the strangeness implicit in authorship. In the most speculative sense, it is possible to see the hints of strangeness in *Hamlet* as anticipating the discrepancy between the currency that authorship held in establishing film studies as a legitimate field of inquiry and the nearly concurrent

---

[51] Garber, Marjorie. *Shakespeare's Ghost Writers: Literature as Uncanny* Causality (New York: Methuen, 1987).

theoretical decrees announcing the death of the author. Conversely, the overarching incongruity in *Bamboozled* is not between the paradoxical legacy of black labor and the film's mercurial director, but the anachronistic idea of property as such in an era where intellectual property law serves the interests of leviathan multi-national corporations. While it may no longer be strange to think that these corporations author the films of contemporary Hollywood, it remains decidedly odd that they are privileged with more self-presence and propriety than individual subjects have ever been able to secure.

# CHAPTER IV
# AUTOMATA
# ARTIFICIAL LIFE, COMMODITY FETISHISM, AND BIO-POLITICS

Automata have long elicited both fascination and dismay. Reminiscent of the magical creatures that populate ancient myths and common folk tales alike, automata are emblematic of the irresistible desire to create and replicate life. Though this desire has never been without its corresponding dangers, the unsettling power of automata became much more acute as the Enlightenment initiated a distinctive vogue for self-moving machines in all their varied incarnations. As part of this new trend, automata were imbricated in everything from philosophical debates, to scientific principles and legitimate technical innovations, to popular entertainment and inscrutable deception. While the vogue for actual automata was somewhat short-lived, the underlying desire remains strong, displaced in a certain sense onto a new breed of automata ranging from androids and robots to, more recently, cyborgs and super-computers, and, as I aim to show, the visual media such as cinema itself. Regardless of this ebb and flow, it has often been the case that the most vivid and recognizable automata are entirely fictional variants produced by literature and cinema. In this chapter I trace the fictional role of automata, and artificial life more generally, beginning with Hoffmann's 'The Sandman' and as it continues in contemporary Hollywood. Whereas the first section delineates artificial life in its most expansive sense as a threat or rival to life itself, the second section considers various overlaps between automata and the commodity throughout capitalist production. The third section explores the intersection between automata and the cinema, while the final section turns to evidence of biopolitics within contemporary Hollywood.

## The Diabolic Life of Automata

In his "fertile but not exhaustive" 1906 paper, Ernst Jentsch claims that the most striking and powerful source of intellectual uncertainty is the "doubt as to whether an apparently living being really is animate and, conversely, [the] doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate."[1] To further his point, Jentsch refers to the many dolls and automata featured within the writing of E. T. A. Hoffmann. Although Freud disagrees with Jentsch's main thesis, he pursues the reference to Hoffmann, making an analysis of 'The Sandman' the centerpiece of his own account of the uncanny. In making his case, Freud draws much greater emphasis to the role of the Sandman and his concomitant links to castration and, as a result, minimizes the significance of the automaton Olympia and the uncertain boundary between animate and inanimate. The move to neglect Olympia proves not only problematic in its own right, but also highlights Freud's failure to address several additional features, namely the story's unconventional structure, its stilted and disordered chronology. As Sarah Kofman has pointed out, the strange epistolary exchange that begins the tale draws attention not only to writing itself but sets up writing as a variation of artificial life, a trope that cannot be limited to Olympia alone but reverberates at every turn.[2]

---

[1] Jentsch, Ernst. "On the Psychology of the Uncanny," 221. The description "fertile but not exhaustive" is Freud's (*U* 219).

[2] Kofman, Sarah. "The Double is/and the Devil: The Uncanniness of *The Sandman,*" *Freud and Fiction*. Trans. Sarah Wykes. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991. Hereafter abbreviated *DD*. There are numerous accounts that likewise focus on Hoffman's story. Among the most notable are Hélène Cixous: "Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's *Das Unheimliche,*" Samuel Weber: "The Sideshow, or: Remarks on a Canny Moment," Neil Hertz: "Freud and the Sandman," Robin Lydenberg: "Freud's Uncanny Narratives," the second chapter in Nicholas Royle's *The Uncanny,* David Ellison: "Freud's '*Das Unheimliche*': the intricacies of textual uncanniness," and Nicholas Rand and Maria Torok: "*The Sandman* Looks at 'The Uncanny': The Return of the Repressed or of the Secret; Hoffmann's Question to Freud."

In one of the letters that begins the tale, the protagonist Nathaniel tells Lothario, the brother of his fiancé Clara, about a traumatic childhood episode. Nathaniel and his siblings were often sent to bed with news that "The sandman is coming."[3] Captivated by this ominous figure, Nathaniel learns of conflicting versions. His mother explains that the sandman is a mere figure of speech while the old woman who looks after his sister tells him of "a wicked man" who first desecrates and then absconds with the eyes of naughty children. The sandman is simultaneously conflated with the unknown visitor who frequently arrives after supper to convene with his father. The mystery eventually prompts Nathaniel to ascertain the identity of this stranger. Hiding himself within his father's study, Nathaniel discovers that the visitor is Coppelius, a spiteful and malevolent lawyer who had on occasion dined with the family. With eyes already identified as a source of vulnerability and implicitly linked to voyeuristic desire, it is clear that Freud's emphasis is justified. However, as Nathaniel observes the occult activities of his father and Coppelius, the importance of eyes expands in strange and confounding ways.

Moments after the two men begin their night time experiments Nathaniel is overwhelmed by a delusional hallucination. "I seemed to see human faces appearing all around, but without eyes – instead of eyes there were hideous black cavities" (*S* 91). At the same instant, Coppelius calls out, 'Eyes, bring eyes!' Either in response to the hallucination or to the call for eyes, Nathaniel screams out and is immediately discovered. Violently seizing Nathaniel, Coppelius exclaims, "Now we have eyes – eyes – a lovely pair of children's eyes!" He then threatens to sprinkle them with 'red-glowing dust'. The threat to purloin the boy's eyes is taken to its sadistic limit, yet never actually

---

[3] Hoffmann, E. T. A. "The Sandman (1816)," in *Tales of Hoffmann*. Ed. and trans. R. J. Hollingdale. New York: Penguin, 2004. Hereafter abbreviated *S*. 87.

carried out. Instead Coppelius turns his attention to "the mechanism of the hands and feet" clutching the boy so forcefully that his joints are "cracked" and "unscrewed" (*S* 91-92). At the same time that the vulnerability of the eyes intensifies exponentially, Nathaniel is not only threatened with fragmentation and ruin but with being transformed into a mechanical object susceptible to disassembly, a helpless instrument in their sordid affairs.

Nathaniel recounts this first traumatic episode within a letter. The story's second major episode – entirely ignored by Freud – further underscores an affinity between Nathaniel and various forms of writing. Upon returning home from university, Nathaniel's engagement to Clara begins to deteriorate. Nathaniel, in response, becomes increasingly infatuated with foreboding dreams and demonic powers, ultimately drawing on his wayward imagination to envision gloomy and incomprehensible tales. Eventually Nathaniel makes Coppelius and the ominous premonition that he would disrupt his union with Clara the subject of a poem. Functioning as another interior digression, the poem details Coppelius's "black hand" touching "Clara's lovely eyes" at which point her eyes "sprang out like blood-red sparks, singeing and burning, on to Nathaniel's breast." At the same time, Coppelius seizes Nathaniel and throws him into a circle of fire, causing him to spin violently. Within the poem, Clara claims that Coppelius has deceived him and implores Nathaniel to look at her. When he does, he discovers in the place of her eyes, "death" gazing back at him. The immediate aftermath of the poem is equally significant. Clara demands that Nathaniel cast the "mad, senseless, insane" poem into the fire, in effect demanding that the poem be subject to the same treatment as Nathaniel within the poem. Once again, just as the various references to eyes reach new and excessive heights

there is a sudden recourse to mechanical life. He replies to her demands with an indignant rejoinder, "Oh, you lifeless accursed automaton!" (*S* 106).

After eventually reconciling with Clara Nathaniel returns to school only to fall madly in love with Olympia, the 'daughter' of one of his professors. His brief affair with Olympia is once again framed with numerous references to eyes and eyesight. Nathaniel first sees Olympia during a visit from Coppola, an Italian optician whose earlier visit had prompted Nathaniel's epistolary recollection of Coppelius. Reaching into a "side pocket" Coppola reveals telescopes of all sizes. To test one of these small devices Nathaniel peers out of his own window and sees Olympia. Transfixed by her beautiful face, Nathaniel is overcome with complete infatuation. Triggered by his own endowed eyesight, he in turn takes Olympia's eyes to be an index of her reciprocal feelings. Most notably, in contrast to Clara, she maintains a pleasant and content appearance as she listens to Nathaniel recount his various stories and poems. A marvelous auditor, he exclaims, Olympia "did not sew or knit, she did not gaze out of the window, she did not feed a cage bird, she did not play with a lapdog or with a favourite cat, she did knot fiddle with a handkerchief or with anything else, she did not find it necessary to stifle a yawn with a little force cough" (*S* 117-118). Instead, "she sat motionless, her gaze fixed on the eyes of her beloved with a look that grew ever more animated and more passionate."

On the verge of proposing marriage to Olympia, Nathaniel arrives at the home of Spalanzani, his professor, only to find him in the midst of a furious battle with Coppola. The two men fight over Olympia, an automaton they have jointly created. When Nathaniel attempts to intercede the conflict escalates and Coppola escapes with what is left of the lifeless doll. As he leaves, however, Nathaniel sees that her eyes are missing

and where they "should have been, there were only pits of blackness" (*S* 120). Spalanzani admonishes Nathaniel to chase after Coppola, throwing the blood-flecked pair of eyes that he had managed to seize so that they strike Nathaniel in the chest. It is at this moment that madness grips him with "hot glowing claws," tearing into him, blasting his mind. Exclaiming, "Circle of fire, circle of fire! Spin, spin, circle of fire! Merrily, merrily! Puppet, ha, lovely puppet, spin, spin," Nathaniel attempts to strangle Spalanzani.

After yet again reconciling with Clara, the final episode takes place as the two walk through town and decide on a whim to ascend the tower atop town hall. Once at the top they see a "funny little grey bush" that seems to be approaching. At that moment, "Nathaniel reached mechanically into his sidepocket; he found Coppola's telescope and gazed through it" (*S* 123).[4] The condensed passage combines clues of all the different symbolic clusters that have shaped Nathaniel's life. The adjective 'mechanically' recalls earlier references to mechanical life. In particular, though, it refers to the episode in which Coppelius threatened to treat Nathaniel as a mechanical instrument. And it is perhaps that experience that explains Nathaniel's subsequent attraction to those who share—literally or figuratively—his own ambivalent status. This particular gesture moreover identifies Nathaniel with Coppola who with the same motion first presented him with the pocket-telescope. Placing Nathaniel both on the side of victim and perpetrator, this reference is overloaded with significance, a kind of indeterminacy in which it is impossible to distinguish any clear meaning.

To continue, the term 'side pocket' produces even more interesting linkages. The pocket is privileged throughout the story, the retainer not only of Nathaniel's telescope but also the poem he reads to Clara and the ring with which he is prepared to offer

[4] For Weber's analysis of this particular passage, see his "Sideshow": 1120-1123.

Olympia. Anytime Nathaniel reaches into his pockets he is bound to activate a series of overdetermined correspondences. The more glaring, albeit tangential, association here is between pocket and its specious cognate, socket. The black cavities left in the wake of vacated eyes are like empty pockets—a receptacle or terminal into which eyes are deposited or stolen. The removal of his optical supplement likens Nathaniel, finally then, to the sandman himself. The text continues, "Clara was standing before the glass!" In the very position previously occupied by Olympia, this recalls both the voyeuristic desire to see and the disastrous discovery that culminated his attempt to romantically pursue the automaton. Next, "a spasm shuddered through him; pale as death he stared at Clara, but soon his eyes began to roll, fire seemed to flash and glow behind them…" Fire has amassed an equally formidable resonance over the course of the story. Its initial significance stems from the secret night time activities of Coppelius and Nathaniel's father as they take place around a hidden hearth. Subsequently, fire is closely associated with eyes—many of which are characterized as either piercing or blazing. Finally, Nathaniel cries out: 'Spin, puppet, spin! Spin, puppet, spin!', a variation of the gibberish he spouts following his confrontation with Spalanzani. For Kofman, the emphasis on 'spinning' recalls the 'wheel', a device used for the purposes of torture (*DD* 146). The case could also be made that this emphasis evokes a top, the cylindrical spinning toy that recalls Nathaniel's fear of being the plaything of a dark, external force.

The repeated and varied references to mechanical apparatus, in addition to Olympia's presence, make it clear that artificial life cannot be dismissed lightly. According to Kofman's cogent argument, the significance of this theme goes well beyond all the explicit references. For example, in her account, Nathaniel's attraction to Olympia

is foreshadowed in his own literary activities. Ranging from his childhood infatuation with the sandman to the poems and stories that he goes on to compose as an adult, Nathaniel shows a decided preference not only for artificial life but more broadly for the illusion of life. His sudden infatuation with Olympia is simply an extension of this preference. The subsequent danger is that writing, by dint of introducing imitation and substitution, threatens to supplant life altogether. Kofman labels this capacity to artificially render life, 'diabolical mimesis'; a perversion insofar as it subverts genesis as a sacred or singular vocation. Nathaniel's ill fate implies, then, a clear morality tale, warning against the madness and death that inevitably follows in the wake of any such blasphemy.

Nathaniel, however, is not alone in his blasphemous ways. That is to say, his artistic aptitude aligns him with the story's other progenitors of artificial life. Over the course of the story there are several scenes involving the desire "to recreate life from inert matter" (*DD* 145). In each case the experiments carried out by Coppelius, Coppola, and Spalanzani are coded as malevolent and dangerous. Nathaniel's own endeavors, however, are even more pointed in their perversion. The romantic affair with Olympia demonstrates Nathaniel's willingness to forsake Clara in favor of a counterfeit rival. As Kofman puts it, his acquiescence is a rejection of sexual procreation, preferring instead creation not only in terms of his literary endeavors but more literally through his eyes. When he first sees Olympia through Coppola's telescope, her eyes appeared "strangely fixed and dead," yet as Nathaniel intensified his focus, "it seemed as though beams of moonlight began to rise within them; it was as if they were at that moment acquiring the power of sight…" (*S* 110). Two subsequent exchanges follow a very similar formulation.

While dancing with Olympia at her inaugural ball, Nathaniel notes that despite her icy cold touch her eyes seemed to gaze "back at him full of love and desire; and at that instant it seemed as though a pulse began to beat in the cold hand and a stream of life blood began to glow" (*S* 114). Later when kissing Olympia's hand, Nathaniel again notices her cold touch. Having "pressed him closer to her," however, "her lips seemed to warm into life" (*S* 115). Rejecting heterosexual procreation, Nathaniel indulges in a perverse kind of artificial reproduction, that is, the artifice that "it is he himself who gives life" (*DD* 143). He endows Olympia with life in the same way that he animates his literary creations. The "displacement of the procreative function from the genitals to the eyes," consequently explains his visual deficiency (*DD* 154). Just as the "'voyeur' in one way or another eventually loses his or her sight," the perverse use of his eyes ensures the malfunction of their natural purpose leaving Nathaniel unable "to distinguish the animate from the inanimate, the real from the imaginary" (*DD* 152).

The collapse of such distinctions is evident not only in Olympia or Nathaniel's penchant for fictional simulacra, but is rather conspicuous throughout the entire story. Of course, Freud's claim that 'The Sandman' primarily concerns castration likewise requires a logic of substitution and exchange—one which is as likely to render clarity as it is to obscure or confuse meaning. In short, castration is never literally present within the story. Instead, Freud takes castration to be the latent meaning of ocular enucleation and, consequently, the repeated references to eyes and their vulnerability as signals of castration anxiety. This substitutive logic expands as he argues that what is uncanny about Hoffmann's tale "is directly attached to the figure of the Sand-Man, that is, to the idea of being robbed of one's eyes," meaning that castration is effectively equated with

the figure who threatens it (*U* 230). While the metonymic relationship may explain why Freud links the two so closely, his interpretation simultaneously gives rise to an economy of interchangeability whereby it is impossible to hold castration as immune to additional shifts in meaning.

Kofman thus claims that Freud's efforts to graft the Oedipal scenario onto 'The Sandman' merely, "covers up a more originary division," or, put another way, "it masks the fact that the other always separates the same from itself." Though Kofman associates this more originary division with the death drive, artificial life is just as instructive. Artificial life is not life itself. However, either by virtue of its proximity or similarity, artificial life is in many cases effectively equivalent to life. As with the primal scene that Nathaniel recounts in his letter to Lothario, his recollection is not itself the scene, but rather a repetition or variation of it. Insofar as the inaugural trauma may have only been fantasized to begin with, Nathaniel's diabolical mimesis, like most forms of aesthetic representation, stands as an equivalent to that which it cannot be identical. In Kofman's terms, the other can never be entirely repressed. It is always already present. It is coterminous with the self. Analogously, then, "the presence of death," or artificial life, is always already, "at the origin of, life itself" (*DD* 158). What's symptomatic about Freud's analysis is not only that the repressed either as embodied by Olympia, or the death drive more generally, inevitably returns, but that he essentially reinforces the main thesis drawn by his precursor Jentsch. The difference, though, is that following closer inspection of Hoffmann's 'The Sandman,' it is not the automaton alone that precipitates uncertainty. Instead, it is clear that ambiguities between animate and inanimate are intertwined with broader concerns about aesthetic representation and the discursive

structure through which they surface. What's more, concerns about artificial life inevitably lead back to more vexing and fundamental problems — contradictions that are necessarily productive but also aligned with death.

## Automata and Commodity Fetishism

Despite his own reservations about the centrality of castration-anxiety in the uncanny essay, Samuel Weber notes that if the full complexity of castration as a psychoanalytic scenario is taken into account then Freud's emphasis is indeed warranted.[5] For Weber, the complexity of castration is that it neither refers to a 'real' event or to a completely arbitrary, imaginary fantasy. The reason for this ambivalent status is that castration is initiated in a scenario whereby, "what is 'discovered' is the absence of the maternal phallus, a kind of negative perception, whose object or referent—perceptum—is ultimately nothing but a difference…" (1112). As a result, Weber suggests that there is good reason for the correspondence between castration and ocular anxiety. Eyes play the decisive role in this scenario, not only absorbing the 'shock' of non-discovery, but then bearing the brunt of a new and ambivalent state of affairs. What's key in this reformulation is that the scene of castration is in fact the one that Freud describes in terms of fetishism.[6] Relevant on several counts, the fetish activates a system of substitution in order to disavow the discovery of castration. In most cases, erotic investment is redirected to an object that either directly or obliquely refers to the original moment of discovery. Because of this, the fetish is frequently a source of contradiction and

---

[5] Weber, "The Sideshow, or: Remarks on a Canny Moment" (*MLN*, Vol. 88, No. 6 [Dec. 1973]: 1102-1133).

[6] Freud, Sigmund. "Fetishism (1927)," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, vol. XXI (London: Hogarth Press, 1961).

ambivalence. At the same time the fetish allows the male child to surmount his 'primitive' belief that the mother possesses the phallus, it serves as a memorial to that phallus and, consequently, always threatens to recall what has been repressed. With regard to the previous section, it should be added that the fetish renders what had been mundane or inanimate alive with libidinous desire, initiating an economy in which the counterfeit operates with the same value and efficacy as its 'precursor'.

The relevance of Freud's account is only further compounded by Marx's well-known comments concerning the same topic.[7] Though this point of overlap opens a wide array of intriguing comparisons, it may be necessary, in a rather cursory overview, simply to say that both treat fetishism as a kind of perversion. For Freud, this perversion is ultimately acquitted of any abnormal connotations and, instead, treated as a defensive mechanism necessary for the male child's normative maturation. Marx, in contrast, concentrates on the illusory value added to the commodity as indicative of the distorted, and hence perverse, relations at work within capitalist production and exchange. While Marx maintains the negative aspect of fetishism, the rhetorical maneuvers he embraces in doing so introduce a range of complicated and provocative associations that will be addressed shortly. In the most basic sense, however, Marx, not entirely unlike Freud, invokes fetishism to characterize a process in which confusion stemming from the intermixing of subjective and objective value reverberates as an ambiguity between what is inanimate and animate. His main concern in this regard is how in the capitalist system, the commodity houses not only use-value, but also human labor and social relations more

---

[7] Marx, Karl. See "The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret," the final section of the first chapter in *Capital Volume 1* (Trans. Ben Fowkes. New York: Vintage Books, 1977). Hereafter abbreviated *C*. See also the chapter "Fetishism and Hard Core" in Linda Williams's *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989) and the Introduction to Laura Mulvey's *Fetishism and Curiosity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

generally. These are all obscured and a subsequent set of values are erected and naturalized in their place. The confusion that proliferates as a result is at the core of the mystery or, rather, the fetishism that attaches itself to the commodity.

In a sense, Marx uses the commodity as the proper starting point in his analysis of the capitalist system. And the confusion he details in relation to the commodity abounds throughout the entire system. Alienation, for example, is rooted in the fact that labor is sold as a commodity. Everyone participating in this system runs the risk of being reduced to the property that he or she willingly exchanges, submitting it to "the disposal of the buyer" (*C* 271). Conversely, the purchase of labor-power introduces "a living agent of fermentation" into the otherwise lifeless object of production, in effect, setting-up the ambiguity that will eventually surface within the commodity itself (*C* 292). This point is reiterated in later chapters concerning the division of labor and the introduction of large-scale mechanization. With regard to the division of labor, Marx writes while the worker is transformed into an isolated organ or appendage subservient to a larger biological system, he or she is simultaneously compelled "to work with the regularity of a machine" (*C* 469). It is in the chapter on mechanization that Marx alternately refers to the factory itself and its workers as automata. The factory he says is a living thing, characterized as monstrous or cyclopean, soaking up living labor-power with the undying thirst of a vampire or werewolf (*C* 353, 367, 548). More specifically, where the worker follows the movements of the machine, the machine "deprives the work itself of all content." Consequently, "it is not the worker who employs the conditions of his work, but rather the reverse, the conditions of work employ the worker" (*C* 548). Or, put another way, "the workers are merely conscious organs, co-ordinated with the unconscious organs of

the automaton [the automatic factory]" (*C* 544). In which case the factory operates not only as an automaton, but also as an autocrat whereby the factory system is likened to barracks and 'mitigated jails'.

Such descriptions illustrate the confusion and exchange that the capitalist system encourages between the living and non-living. Variations of this confusion, however, can already be glimpsed in the opening chapter of *Capital*. There are two particular passages worth considering here. First, Marx draws an analogy between commodity fetishism and what he refers to as "the misty realm of religion." It is in that realm that, "the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own…" (*C* 165). The analogy concisely reiterates the faulty logic in which material objects are personified with spiritual or animistic qualities while evoking the system of distorted values that follows as a result of this logic. Religion, in this instance, also evokes an array of contradictory associations that serve to further complicate the analogy. Throughout the section devoted to commodity fetishism Marx appeals to magic, witchcraft, and theology as though they are all interchangeable. At first glance, the analogy suggests that the mystery of the commodity parallels 'primitive' religions in which ritual objects are imbued with supernatural agency. At the same time, however, it is clear that Marx, seeing no discernible difference between primitive superstitions and its modern Christian counterpart, extends his pejorative sentiment to all religions.[8] Moreover, considering the Byzantine history of the fetish, it is not difficult to see that such comparisons are much more than mere happenstance. William Pietz, throughout his extensive commentary on

---

[8] Yet again, we are reminded here of Freud's formulation in the uncanny essay that the human species both as individuals and socially have passed through various primitive stages. While we believe that we have long since surmounted such stages, "none of us has passed through it without preserving certain residues and traces of [them] which are still capable of manifesting themselves…" (*U* 240). Considering the topic of religion, Freud's *Totem and Taboo* resonates here as well.

the fetish, stresses that recourse to religion is a crucial part of Marx's overarching attack on "the idealist and, at best, abstractly materialist social philosophies of his time…"[9] What's more, the ambiguous associations implicit in Marx's appropriation of the term fetish were not only congruent with his strategy of articulating social conflict through contradiction, but also emblematic of the complicated cross-cultural context (involving the contentious encounter between variant religions and the contemporaneous development of colonialism, expanding economic interests, and Enlightenment philosophy) in which the term initially emerged. Finally, Pietz suggests that fetishism functions as part of a strategy of rhetorical estrangement. That is, because the mystery of the commodity is under erasure as soon as the capitalist system takes root, it is necessary, at least for Marx, to introduce a foreign terminology capable of turning that system on its head.

An even more audacious example of this strategy is on display in Marx's reference to a dancing table that will likewise be turned on its head. In a seemingly random example, he explains that once a table is transformed into a commodity, "it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of

---

[9] Pietz, William. "Fetishism and Materialism: The Limits of Theory in Marx" in *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse* (Eds. Emily Apter and William Pietz. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993): 130. For a much more detailed account, see Pietz's "The Problem of the Fetish," published in *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* in three installments (No. 9, Spring 1985: 5-17; No. 13, Spring 1987: 23-45; No. 16, Autumn 1988: 105-124). For a contrasting approach to the fetish, see "The Rhetoric of Iconoclasm: Marxism, Ideology, and Fetishism" in W. J. T. Mitchell's *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

its own free will" (*C* 163-164).[10] For Derrida, this lively metaphor is not unrelated to the theological undercurrents discussed above. Indeed, the mystery of the fetish directly echoes the spectral character found in Marx's earlier foray into matters of religion and ideology in *The German Ideology*. As is evident in Marx's description, the commodity is subject to multiple divisions, all of which render it in Derrida's analysis a product of *différance*, a 'thing' thoroughly haunted by the invisible apparition that is its mysterious secret. The recourse to such figurative language merely dramatizes the contradiction at the origin of capital:

> Moving about freely, on its own head, with a movement of its head but that controls its whole body, from head to toe, ligneous and dematerialized, the Table-Thing appears to be at the principle, at the beginning, and at the controls of itself. It emancipates itself of its own initiative: all alone, autonomous and automaton, its fantastic silhouette moves on its own, free and without attachment. It goes into trances, it levitates, it appears relieved of its body, like all ghosts, a little mad and unsettled as well, upset, 'out of joint', delirious, capricious, and unpredictable. (*SoM* 152-153)

Derrida further characterizes this contradiction through a series of oxymorons: as automatic autonomy, mechanical freedom, and technical life. As a kind of "automaton, a puppet, a stiff and mechanical doll whose dance obeys the technical rigidity of a program," the commodity hence abounds in indeterminacy. Its uncanniness is, in essence, that it "survives." Neither dead nor alive, the commodity nonetheless mimics the living (*SoM* 153). Whereas in its most basic sense the capitalist system allows the commodity to appear as though it possesses inherent and natural value, Marx's analysis and, more specifically, the figurative language he adopts effectively voids the ontological status of that value. What is proper to the commodity is never actually present – the human labor

---

[10] Freud, incidentally, makes reference to another unexpectedly animate table in his uncanny essay. For further consideration of this reference and the context surrounding its source, see the chapter entitled 'Inexplicable' in Nicholas Royle's *The Uncanny*.

and social conditions that undergird it. This is not only where haunting begins – in its lack of a present, its untimeliness – but also where ontology gives way to hauntology.

Derrida is the most assertive in drawing an explicit analogy between automata and the commodity. More generally, though, the different accounts of fetishism open a wide-ranging constellation in which religion, sexual desire, value, belief, and perception are all involved. And, indeed, it is precisely this convoluted constellation that informs one of the most famous early examples of cinematic automata. Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* is likely best known for the android brought to life within its narrative. However, as with 'The Sandman', the android is not its only overture to artificial life. To begin, the film's premise is one of class conflict. Metropolis is a city divided between the master engineer that rules from its heights and the legions of manual laborers who toil deep within its subterranean bowels. Characterized in the film's idiom as a divide between head and hands, the workers are in fact depicted as mere appendages; subservient to the overarching factory system, their movements reduced to simple mechanical repetitions. Additionally configured as geometric shapes while they transit to and fro their place of work, the somnambulistic labor force is made to resemble the heavy machinery that is even more explicitly aestheticized in the montage that opens the film.[11] At the same time,

---

[11] These formations directly correspond to what Siegfried Kracauer terms the 'mass ornament'. Writing about a new type of spectacle in which performers ranging from cabaret dancers to military marching bands compose themselves as ornamental shapes or patterns, Kracauer writes that such figures reflect "the entire contemporary situation," namely the capitalist production process: "Everyone does his or her task on the conveyor belt, performing a partial function without grasping the totality. Like the pattern in the stadium, the organization stands above the masses, a monstrous figure whose creator withdraws it from the eyes of its bearers, and barely even observes it himself.—It is conceived according to rational principles which the Taylor system merely pushes to their ultimate conclusion. […] The mass ornament is the aesthetic reflex of the rationality to which the prevailing economic system aspires" ("The Mass Ornament," *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*. Trans. and ed. Thomas Y. Levin [Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995]. 78-79). Despite drawing this correlation, Kracauer does go on to identify elements of ambiguity within these configurations. With regard to *Metropolis*, R. L. Rutsky stresses that the aestheticization occasioned by such mass ornaments plays a mediating role, endowing the otherwise dead technological object with internal meaning and purpose. See his interpretation "The Mediation of Technology and

and again in accordance with Marx, the factory is itself depicted as a monstrous living machine—a Moloch in the eyes of the film's protagonist Freder (Gustav Fröhlich), angrily consuming its human attendants. These nascent inconsistencies are further amplified as the rhetoric of technology is intermixed with religious symbolism (e.g. predictions of a Christ-like mediator), mythological overtures (e.g. the tower of Babel), and accusations of witchcraft.

The iconographic android at the center of *Metropolis* is no less inscribed with this same ambivalent duplicity. Rotwang (Rudolf Klein-Rogge), an eccentric and renegade inventor in the mold of Dr. Frankenstein, introduces the android both as a machine-man and as a replacement for Hel, the dead wife of Jon Fredersen (Alfred Abel), master of Metropolis, but also the object of Rotwang's secret and unrequited love. To be sure then, Rotwang's artificial offspring is doomed to live a double life. Rather than replace his human drones with a new species of automata, Fredersen has Rotwang shroud his android in the likeness of Maria (Brigitte Helm), the benevolent leader advising the workers amidst their unrest. According to Fredersen's plan, the false Maria will provoke the workers into action and thereby justify his own escalation in oppressive conditions. Rotwang, however, maintains control of his creation believing that he will use it to satisfy his personal vendetta against Fredersen. The false Maria's divergent objectives are recapitulated as two very different roles. On the one hand she is seen performing wildly erotic dances for the urban leisure class while, on the other, she appears as a hysterical agent provocateur inciting the workers to revolt.[12] The intersection of technology and

---

Gender," in *High Techné: Art and Technology from the Machine Aesthetic to the Posthuman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

[12] In this regard, Maria's status as an erotic spectacle recalls the fetishism that Laura Mulvey associates with women as the bearer of the male gaze. More broadly, the relationship between gender and automata

sexual excess of course returns fetishism to the fore. More than mere erotic spectacle, the false Maria coincides with the overarching focus on loss, division, and substitution that is stressed throughout the film. For instance, Rotwang refers to his robotic creation as a replacement for Hel, a monument to his lost love not unlike the prosthetic hand he has in place of the one he sacrificed in the process of 'her' construction. The workers are also likened to hands. They are both irrevocably divorced from their counterpart the brain and rendered inert; completely alienated from the monstrous life-form they mindlessly serve. Regardless of how *Metropolis* is ultimately understood, it clearly situates the notion of artificial life within a constellation of sexual and technological fetishization as well as a strong emphasis on industrial production and material conditions.[13]

More recently, Hollywood films featuring various automata have been far more insistent in stressing their commodity status. In *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), the Tyrell Corporation manufactures the sophisticated Nexus 6 robot, or replicants as they are colloquially known, for the purpose of providing slave labor in the 'Off-world' colonies. Combat and pleasure models are likewise employed in the service of these

---

has been both somewhat inconsistent and intensely debated. Maria follows in the tradition of Olympia in 'The Sandman' and Hadaly in Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *The Future Eve* in which androids are not only gendered female but manipulated and coerced by their male creators. There are, however, examples of more androgynous automata—a tradition we might see as culminating with Donna Haraway's cyborg manifesto. Throughout the 1980s and 90s there are just as many examples of robots and androids coded as hyper masculine. For various considerations of the relationship between gender and automata, see anthologies such as *Close Encounters: Film, Feminism, and Science Fiction* (Eds. Constance Penley, Elisabeth Lyon, Lynn Spigel, and Janet Bergstrom. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991). For an overarching account as well as a chapter specifically related to the present discussion, see Sue Short's *Cyborg Cinema and Contemporary Subjectivity* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005).

[13] See Andreas Huyssen's "The Vamp and the Machine: Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*" in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986) and Siegfried Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1947). See also, Anton Kaes's "Cinema and Modernity: On Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*" in *High and Low Cultures: German Attempts at Mediation* (Eds. Reinhold Grimm and Jost Hermand. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994). It should be noted that because *Metropolis* – like several of the films that will be subsequently discussed, especially *Blade Runner* and *Terminator 2* – has garnered so much critical discussion, it is difficult to provide any kind of comprehensive survey. These references are only a small, selective sample.

endeavors. Their status as commodities is most forcefully apparent as Rachel (Sean Young), an assistant to the head of the Tyrell Corporation and unwitting replicant, recognizes that she is not 'in' the business, but, rather, 'is' the business.[14] Paul Verhoven's *Robocop* spends even more time in the boardroom of its prevailing corporation, Omni Consumer Products or OCP. There we learn that their urban renewal plans are contingent on the introduction of a new security product – an enforcer droid known as ED-209 – into the police force that they now also run. Exemplary in its aptitude for horizontal integration, an OCP senior executive further boasts that after a successful tour with urban law enforcement the enforcer droid will become "the hot military product for the next decade."[15] The focus shifts from defense industries to the domestic sphere in *Bicentennial Man* (Chris Columbus, 1999) and *Artificial Intelligence* (Steven Spielberg, 2001).[16] The former begins with the delivery of a Northam Robotics NDR series android

---

[14] Another explicit example can be found in *Child's Play* (Tom Holland, 1988) where a toy doll comes to life. However, the manner in which the toy comes to life – a murderer uses voodoo to reincarnate himself – recalls the equally incredulous 'magic' used in *Weird Science* (John Hughes, 1985) and *Mannequin* (Michael Gottlieb, 1987).

[15] A recurrent theme throughout this period is the military application of automata. This can be seen in films ranging from *D. A. R. Y. L.* (Simon Wincer, 1985) and *Short Circuit* (John Badham, 1986) to *Universal Soldier* (Roland Emmerich, 1992) and *Eve of Destruction* (Duncan Gibbins, 1991). The same theme resonates throughout the more recent superhero genre. Consider, for example, mutations and experimental fusions such as those found in *The Hulk* (Ang Lee, 2003), *Wolverine* (Gavin Hood, 2009) as well as the *X-Men* more generally, and *Iron Man* (Jon Favreau, 2008), all of which are intertwined with military interests. This same idea can also be extended to films featuring less literal 'killing machines' such as the *Bourne* trilogy. These ambitions now have their correlate in the military drones—pilot-less aircraft—responsible for most of the bombing missions undertaken in current war zones such as Afghanistan. A precursor to this trend is of course *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick, 1971) in which behavioral training is used not to render lethal assassins but, on the contrary, to create a model citizen incapable of violence.

[16] An interesting precursor to this shift might be found in *The Stepford Wives* (Bryan Forbes, 1975, remade by Frank Oz in 2004) and, to a lesser extent, in *Making Mr. Right* (Susan Seidelman, 1987). Susan Jeffords's *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994) provides a framework for thinking about both the rise of the hyper masculine cyborg and for the apparent shift in focus to more family oriented male figures. The changes in the two terminator roles played by Arnold Schwarzenegger serve as an acute example of Jefford's overarching claim. The example from *Robocop*, however, is somewhat more problematic. While frequently treated as exemplifying the 'hard body' model, Robocop is in fact a deeply ambivalent, even at a certain point tragic,

to the Martin family, a status symbol that only, or primarily, the leisure class can afford. While the Martins' younger daughter rechristens the robot Andrew – both anthropomorphizing the android and inaugurating its two hundred year journey toward human status, a representative of the company later refers to it as a simple household appliance created, as their slogan has it, for a lifetime of service. *Artificial Intelligence* meanwhile follows David (Haley Joel Osment) a child robot, or mecha, who after abandoned by his 'parents' returns to the laboratory in which he was created only to find scores of identical prototypes packaged as life-size dolls ready to go to market. In *I, Robot,* robots are integrated into the general population, primarily as manual laborers and domestic servants. The film follows the introduction of the new Nestor or NS-5 series, which has its manufacturer, U. S. Robotics, on the brink of placing a robot in every home. In each of these films there is not only a greater emphasis on automata as commercial products, but on an overarching economic system in which corporate profits and mass consumption rule the day.

The earliest automata blurred the distinction between the animate and inanimate in an abstract sense. Machines capable of moving on their own accord could in some sense be construed as being alive, but would not necessarily be mistaken for an actual human. It was only in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that automata constructors such as Jacques de Vaucanson and Wolfgang von Kempelen began to produce mechanical figures more concerned with simulating human appearance.[17] In some cases, as Jessica Riskin has pointed out, this work lead directly to technical advancements in

---

figure. For another analysis specifically interested in gender, see Claudia Springer's "The Pleasure of the Interface" (*Screen* 32.3 Autumn 1991).

[17] For a general account, see Gaby Wood, *Edison's Eve: A Magical History of the Quest for Mechanical Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002).

industrial production and automation in particular. For instance, Vaucanson in his later post as Inspector of Silk Manufactures parlayed his expertise into an automatic loom, a device that no longer resembled a living being but nonetheless served as a mechanical substitute for what had formerly been human labor.[18] While the industrial application of automation shifted the emphasis away from human resemblance, fictional accounts of automata continued to focus almost exclusively on indistinguishable human simulation. Perhaps beginning with Hoffmann's 'The Sandman' and continuing with the recent films introduced above, the central focus has been the fear that artificial life may go undetected — not because it is concealed within industrial technologies in a broad sense but because automata threaten to become 'more human than human'.

The replicants in *Blade Runner*, for instance, are introduced as 'virtually identical' to their human counterparts. And because the Nexus 6 is capable of developing its own emotional responses over time its designers instituted a four year life span for fear that it would indeed be impossible to maintain any distinction between the two. Robocop, the cyborg soldier that OCP turns to when the ED-209 runs afoul, likewise features emotional susceptibility, suffering traumatic flashbacks even though the dead police officer that provides a kind of organic chassis for the crime-fighting machine has had his memory 'wiped' clean. The more sanguine accounts are, as would be expected, much more affirmative in celebrating the unique human qualities manifest in their various simulations: Andrew (Robin Williams) in *Bicentennial Man* shows an acute aptitude for

---

[18] Riskin, Jessica. "The Defecating Duck, or, the Ambiguous Origins of Artificial Life," *Critical Inquiry 29* (Summer 2003): 623 – 633. See also Riskin's "Eighteenth-Century Wetware," *Representations* 83 (Summer 2003): 97—125 and the first chapter in James Lastra's *Sound Technology and the American Cinema: Perception, Representation, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000). Also of note here, in a chapter where Vaucanson is mentioned together with industrial innovators Richard Arkwright and James Watt, Marx writes that with the introduction of large-scale machinery the factory itself becomes a kind of 'vast automaton'. Discussed throughout chapter 15 of *Capital*, Marx draws this comparison from Andrew Ure's *The Philosophy of Manufactures* (London: 1835).

creativity and personal expression, David in *Artificial Intelligence* shows self-learning and self-motivated reasoning in his desire to become a real boy, Sonny (Alan Tudyk) in *I, Robot* similarly has the ability to dream as well as keep secrets.

In all of these examples, Hollywood's automata are both explicitly distinguished as commodities while also displaying venerable human qualities. In what amounts to an apotheosis of commodity fetishism, these robot life-forms are both transcendent in their behavior, yet still the material domain of their corporate proprietors. Further reinforcing this paradoxical situation is an underlining reference to slavery. The prologue in *Blade Runner* announces that replicants were produced for the purpose of slave labor. While the question of slavery is largely suppressed as the focus shifts to Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer), an elite combat model, and Deckard (Harrison Ford), the bounty hunter after him, traces of this question remain not only in *Blade Runner* but throughout the entire cycle under discussion.[19] In *Robocop* and *Bicentennial Man* it is reiterated that these machines are mere property, that is, a valuable commodity that remains at the disposal of its owner. This point is even more trenchant in *I, Robot* when the CEO of U. S. Robotics reminds the police officers suspecting one of his robots, that property cannot commit murder. While the robot's proximity to the death of one of USR's lead scientist cannot be ruled out, it would at worst be classified as an industrial accident, not murder. The linkage to slavery is also apparent in the derogatory monikers that indicate a general antipathy, or at least ambivalence, toward the robots. 'Skin jobs' in *Blade Runner* articulates the stigma attached to replicants and 'canners' (short for can openers) in *I, Robot* insinuates

---

[19] For an example of one of the few analyses to emphasize this point, see Silverman, Kaja: "Back to the Future," *Camera Obscura*, vol. 27 (Sept 1991). For a related account, see also Zizek, Slavoj: "I or He or It (the Thing) Which Thinks" in *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

inferiority. The social stratification implicit in such terms reaches its climax in *Artificial Intelligence* where 'stray' mechas are rounded up, tortured, and destroyed at what are called Flesh Fairs in front of a fanatic audience. *Bicentennial Man* evokes such matters somewhat more subtly when Andrew tacitly refers to the fourteenth amendment in requesting his own freedom.[20] This reference foreshadows the subsequent hints of miscegenation that loom as Andrew battles to marry a human wife. These various allusions not only elicit the specter of slavery as an American institution, but also Marx's comments regarding the state of labor within the capitalist system. That is to say, in a system where labor is sold, or exchanged as a commodity to be more precise, the individual selling that labor not only becomes a commodity but in effect becomes the property of the capitalist. "The use of a commodity belongs to its purchaser…" and, hence, "From the instant he steps into the workshop…" his labor "belongs to the capitalist" (*C* 292). With both chattel slavery and industrial labor there is the potential for a singular figure to encompass two divergent ontological and legal categories: human and inhuman as well as commodity and commodity owner. This situation further raises questions, and related anxieties, about who or what purpose such divided figures serve.

*Metropolis* begins with a clear distinction between head and hands. The city's architecture further emphasizes an untenable social divide and the image of the monstrous factory system underscores the insufferable conditions that are the result of this divide. At the same time, however, this opposition is undercut both by False Maria, who is divided between her commitment to Fredersen and her secret allegiance to

---

[20] The Fourteenth Amendment was added to the United States Constitution following the Civil War. It guaranteed citizenship to former slaves, overturning the 1857 Dred Scott decision that had maintained because slaves were property they, in effect, had no legal recourse whatsoever. More recently, this amendment has in part been used to extend rights to corporations on the basis that they too should be treated as legal persons.

Rotwang, and by the way the workers not only resemble the machinery they operate but prove to be utterly dependent on it—their attack on the city's heart machine is tantamount to a suicide mission resulting in the flooding of their living quarters and near annihilation of their children. Despite the overall influence of *Metropolis*, signs of class conflict and the lasting ambivalence that it produces are either altogether obscured or significantly attenuated in the more recent Hollywood examples. To a large extent, the means of production are dematerialized in the post-Fordist, post-industrial era. Assembly lines begin to in fact disappear – or, more likely, are exported to off-shore sites that are dramatically less regulated and ever more exploitive – which perhaps explains their absence in contemporary Hollywood. Even with signs of industrial production diminishing, traces of its residual ambivalence nonetheless linger.

The most obvious token of class conflict is found in the ubiquity of corporate monopolies lording over the fictional future. There are also still fleeting glimpses of actual production. The title sequence in *Bicentennial Man* features the assembly of a NDR android. More methodical and less frenzied than the machine montage that opens *Metropolis*, the sequence leaves open the question of who or what oversees the manufacturing process. The question is subsequently answered in *I, Robot* as the search for Sonny, the robot suspected of murder, leads to a USR assembly plant. "Robots building robots," exclaims detective Spooner (Will Smith), when his USR escort tells him that the facility is entirely automated. On a related note, Derrida observes that the commodity "does not recognize itself in a mirror" (*SoM* 156). The automaton is likewise ignorant or confused about who and what it is. This ignorance is manifest in a play of personal pronouns (shifting between it, one, I), the desire to meet its maker as in *Blade*

*Runner,* and in the urge to return home to an earlier domestic life as in *Robocop* and *Artificial Intelligence*. In addition to raising questions about agency and ontological status, a larger anxiety looms in the possibility that automata are indeed mere instruments or pawns carrying out the sordid affairs of others.[21] Three primary directives guide the cyborg police officer in *Robocop*: serve the public trust, protect the innocent, and uphold the law. There is also, however, a fourth directive that remains classified until near the end of the film. When he attempts to arrest a senior OCP executive, it is finally revealed that the fourth directive prevents Robocop from doing so. As the executive puts it, "you're our product and we can't very well have our products turning against us."

In *Bicentennial Man* and *I, Robot*, both based on works by Isaac Asimov, the robots are similarly subject to three laws that are meant to ensure that they never turn against their human creators.[22] The villain in *I, Robot*, nonetheless, turns out to be neither Sonny or the CEO of USR, but, rather, VIKI (an acronym for Virtual Interactive Kinetic Intelligence), the computer system on which USR is built. Appearing in the guise of an artificial intelligence that is also governed by the three laws, VIKI uses the uplink feature of the new NS-5 to orchestrate a robot coup d'état. Re-interpreting the three laws, VIKI forsakes immediate compliance in order to serve and protect humankind in the abstract. Like her forebears HAL in *2001* and, more directly, COLOSSUS in *Colossus, The Forbin*

---

[21] According to Tom Gunning, "Most myths of animating the inanimate carry a freight of anxiety that, once brought to life, the creature might become independent and ignore the command of its maker. Tales of the tool that turns on its master, most identified with the Frankenstein monster (the principle modern Goyishe form of the Golem legend), became, in the twentieth century, the dominant allegory of man's relation to technology" ("Gollum and Golem: Special Effects and the Technology of Artificial bodies," *From Hobbits to Hollywood: Essays on Peter Jackson's* Lord of the Rings. Eds. Ernest Mathijs and Murray Pomerance. [Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006]).

[22] The three laws of robotics according to Asimov are: 1) A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm; 2) A robot must obey any orders given to it by human beings, except where such orders would conflict with the First Law; and 3) A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law.

*Project*, VIKI adopts a 'reality principle' taken to the extreme.[23] At first glance, the growling ED-209 or the Demo-bot in *I, Robot* may appear as the descendents of the Moloch machine in *Metropolis*: monstrous technology literally attacking or killing humans. Ultimately, however, what's more monstrous is the totalitarian state violently instituted by VIKI and the fact that her aberrant logic is not unique to artificially produced life but rather a distinguishing feature of the corporate entity to which she is both part and parcel.[24] Partly as a result of this, automata and technology more generally are almost always in the end cast in highly ambivalent terms. After beginning with either sharply utopian or dystopian visions of the future, these films give way to much more tempered if not ambiguous endings. The reason for this hedging is undoubtedly that these films are themselves both a technological medium and an accomplice within the same corporate logic.

It is possible to begin addressing these factors, but only by considering a rather different example of artificial life. Recent scholarship has suggested that Mickey Mouse prefigures much of the previous discussion and thus serves as a kind of honorary member of the android family. Following Walter Benjamin's both fleeting and provocative references to the Disney cartoon, Miriam Hansen more specifically argues that Mickey Mouse is emblematic of the same boundary confusion – between organism and machine, animal and human, etc. – that has been used to characterize the liberating potential of the

---

[23] These examples represent a variation of the Frankenstein model mentioned above. The super computers in these films, moreover, provide a kind of fictional scapegoat both revealing the extent to which technology according to Herbert Marcuse "has become the great vehicle of reification" while obscuring the total domination that instrumental reason legitimates. See *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).

[24] The confluence of villainous super computers and conspiring corporations echoes Fredric Jameson's account of political thrillers in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

cyborg.[25] Contemporaneous with his 'Frankfurt School' counterpart, Sergei Eisenstein was extremely enthusiastic in his endorsement of Disney. Excited by the animated figure's extreme fluidity or what he termed its 'plasmaticness', Eisenstein links Mickey with what he categorizes as the 'attraction'.[26] As he explains it, even while endowed with a definite external appearance, the cartoon character simultaneously retains the quality of "primal protoplasm, not yet possessing a 'stable' form," and is thereby "capable of assuming any form… skipping along the rungs of the evolutionary ladder, [attaching] itself to any and all forms of animal existence" (*EoD* 21). What Disney and other early animators brought to bear – and what undoubtedly impressed Eisenstein – was a supernatural world full of magic and fantasy, where everything was infinitely transformable and logic dissolved into the ether. The result was a diegetic world populated by perverse amalgamations – often times, literal mongrels – breaking down and synthesizing oppositions such as nature and technology, material and immaterial, animate and inanimate. Of course the tendency within early cartoons to animate and anthropomorphize "ordinary lifeless objects, plants, [and] beasts" redoubled the fact that animated drawing was, as Eisenstein noted, itself "the most direct manifestation of…animism" (*EoD* 43).

---

[25] Hansen, Miriam. "Of Mice and Ducks: Benjamin and Adorno on Disney." South Atlantic Quarterly 92:1 (Winter 1993): 27-61. Hereafter abbreviated *OMD*. On cyborg politics, see Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

[26] Eisenstein, Sergei. *Eisenstein on Disney*. Ed. Jay Leyda. Trans. Alan Upchurch. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1986. Hereafter abbreviated *EoD*. On the importance of the attraction, see "The Montage of Attractions" in *The Eisenstein Reader* (Ed. Richard Taylor. London: BFI, 1998). Further consideration might examine how Eisenstein's theatrical training relates to his fascination with animation. See, for example, Alma Law's *Meyerhold, Eisenstein, and Biomechanics: Actor Training in Revolutionary Russia* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1996).

While Benjamin may have shared Eisenstein's underlying appreciation of Disney's animated cartoons, he cast his assessment in a much more ambivalent, if not negative, light. He begins his 1931 fragment on Mickey Mouse discussing property relations: "here we see for the first time that it is possible to have one's own arm, even one's own body, stolen."[27] In the second version of his famous work of art essay, Benjamin follows his earlier account by noting that what is revealed in Disney's animation is "the cozy acceptance of bestiality and violence as inevitable concomitants of existence."[28] To a certain extent Adorno and Horkheimer corroborated Benjamin's account in their "Culture Industry" essay, noting that cartoons and stunt films were "exponents of fantasy against rationalism," allowing "justice to be done to the animals and things electrified by their technology, by granting the mutilated beings a second life."[29] However, they continue their assessment adding that by the 1940s cartoons had been brought into line with the rest of the culture industry, adapting "the senses to the new tempo… hammer[ing] into every brain the old lesson that continuous attrition, the breaking of all individual resistance, is the condition of life in this society" (110). Their analysis then effectively culminates in an even more negative reference to Disney, albeit Donald Duck rather than Mickey Mouse. The sadistic pleasure obtained at the expense of film characters such as Donald Duck conditions viewers to masochistically enjoy their own violent exploitation. This sadomasochistic formula serves to summarize the power of

---

[27] Benjamin, Walter. "Mickey Mouse." *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 2, 1931-1934*. Ed. Michael Jennings. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999. 545.

[28] Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version." *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 3, 1935-1938*. Eds. Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2002. 130. Hereafter abbreviated as *Art SV*.

[29] Horkheimer, Max and Theodor W. Adorno. "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception." *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002. 110.

the culture industry to coerce and entice the powerless while concealing the omnipotence of their true master, capital.

Though it is unlikely that Benjamin would have followed Adorno and Horkheimer entirely in their final judgment, he clearly anticipated key parts of their analysis. The idea that Mickey Mouse is synonymous with divisibility and expropriation seems to draw a direct corollary to the way labor is alienated within the capitalist mode of production. Mickey's dehumanized state, in other words, is symptomatic of a society in which intensifying reification and incessant commodification are the only definitive features. Moreover, suggestions of mutilation and fragmentation echo linkages to the brutal effects of modern warfare in particular and the shock and disorientation of technology more generally. But Mickey was not just a hybrid stand-in for the modern subject. Benjamin continues in his fragment, "Mickey Mouse proves that a creature can still survive even when it has thrown off all resemblance to a human being. He disrupts the entire hierarchy of creatures that is supposed to culminate in mankind." Despite the suggestion of a reversal in evolutionary progress, this particular creature is simultaneously prepared "to survive civilization." For Benjamin, civilization, like humanism as an intellectual discourse, had lost its implicit and irrefutable value, its unquestioned association with progress and enlightenment. To combat its lingering reign he therefore proposed "a new, positive concept of barbarism"[30] Within this sentiment there is a glimpse of steadfast interest, if not outright preference, for an anti-anthropocentric understanding of life. More specifically, Benjamin was interested in a destructive, even monstrous, inhuman capable of surpassing the limits of humankind in

---

[30] Benjamin, Walter. "Experience and Poverty." *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 2, 1931-1934*. Ed. Michael Jennings. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999. 732.

its current state. Evidence of this mutated species was often found in many of the topics frequented by Benjamin, ranging from the deformed and primeval figures of Kafka and Paul Klee, to the illustrations of Grandville and children's books, to the utopian imagery of Charles Fourier.[31] Still, it was perhaps Mickey Mouse that gave the sharpest expression to this line of thinking. In "Experience and Poverty," Benjamin elaborates on the ideas collected in his earlier fragment:

> Tiredness is followed by sleep, and then it is not uncommon for a dream to make up for the sadness and discouragement of the day—a dream that shows us in its realized form the simple but magnificent existence for which the energy is lacking in reality. The existence of Mickey Mouse is such a dream for contemporary man. His life is full of miracles—miracles that not only surpass the wonders of technology, but make fun of them. For the most extraordinary thing about them is that they all appear, quite without any machinery, to have been improvised out of the body of Mickey Mouse, out of his supporters and persecutors, and out of the most ordinary pieces of furniture, as well as from trees, clouds, and the sea. Nature and technology, primitiveness and comfort, have completely merged. And to people who have grown weary of the endless complications of everyday living and to whom the purpose of existence seems to have been reduced to the most distant vanishing point on an endless horizon, it must come as a tremendous relief to find a way of life in which everything is solved in the simplest and most comfortable way, in which a car is no heavier than a straw hat and the fruit on the tree becomes round as quickly as a hot-air balloon. (734-735)

The endorsement of creaturely life over and against anthropocentric life was typical of Benjamin's penchant for playing with and inverting apparent oppositions including natural and human history, first and second nature, as well as civilization and barbarism. What specifically set Mickey Mouse apart from the others, however, was the relationship between the animated cartoon and technology. Adding greater importance to

---

[31] Further discussion of these topics can be found in Hansen's "Of Mice and Ducks" as well as Esther Leslie's *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant-Garde* (New York: Verso, 2002) and Beatrice Hanssen's *Walter Benjamin's Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). See also, Eric Santer's *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

this element is the fact that animated cartoons minimized their explicit links to modern technology by, instead, emphasizing a return to the natural world. Unlike the "techno-fetishism" of the German *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) movement, the Soviet Constructivists, or even the more recent Hollywood incarnations of automata, technology in the Mickey Mouse cartoons primarily remains under erasure. In effect, "the films turn technical invention back into a feat of nature." And, in so doing, "oblige audiences to confront how technology rules over them as a second nature" (*Hollywood Flatlands* 86). In Miriam Hansen's analysis, this furthermore signals "the utopian potential of technology for reorganizing the relations between human beings and nature" (*OMD* 42). Nature permeated by an absent technology speaks not only to Mickey Mouse, but to the cinematic medium more broadly.

Benjamin devotes several sections in the work of art essay to the experience of the film actor. The actor performs in front an apparatus, which is to say the camera itself as well as the "group of specialists—executive producer, director, cinematographer, sound recordist, lighting designer, and so on—who are in a position to intervene" at any time (*Art SV* 111). Under this constant scrutiny, the actor's performance begins to resemble the standardized movements of those working on the assembly line. More significantly, the actor not only foregoes the aura that persists within the theater, but his or her performance is reduced to a series of isolated, discrete parts—that is, their work, the product they render, is no longer a unified whole. The film actor's performance, in other words, is itself a composite assembled after the fact. "Nothing," according to Benjamin, "shows more graphically that art has escaped the realm of 'beautiful semblance'…"[32]

---

[32] In an extended footnote to this passage, Benjamin explains, "The significance of beautiful semblance is rooted in the age of auratic perception that is now coming to an end" (*Art SV* 127 n. 22). This earlier era is

Such assembly is even more resonant with regard to the importance of editing. In a strikingly paradoxical passage, Benjamin explains:

> *In the film studio the apparatus has penetrated so deeply into reality that a pure view of that reality, free of the foreign body of equipment, is the result of a special procedure—namely, the shooting by the specially adjusted photographic device and the assembly of that shot with others of the same kind.* The equipment-free aspect of reality has here become the height of artifice, and the vision of immediate reality the Blue Flower in the land of technology. (*Art SV* 115)

Like the actor or manual laborer that has internalized the standards—whether they be aesthetic as in film or mechanical as in the factory—of his or her supervisors, reality itself has incorporated the technological apparatus that is responsible for manufacturing reality. In other words, Benjamin suggests, just as Marx had done with the commodity, that the contradictions within any such realism remain structurally operational, if not in a certain sense alive. Equipment-free reality may be just as artificial as Olympia the automaton, but it remains more real than the Blue Flower that may have never existed to begin with. Such artifice culminates in Mickey Mouse who both signifies a world where it is no longer "worthwhile to have experiences" and the "very cheerful cannibal attitude" reminiscent of "the barbarism of children."[33] Everything within the animated diegesis is of the same order—"everything in the drawn world is of the same stuff" (*Hollywood Flatlands* 23). And, consequently, for all the endless mutation and transformation, Mickey always remains the same, completely indifferent to experience.

---

associated with Hegel, "for whom beauty is 'the appearance of spirit in is immediate…sensuous form…'" In contrast, Benjamin refers to the work of Goethe in which "The beautiful is neither the veil nor the veiled object but rather the object in its veil" (quoted from Benjamin's essay "Goethe's Elective Affinities"). Although it is impossible to sufficiently examine here, there are two striking points worth mentioning. First, Hegel's emphasis on 'appearance' constitutes a significant factor, as Derrida observes throughout *Specters of Marx*, in Marx's opposition to German idealism. Second, Benjamin's formulation of beauty in Goethe strongly resonates with most accounts of fetishism.

[33] Quoted in *Hollywood Flatlands* from an unpublished version of "Experience and Poverty": 85.

With all this talk of barbarism and cannibals, it may be easy to forget that Mickey Mouse is likewise closely intertwined with the capacity to elicit laughter. Of course, involuntary and possibly inhuman sounding, collective laughter evokes Benjamin's broader investment in the creaturely—a possibility which might be further developed by examining Henri Bergson's claims that laughter specifically concerns the intersection between the mechanical and the organic.[34] Also, because such laughter is impossible to track in any kind of empirical or definitive way it is difficult to further speculate about its significance. The only available recourse, in this regard, may be the 1941 film, *Sullivan's Travels* (Preston Sturges) in which a Hollywood director, John Sullivan (Joel McCrea), famous for his Depression era escapist comedies, sets out in search of human suffering so that he can make a film of "social significance." When the inevitable case of mistaken identity ensues Sullivan lands on a Southern chain gang where after days of 'hard labor', he and his fellow inmates are treated to a Mickey Mouse cartoon, the response to which is a clear and resounding example of collective laughter. As a result, Sullivan abandons his plans for a serious social commentary, understanding that making people laugh is in fact an indispensable social value after all.

The director's final sentiment coyly anticipates Adorno and Horkheimer's notion that, "laughter [is] the instrument for cheating happiness," that those who participate in such collective laughter merely illustrate the "inescapability of power." To take solace in such pleasure "presents a caricature of solidarity" (*CI* 112). The ending likewise recalls Eisenstein. Celebrating the very feature that Adorno and Horkheimer so forcefully critique, he boasts that:

---

[34] Bergson, Henri. *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. Trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell. Los Angeles: Green Integer, 1999.

> Disney is a marvelous lullaby for the suffering and unfortunate, the oppressed and deprived. For those who are shackled by hours of work and regulated moments of rest, by a mathematical precision of time, whose lives are graphed by the cent and dollar. Whose lives are divided up into little squares, like a chess board [whose only color is grey]…. From birth to death. Grey squares of city blocks. Grey prison cells of city streets. Grey faces of endless street crowds. The grey, empty eyes of those who are forever at the mercy of a pitiless procession of laws, not of their own making, laws that divided up the soul, feelings, thoughts just as the carcasses of pigs are dismembered by the conveyor belts of Chicago slaughter houses, and the separate pieces of cars are assembled into mechanical organisms by Ford's conveyor belts. That's why Disney's films blaze with colour. …Disney's films are a revolt against partitioning and legislating, against spiritual stagnation and greyness. But the revolt is lyrical. The revolt is a daydream. Fruitless and lacking in consequences. These aren't those daydreams which, accumulating, give birth to action and raise a hand to realize the dream. They are the 'golden dreams' you escape to, like other worlds where everything is different, where you're free from all fetters, where you can clown around just as nature itself seemed to have done in the joyful ages of its coming into being… (*EoD* 3-4)

Though many have understood the denouement in *Sullivan's Travels* as a genuine appeal to harmless comedy, it is actually very difficult to take the ending at face value. Just as Eisenstein slyly concludes the section quoted above observing that Americans will recall with warmth and gratitude the Disney cartoons that "allowed them to forget, to not feel the chilling horror before the grey wolf who, while [they] were at the movies, pitilessly turned off [their] gas and water for non-payment," there is something both subtle and mischievous about the end of Sturges's film. To be sure, Sturges warrants the label satirist who, as Benjamin notes in an essay devoted to Karl Kraus, is responsible for delivering the cannibal into civilization. Like the actor who for each role "assimilates bodily a human being," Sturges incorporates his adversaries.[35] Indeed, it is the case, that the laughter that concludes *Sullivan's Travels* is neither merry nor harmonious. In one

---

[35] Benjamin, Walter. "Karl Kraus." *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 2, 1931-1934*. Ed. Michael Jennings. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999. 450.

account, the laughter instead recalls Nathaniel West's *The Day of the Locust*. The laughter, in short, is instead terrifying, it is "laughter at the death of innocent laughter…"[36]

*Sullivan's Travels* effectively illustrates what Benjamin claimed was already implicit in Mickey Mouse, an ambivalent pleasure that menaces the arbitrary boundaries of modern society. That *Sullivan's Travels* required a multi-layered self-reflexive and farcical narrative framework in order to bring this to the fore not only serves as a reminder that Disney had long since abandoned the unruly aesthetic that Benjamin championed but, more significantly, that the qualities he most admired were never anything other than embryonic. Even in animated cartoons, where technology by strange turn is all the more present, the overall context more often than not successfully negated or obscured the ambiguities that Benjamin had hoped would surface. If Mickey failed to fulfill his potential, a similar dialectic nonetheless persists in contemporary Hollywood.

Consider the recent case of *Transformers*. Hasbro introduced a toy line of the same name in the mid-1980s alongside an animated television series designed to both publicize and provide a narrative context for the adversarial robots capable of transforming into everyday objects such as automobiles and electronics. Where Mickey began as an aberrant creature only to be eventually transformed into a commodity, *Transformers* in contrast literally begins as a commodity. The recent appearance of *Transformers* on the big screen, on the other hand, illustrates the strategy, in part pioneered by Disney amidst its current reign, of exploiting pre-existing texts. In spite of, or perhaps because of, these circumstances, there are moments in which *Transformers*

---

[36] Moran, Kathleen and Michael Rogin. "'What's the Matter with Capra?': *Sullivan's Travels* and the Popular Front." *Representations* 71 (Summer 2000): 127.

recalls in complicated ways the ambiguities that once occupied the likes of Marx and Benjamin. For instance, near the beginning of *Transformers'* second installment *Revenge of the Fallen* (Michael Bay, 2009) we see several kitchen appliances spring to life. Similar to the 1916 short *The Pawnshop* in which Charlie Chaplin stands by as 'inanimate' objects come alive, the scene rehearses the one desire that all commodities share, to stand on their head dancing manically. In the end, however, the scene acts as a brief artifact of what was once uncanny. In contrast to the stop-motion animation in the Chaplin short, the robots in *Transformers* are computer generated. Whereas most of the films featuring automata discussed above cast humans in the role of androids, Hollywood has more recently not only embraced a new species of virtual characters but in doing so has flattened its entire aesthetic capacity into a series of calculated effects. Call it the Disneyfication of Hollywood, a term that no longer carries the paradoxical associations that once enticed Eisenstein and Benjamin but rather signals a model of corporate colonization that deadens everything it cannibalizes.

## Automata and Cinema

In the concluding chapter of *The Language of New Media* Lev Manovich contends that with digitization and the widespread use of computer generated images it is now necessary to reclassify cinema as "a particular case of animation," or, alternately, "a subgenre of painting."[37] In effect, emphasis in the digital era is given to the various modifications and computer effects that are done at the 'post-production' stage following the recording of live-action footage. In addition, digitization makes it possible to modify

[37] Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001.

details at the most minute level. Pixels and frames are now generated or manipulated in the same way that animation was once comprised of individual drawings. While it is likely the case that contemporary Hollywood cinema mimics animation both technically and aesthetically, what Manovich means by animation is actually somewhat ambiguous. He writes that, "Everything that characterized moving pictures before the twentieth century—the manual construction of images, loop actions, the discrete nature of space and movement—was delegated to cinema's bastard relative, its supplement and shadow—animation" (298). Manovich goes on to add that with the techniques of digital cinema, "What was once supplemental to cinema becomes its norm; what was at the periphery comes into the center. Computer media return to us the repressed of the cinema" (308). That the Freudian formulation within this last phrase is not attributed is merely splitting hairs. More problematic though, and what the explicit mention of Freud would have made unavoidable, is the notion of simply embracing or recapturing what has been repressed. This not only obscures the specificity of recent digital technologies, but broadly overstates whatever utopian tinge once was or still remains attached to the rubric of new media. To be sure, Manovich makes the important point that animation is inextricably linked to the new era of digital attractions. This does little, however, to exclude either from the paradoxes that afflict commercial cinema as a technology and commodity or as a compendium of images and narratives widely featuring both real and fictional technologies and commodities.

Symptomatic of this oversight is Manovich's failure to significantly address any similarities between cinema and animation, particularly the fact that both were once literally considered means of endowing life. Just as animation animates and computer

generated images render virtual worlds and synthetic creatures extant, the cinema itself was likewise considered an incubator of life. This is certainly what André Bazin had in mind in "The Myth of Total Cinema" when he not only mentions automata dating back to Descartes and Pascal as amongst the precursors of cinema but also cites a passage from Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *The Future Eve* as further evidence of the enthusiasm with which "inventors conjure up nothing less than a total cinema" capable of providing a "complete illusion of life."[38] Even if Bazin's reference is, as Annette Michelson latter claims, somewhat laconic, it is still telling both because it appears in an essay itself concerned with the reversal of historical causality – in a way foreshadowing Manovich's own efforts – and because his comments follow a broadly shared sentiment celebrating cinema's lifelike status—a sentiment that is in fact documented by Georges Sadoul, the author Bazin reviews in "The Myth of Total Cinema."[39]

While there may have been a widespread equation between cinema and life in the popular press, the most famous of such accounts likely belongs to Maxim Gorky. In a report from July 1896, the Russian author wrote of pictures that come to life, movements that "are full of living energy," and a life that surges forward.[40] At the same time, however, Gorky was extremely acute in observing the ill-effects of this new technology. Noting the absence of sound and color, Gorky registers his ambivalence exclaiming that, "This is not life but the shadow of life and this is not movement but the soundless shadow

---

[38] *What is Cinema? Volume 1*: 20. Hereafter abbreviated as *WC1*.

[39] Michelson, Annette. "On the Eve of the Future: The Reasonable Facsimile and the Philosophical Toy." *October* 29 (1984).

[40] Gorky, Maxim. "The Lumière Cinematograph (Extracts)." *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents 1896-1939*. Eds. Richard Taylor and Ian Christie. New York: Routledge, 1988. For an additional discussion—to which this chapter is greatly indebted—of the early French accounts included in Sadoul's book, see Louis-Georges Schwartz's "Cinema and the ~~Meaning~~ of 'Life'" *Discourse* 28.2 & 3 (Spring and Fall 2006): 7 – 27.

of movement." In acknowledging the lifelike quality of the new medium while also lamenting it as artificial, illusory, another vicious trick by the likes of Merlin and his ilk, Gorky seemingly rehearses a much broader dialectic, one that remains a structuring force throughout all of modernity. R. L. Rutsky, to take an account particularly germane to the topics under discussion, argues that aesthetics and technology delimit opposing ends within the modern era.[41] Both ends harbor their own fair share of positive and negative connotations. For instance, the aesthetic sphere encompasses eternal and immutable beauty, natural and organic processes, objects endowed with internal purpose and the aura of presence. Simultaneously, these attributes easily lend themselves to more problematic categories such as myth and superstition. At the other end of the spectrum, technology is associated with functional efficiency, industrial progress, as well as Enlightenment principles more generally. As has already been hinted throughout this chapter, features such as scientific reason and efficiency just as easily evoke instrumentality taken to an oppressive degree while industrialization concurrently implies fragmentation, brutalizing shock, and monstrous machines. Whereas, according to Rutsky, the Romantics celebrate the aesthetic realm by condemning the technological, there has been a strong trend within modernist art to reconcile the two, resulting in art that aims to be both practical and functional. In both cases, however, the result is nothing short of Freudian. Efforts to secure one category by marginalizing the other only guarantee a return of the repressed. In Rutsky's terms, a 'living spirit' or, rather, the trace of its aesthetic counterpart, haunts modern technology. Consequently, technology finds itself divided between forms of artificial life that are virtually identical with what is

---

[41] Rutsky, R. L. *High Techne: Art and Technology from the Machine Aesthetic to the Posthuman*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. Hereafter abbreviated as *HT*.

celebrated as utopian within the aesthetic realm while another faction of technological forms are deemed demonic, undead monsters. In other words, this formulation is already apparent in Gorky's 1896 report in which cinema encompasses both life and a dismal, shadowy version of life.

Rutsky goes on to make a more specific case with regard to cinema. He draws a distinction between the "mummy complex" that he associates with Bazin and what he develops as the "Frankenstein complex." With the former he claims that, "every effort is made to elide technology, to erase the distinction between the original and its reproduction." In so doing, cinematic representation is "transmuted into a living totality," whereby it is reendowed with the "enchanted spirit or aura of the original" (*HT* 34-35). Frankenstein's monster, in contrast, cannot be retrofitted to any such aesthetic purpose if for no other reason then for the simple fact that the monster is horrendously ugly. Beneath this surface logic lies another reason. As a form of technological life, a truly living machine, Frankenstein's monster is not only not beholden to any aesthetic purpose but – and this is precisely what makes him such a fearsome monster – instead represents "an autonomous technology that no longer answers to rational, instrumental standards" (*HT* 38). Because of this possibility, Rutsky goes on to compare both the monster and cinema to what has been termed a 'bachelor machine'.[42] While such machines represent the desire to create a closed system free of any external instruction, they exist in fact merely as the purview of either philosophical speculation or fictional

[42] For further analysis, see Constance Penley's "Feminism, Film Theory, and the Bachelor Machines" in *The Future of an Illusion: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989). Though such machines are definitively male in her account, Michelson points to several instances in which they crystallize either around or through the female body. It is certainly the case that many of the fictional examples of automata are framed within highly gendered terms. While Michelson and Penley have been critical in highlighting any signs of patriarchy amid such examples, it is difficult to say that there is any kind of consensus among feminists on this particular issue.

fancy. Ultimately, the bachelor machine can never be completely autonomous just as the cinema and Frankenstein's monster can never be fully alive. All three variations are in effect simulacra "that 'merely' re-present the full presence of life, a kind of technological 'phantom' or fantasy," rather than life itself as such (*HT* 39). In the end, the proposal of a "Frankenstein complex" does little, then, to clarify either the contradictions that ail Bazin's mummy complex or the other convoluted dichotomies used to frame either cinema or modernity. As Rutsky himself concludes, the cinematic machine, on the one hand, "is figured as an uncanny, dystopian technological life, a life that remains… fragmentary, artificial, ugly, a mere substitute for the fully living." And, yet, cinema, on the other hand, simultaneously maintains an uncanny ability to recapitulate the full presence of life and, indeed, at times embodies the spirit of aesthetic wholeness (*HT* 47).

I will shortly return to the question of Bazin's precise role within this discussion, but in the meantime it is worth considering two variations on the dialectic Rutsky outlines. The first can be seen in the fictional film *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (James Cameron, 1991). The storyline in the *Terminator* series involves time traveling cyborgs programmed to eliminate the future leader of a human resistance to Skynet—a fully automated military computer system that, as with other instances of artificial intelligence such as Colossus and Viki, gains consciousness only to assault the humans it was designed to serve. In addition to featuring both sentient computer systems and advanced humanoid robots, the *Terminator* films contain several peripheral points of interest. Produced with a very modest budget, the first film largely adhered to the well-worn generic parameters of science-fiction, action, and horror. Throughout the film technology is cast, in no uncertain terms, as dystopian—the demonic and relentless Terminator is

quite literally depicted as a monster both in terms of Arnold Schwarzenegger's physical brawn and his verbal reticence. In contrast, *Terminator 2* features two different models of Terminators fighting to the death with nothing less than the entire human race hanging in the balance. With such epic stakes it was not only clear that the narrative had moved beyond its previous generic confines, but the entire production had shifted to a much larger scale. In many ways emblematic of contemporary Hollywood's prevailing trends, the second installment was a certifiable blockbuster with Schwarzenegger, by this time, a full-fledged star and James Cameron a top tier director. More importantly, what further distinguished *T2* was the fact that the special effects were by most counts the film's main attraction.

In the first film there are a number of subtle gags that establish and reiterate the ways that technology has already adversely penetrated everyday life. Several mix-ups, for instance, occur as a result of the telephone including the inability to distinguish between an individual's voice and the answering machine that reproduces it. Even the automated factory that helps Sarah Connor and Kyle Reese finally destroy the Terminator is not the savior that it seems to be. As the sequel reveals, scraps from the destroyed machine were covertly salvaged and end up in the hands of the Cyberdyne corporation that would eventually spawn Skynet. In part because of the growing importance of special effects, the second film is obliged to allay any signs either of direct hostility toward technology or even more subtle hints of underlying skepticism. *T2* further undermines the possibility of an anti-technology view by enlisting the 101 Terminator – the same model that so viciously pursues Sarah throughout the first film – as John Connor's protector, sent back in time specifically to combat the T-1000, an advanced model, who will once again

attempt to eliminate the future leader. As John's protector, the T-101 is not only subservient to the boy's orders but precisely because of his inexorable commitment he becomes the good father that John has otherwise never had.

Though the film in this regard stresses technology's capacity for good, several ambiguities remain. Sarah, for example, is as cold and menacing as the inhuman T-1000, particularly in her efforts to change what seems to be a predetermined and inescapable future. If, conversely, the T-101, ends up as the film's most empathetic figure, the implication is that the human species indeed requires a technological savior. Another ambiguity arises with regard to the T-1000 who despite his complete vilification within the diegesis garnered the most enthusiastic admiration in popular responses to the film. Just as the T-101 represents an outdated Terminator model, Schwarzenegger appears as a vestige of an earlier era of both masculinity and action stunts. In stark contrast, the T-1000 was defined by an elegant and ground-breaking fluidity that accounted for the film's most spectacular and impressive scenes. As it is explained in the narrative, the T-1000 is composed of a mimetic poly-alloy, or liquid metal, whereby he can assume the identity of anyone he comes into contact with and, additionally, can form solid metal shapes such knives and stabbing weapons. These attributes were of course only possible because of a number of breakthroughs in 3-D computer animation, compositing, and morphing technologies. For most of the film the T-1000 appears in the guise of Robert Patrick, the actor credited with playing the role. During sequences in which the T-1000 morphs into other characters or undergoes any other kind of transformation, we see Patrick's character dissolve into a gelatinous metallic substance. This transformation process is often most visible when the T-1000 experiences duress. For example, gaping

holes open up as he absorbs massive gunshot blasts. The liquid metal momentarily bends and twists violently before the T-1000 gathers himself, seamlessly resuming his previous pretense of semblance. The gelatinous metallic substance that appears in these sequences was partly but not exclusively the product of computerized animation. The film's complicated special effects indeed relied on technical innovations, but only as a means of supplementing more traditional methods such as animatronic models, miniatures, puppetry, make-up, and prostheses.[43] Nevertheless, the T-1000 for many viewers embodied "the transcendence of the digital over the limitations of the analog cinematic apparatus" (119).[44] Certainly, the final result was a synthetic or artificial creature that although only existing within the fiction of the diegesis and as a visual artifact on the screen became the film's most compelling and celebrated, if not fetishized, character.

Contrary to the questions about the dangers of technology raised within the diegesis, the visual innovations in both *Terminator 2* and the equally ground-breaking *Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg, 1993) made it clear that technology did not entail doom and catastrophe but, rather, paved the way to the future—or, at the very least, the future of filmmaking. In effect, the T-1000, together with the dinosaurs brought back to life in the latter film, would spawn the next generation of Hollywood cinema. A very broad history of the past two decades might identify three basic trends that can be traced back to the digital effects introduced in the early 1990s. First, historically-based narratives began

---

[43] For an extensive account of the special effects in *T2*, see Jody Duncan's "A Once and Future War," *Cinefex* 47 (August 1991).

[44] Fisher, Kevin. "Tracing the Tesseract: A Conceptual Prehistory of the Morph," *Meta-Morphing: Visual Transformation and the Culture of Quick-Change* (Ed. Vivian Sobchack. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000): 119. Although Sobchack is generally acknowledged as an important scholar within the field of science-fiction, this seems to be particularly egregious anthology not only because it includes several essays echoing Fisher's overstated interpretation of T2 but because the morphing technology on which it is premised proved to be at best a minor cultural fad. It seems that even the most cursory perusal of readily available sources such as *Cinefex* would have stressed the minor significance of this technology.

to increasingly incorporate digital effects without necessarily calling attention to them as such. The most famous example of this is likely *Forrest Gump* (1994), but can also be seen in films ranging from *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997), one of the most successful movies of all time, to much more modest and quirky films such as *Quills* (Philip Kaufman, 2000) and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (Joel Coen, 2000).[45] Contemporaneous with Forrest's believable, yet wholly fanciful, march through time, *The Mask* (Chuck Russell, 1994) more directly extended the work that began with the T-1000. In synthesizing Jim Carrey's performance with a computer animated mask, however, the film abandoned the weighty issues of *T2's* epic framework in favor of an explicitly cartoon-ish and unrealistic diegesis. *Casper* (Brad Silberling) in the following year further confirmed the primary path that would be taken by CGI's progeny. This trend continues with Hollywood's current stable of comic book-based superheroes, most of whom remain relatively predictable despite their limitless abilities. A third, closely related, trend can be seen in the growing importance of animated features, many of which beginning with *Toy Story* (John Lasseter, 1995) were produced entirely with 3-D computer animation. Though typically relegated to the under-scrutinized category of children's entertainment, animated features such as *Shrek* (Andrew Adamson and Vicky Jenson, 2001) have accounted for some of Hollywood's most successful franchises while others ranging from *Babe* (Chris Noonan, 1995) to *Stuart Little* (Rob Minkoff, 1999) to *Polar Express* (Robert Zemeckis, 2004) have made important contributions to the

[45] For more details on several of these examples, see Stephen Prince's "True Lies: Perceptual Realism, Digital Images, and Film Theory," *Film Quarterly* 49:3 (Spring 1996): 27-37.

development of various effects techniques.[46] More recently, what might be called the aesthetic of animation has spread well-beyond the confines of children's entertainment to films ranging from the idiosyncratic *Waking Life* (Richard Linklater, 2001) to the uber-masculine *Sin City* (Robert Rodriguez and Frank Miller, 2005) and *300* (Zack Snyder, 2006) to the mythical epic *Beowulf* (Robert Zemeckis, 2007).

While notable failures such as the CGI-generated character Jar Jar Binks in the new *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* (George Lucas, 1999) and the entirely computer generated feature *Final Fantasy: The Spirit Within* (Hironobu Sakaguchi, 2001) seemed to put a damper on the most enthusiastic advocates of digital technologies, these few exceptions did nothing to stop the first decade of the twenty-first century from being ruled by a combination of digitally fabricated fictional worlds, special effects, and increasingly virtual characters. In addition to the trends outlined above, one of the most distinctive features of the early 2000s has been the retreat into fantasy adventure. In series such as *Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, and *Pirates of the Caribbean*, this retreat is primarily made possible by the power of computer animation and digital effects. In contrast to *T2*, however, technology is rarely directly acknowledged in these films but instead surfaces in the guise of sorcery and the supernatural. Despite the fact that these films are so clearly framed within the realm of fantasy a premium is nonetheless placed on realistic representation, none more so than on characters subject to significant alteration and the entirely artificial life forms that follow in the footsteps of the T-1000. For example, consider the attention devoted to the character Gollum in the second and third installments of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Although Gollum appears in the film

---

[46] For an exception, see Peter Krämer's "Would You Take Your Child to See This Film?: The Cultural and Social Work of the Family-Adventure Movie" in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (Eds. Steve Neale and Murray Smith. New York: Routledge, 1998).

as entirely CGI-generated, the actor Andy Serkis not only provided the character's voice but played the role together with the other actors during the recording of live-action.

Serkis's performance served as a point of reference, then, both for his fellow actors and for the animation technicians during the post-production process. Referred to as motion capture, Serkis wore a suit that provided detailed coordinates and other data that was subsequently used to generate the animated figure that appears in the film. Something similar had been used for the T-1000: data was collected by in a variety of ways including filming the actor Robert Patrick simultaneously from two different angles. The difference in *Lord of the Rings* was that the motion capture technique was simultaneous with the live-action filming. The same technique was subsequently used in a variety of films already mentioned—*Polar Express*, *Beowulf*, and *Pirates of the Caribbean*—as well as in the rendering of Sonny in *I, Robot*. The advantage of the motion capture data is most palpable not in animating the figure per se, but rather in rendering the figure both as realistic as possible and seamlessly integrating it into the live-action footage. In terms of accomplishing this, the most important details are layered textures such as hair, flesh, fur, and feathers as well as cross-matching lighting and reflections between the live-action and the visual effects added later. Such techniques are rarely if at all done by hand anymore. Instead the process is completely automated by virtue of various software programs, which technicians frequently customize by developing plug-ins that address specific issues within the production process. Customization provides a potential proprietary commodity that is applied throughout the entire film and subsequently adopted by the industry as a whole. In the case of Gollum, for example, a process known as subsurface scattering was adopted. With basic computer

graphics, light interacts with an object only at the surface of the object. Subsurface scattering allows for the fact that many surfaces, such as flesh, do not reflect light in such a simplistic manner. This technique, then, by calculating that a certain amount of light is absorbed and scattered, simulates a more diffuse reflection that is conducive to more realistic renderings of depth, shadow, and texture.[47] The lighting and rendering techniques adopted for Gollum were subsequently applied to the other digital creations in *The Two Towers* and *Return of the King*.

Something of the same principle is at work as various programs are able to not only complement one another but interact and cooperate in sophisticated ways. One of the most significant breakthroughs associated with the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy was the development of the software program MASSIVE, an acronym for Multiple Agent Simulation System in Virtual Environment, which allowed for enormous crowds to be digitally contrived. With the program the effects team was able to interject and multiply its various animated and motion captured creations and create incredibly detailed, spectacular battle scenes. The distinctive feature of MASSIVE, however, was that each 'agent' was rendered discrete with its own actions and behavior while also capable of individually reacting to its immediate environment.[48] In effect, the program provides a system within which individual agents act autonomously. Before the cinema displaced mechanical automata and CGI characters supplanted the traditional actors who previously impersonated their android kin, the drive to replicate life was appropriated as another

---

[47] Robertson, Barbara. "The Big and the Sméagol," *Computer Graphics World* Vol. 27 no. 1 (Jan. 2004). Accessed online at http://www.cgw.com/ on 16 June 2010.

[48] The software developer responsible for the program, "Steve Regelous had been interested in artificial life for some time; and he thought the best way to give Peter [Jackson, the director] what he wanted was to build intelligent models, or agents, that have smarts—you actually build brains for them." Quoted in Jody Duncan's "Ring Masters" *Cinefex* 89 (April 2002): 84.

feature of industrialization. Free from the drive to simulate human appearance, mechanization and automation were simply means of replacing human labor. Quite simply, were it not for the innovative software programs such as MASSIVE that automate so many of the technical procedures used in today's films there would not be enough time or money (in effect, labor power) to produce the current crop of Hollywood blockbusters. In other words, the aims once associated with artificial life subsist but only within the controlled and commodifiable computer software that underlies the new era of digital effects.

Although still primarily concerned with cinema's early development, much of Tom Gunning's recent work, to return to the dialectic introduced above, considers the relationship between aesthetics and technology more broadly. Like Rutsky, he finds that the dynamics within this relationship are both at odds and oddly complicit with one another. For instance, Gunning suggests that modernity comprises a perpetual oscillation between wonder, novelty, and astonishment on the one hand and familiarity and disenchantment on the other.[49] Though understood as diametrically opposite, he shows that novelty and familiarity are more often than not two sides of the same coin. In another essay, he demonstrates that cinema, following a tradition well established in precursors ranging from the phantasmagoria to early automata and magic more generally, teeters between supernatural illusion and scientific demystification.[50] In a more a relevant

---

[49] Gunning, Tom. "Re-Newing Old Technologies: Astonishment, Second Nature, and the Uncanny in Technology from the Previous Turn-of-the-Century," in *Rethinking Media Change: The Aesthetics of Transition* (Eds. David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003). See also his related essay, "'Animated Pictures': Tales of Cinema's Forgotten Future, After 100 Years of Films" in *Reinventing Film Studies* (Eds. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams. London: Arnold, 2000).

[50] Gunning, Tom. "Phantasmagoria and the Manufacturing of Illusions and Wonder: Towards a Cultural Optics of the Cinematic Apparatus" in *The Cinema, A New Technology for the 20th Century* (Eds. Andre Gaudreault, Catherine Russell, and Pierre Veronneau. Lausanne: Payot Lausanne, 2004).

analysis, Gunning expands these concerns to examine Gollum, from *The Lord of the Rings*, as a specific example.[51] Again following in the tradition of earlier automata, he affirms that discourse surrounding Gollum not only repeats many of the same anxieties that always accompany efforts to simulate life but also provides an interesting variant of the mythical Jewish figure known as Golem. While Gunning concurs that this synthetic creature represents a culmination in the dream of artificially reproducing life, he subsequently turns his attention to making a more general case on behalf of technology. In effect he makes three main points. First, he writes, that even though "much of contemporary CGI and digital manipulation blends imperceptibly into familiar realities, spectacular special effects films primarily visualize the fantastic" (344). In this regard, contemporary Hollywood continues cinema's long-established role as a repository of wonder and illusion bringing to life creatures that previously only existed in the imaginary—CGI simply expanding the sleight of hand that began with the likes of Melies more than a century ago. Second, he argues that it is futile to condemn the contradictions of contemporary Hollywood—such as its propensity for anti-technology narratives while employing the most advanced technological innovations available—precisely because the technological ambiguities that arise in fiction film mirror those ambiguities that are likewise found in modern culture at large. Third, the hybrid innovations necessary in creating Gollum not only reiterate cinema's multi-media history but, more importantly, illustrate the insufficiency of film theory's dueling factions. That is, with the motion capture technology both linked to the most advanced special effects and a modified recapitulation of indexicality the creation of virtual figures such as Gollum evokes traditional theoretical positions even while clearly necessitating a move beyond them.

[51] Gunning, "Gollum and Golem."

By voicing this demand for new theoretical approaches, Gunning basically initiates a war on two fronts. On the one hand he dismisses the ideology critique that developed over the course of the seventies, together with the exegetes of new media, as totalizing and excessive. The more glaring target, however, is André Bazin and the theory of photographic realism that he remains emphatically associated with.[52] To prove that a special ontology of the photographic image is unnecessary Gunning cites Bazin's unwitting celebration of a process shot from *Citizen Kane*. The point being that realism is as much, if not entirely, the result of various dramatic and stylistic effects rather than the image itself. Even if Bazin's general observation holds, his overarching theoretical framework, according to Gunning, does not. Rutsky similarly situates Bazin as a particularly feeble straw man. In his embrace of total cinema, Bazin is seen not only as discounting the science that underlies the new technology but also reinscribing the medium with nebulous qualities such as magic, myth, and ritual. Concomitant with this view, technology is understood as a threat to the utopian desire to reproduce life or presence in earnest. Rutsky writes that for Bazin this threat is manifest most clearly in his hostility to montage (*HT* 45). In short, Bazin is able to preserve the illusion of total cinema only through his injunction against montage or, rather, by placing technology under erasure.

Certainly Bazin embraced select attributes of aesthetic realism and explicitly stressed the importance and specificity of the photographic image throughout his writing. But this does not necessarily mean that Bazin was the naïve realist that he is so often

---

[52] For further evidence, consider Gunning's "Moving Away from the Index: Cinema and the Impression of Reality," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* Vol. 18, no. 1 (Spring 2007). For a contrasting account consider, Mulvey, Laura: *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006).

caricatured as. In fact, many of his views appear purposely ambivalent or inconsistent, so much so that it is utterly impossible to sustain the approaches undertaken by Gunning and Rutsky. As a case in point, consider Bazin's essay "The Virtues and Limitations of Montage" and, more specifically, his remarks concerning Albert Lamorisse's *Red Balloon* (1956). In contrast to the anthropomorphism seen in the Jean Tourane film *Une Fée pas comme les autres* and the animation films of Walt Disney more generally, Bazin insists that the red balloon brought to life in Lamorisse's film owes nothing to montage.[53] Although *The Red Balloon* involves a certain amount of trickery, as he goes on to say, "the important thing about it is that this story owes everything to the cinema precisely because, essentially, it owes it nothing" (*WC1* 46). While Bazin's main point seems to be that imagination and reality are not mutually exclusive, explaining how the two are intertwined leaves him caught "thinking in a series of paradoxes." Indeed, it is difficult to decipher what he means by saying that Lamorisse's film owes cinema both everything and nothing. What is clear, however, is that Bazin's opposition to montage concerns the fact that the actions and meanings that are assigned to the image do not, in his words, actually exist. The illusion of inanimate life found in *The Red Balloon* does not stem from this same sort of abstraction. Instead the illusion "is created here, as in conjuring, out of reality itself" (*WC1* 45). What lends the cinema to imagination, then, is that the tricks and subterfuge demanded by the logic of its stories "allows what is imaginary to include what is real and at the same time substitute for it" (*WC1* 47). Or, as he later adds, "All that matters is that the spectator can say at one and the same time that the basic material of the film is authentic while the film is also truly cinema. So the screen reflects the ebb and

[53] We might further expand this tradition beyond talking, thinking animals to include films such as *The Love Bug* series (recently remade as *Herbie Fully Loaded*) or *Look Who's Talking* (Amy Heckerling, 1989)—films employing fundamentally similar tactics in animating everything from automobiles to infants.

flow of our imagination which feeds on a reality for which it plans to substitute" (*WC1* 48).

Strangely enough, Bazin's comments concerning the tricks employed on behalf of a child's tale anticipate and subtly correspond with Christian Metz's own examination of the role of special effects twenty years later. In "*Trucage* and the Film," Metz delineates several different categories of *trucage*, or special effects, among which the most important is his distinction between the imperceptible, visible, and invisible.[54] Visible *trucage* refers to effects such as slow motion. These effects are not only meant to be apprehended by viewers, but are coded as an explicit manipulation. The standard use of stunt doubles and stand-ins serve as examples of an imperceptible *trucage*. As prevalent as such tactics may be they are rendered entirely transparent by virtue of editing and other techniques. Invisible *trucage*, on the contrary, requires a more detailed explanation. According to Metz, the spectator cannot explain how this type of effect was produced or where exactly it dwells within the text. "It is invisible because we do not know where it is, because we do not see it. But it is perceptible, because we perceive its presence, because we 'sense' it …" (664). Further describing this as avowed machination, such invisible effects exemplify the fact that *trucage* more generally entails deceit and duplicity. For example, he writes, "In films of the fantastic, the impression of unreality is convincing only if the public has the feeling of partaking, not of some plausible illustration of a process obeying a nonhuman logic, but of a series of disquieting or 'impossible' events which nevertheless unfold before him in the guise of eventlike appearances" (667). This is certainly the case in contemporary Hollywood where fantasy

---

[54] Metz, Christian. "*Trucage* and the Film." Trans. Françoise Meltzer. *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 3, no. 4 (Summer 1977): 657-675.

films, as well as many other genres, demand a believable and relatable diegesis not in spite of but because of the unbelievable and unrealistic events that transpire within that world.

Seemingly in accordance with what Metz has discussed elsewhere as the role of fetishism and the spectator, Hollywood cinema simultaneously flaunts its visual and technical abilities, relishing its capacity to astonish the senses, while never ceasing to conceal its inner workings.[55] In other words, it both acknowledges and disavows its own visual virtuosity. Although these comments specifically concern invisible *trucage*, it becomes increasingly difficult for Metz to maintain a distinction with the earlier category of the imperceptible. To be sure, all three varieties of *trucage* contribute to an image track that is simultaneously visible and invisible. And, in fact, Metz eventually concedes that montage is a form of perpetual *trucage* and, beyond that, the cinema "in its entirety is, in a sense, a vast *trucage*" (670). Though Metz has a very different critical orientation, his claim that the perceptible and the invisible intermingle recalls Bazin's own assessment that the imaginary and realistic are intertwined. In this regard, both remain relevant to the new era of Hollywood cinema, primarily in the sense that it continues to thrive by simultaneously flaunting and concealing its technical abilities.[56] Metz's terminology is at least as useful as Gunning's middling account of the attraction and

---

[55] See *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (Trans. Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster, and Alfred Guzzetti. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).

[56] For an account that counters, or at least mitigates Metz's claims, see Michelle Pierson's *Special Effects: Still in Search of Wonder* (New York: Columbia, 2002). Pierson, in one of the still relatively rare extended analyses of its kind, makes a case for connoisseurship in which special effects cease to be either invisible or imperceptible. Though it seems that there is indeed a significant number of fans devoted to the intricacies of special effects, I strongly doubt that the existence of such enthusiasts alters Metz's general argument in any substantial way. If anything, the existence of these enthusiasts invites further analysis with regard to fetishism.

Bazin, regardless of how his theoretical framework has been roundly mischaracterized, details techniques that still have the potential to undercut current Hollywood conventions.

Bazin more fully develops his position in the second installment of "Theater and Cinema." In comparing the two he suggests not only that the concept of presence requires rethinking, but that identification and what he refers to as décor are the two most telling traits in doing so. Beginning with the common belief that the actor's presence is what defines theater and, by contrast, what cinema lacks, Bazin argues that theatrical presence effectively discourages identification. Precisely because of "the reciprocal awareness of the presence of audience and actor," the two sides interact exclusively on the basis of the latter's performance. Cinema, on the other hand, has at its disposal a much greater range of means with which to "stimulate the consciousness of the spectator" (*WC1* 100). Moreover, in the cinema, "There is nothing to prevent us from identifying ourselves in imagination with the moving world before us" (*WC1* 102). To further understand this distinction Bazin next turns his attention to "the ensemble of conditions that constitute the theatrical play and deprive the spectator of active participation." The locus in this ensemble is of course the stage, that three-sided box that opens onto the auditorium. The false perspectives and facades that the stage facilitates, Bazin continues:

> have another side which is cloth and nails and wood. Everyone knows that when the actor 'retires to his apartment' from the yard or from the garden, he is actually going to his dressing room to take off his make-up. These few square feet of light and illusion are surrounded by machinery and flanked by wings, the hidden labyrinths of which do not interfere one bit with the pleasure of the spectator who is playing the game of theater. (*WC1* 104)

Emphasizing that the enclosed and circumscribed space of the stage is an illusory one, he further adds that the theater "exists by virtue of its reverse side and its absence from anything beyond, as the painting exists by virtue of its frame" (*WC1* 105).

In contrast, Bazin claims that the screen is centrifugal. It is not subject to the same boundaries that delimit the theater. "When a character moves off screen, we accept the fact that he is out of sight, but he continues to exist in his own capacity at some other place in the décor which is hidden from us. There are no wings to the screen" (*WC1* 105). Or in more expressive terms, "we might say of the cinema that it is the little flashlight of the usher, moving like an uncertain comet across the night of our waking dream, the diffuse space without shape or frontiers that surrounds the screen" (*WC1* 107). The obvious rebuttal here is that the screen is absolutely surrounded by machinery, the unseen technical resources and untold labor that underlies essentially every image that appears on screen. On the one hand, the type of cinema that Bazin lobbied for most adamantly was largely outside the confines of Hollywood's classical conventions. Therefore when advocating this position what he had in mind was in fact less, if at all, dependent on such methods. On the other hand, the paradoxes that Bazin again finds himself entertaining faintly recall Benjamin's paradoxical contention that the equipment free reality made possible by cinema is also the height of artifice. Like Bazin, Benjamin draws upon the distinction between cinema and theater. He likewise associates the illusory nature of film with montage and suggests that the theater is more proficient at concealing its own status as an illusion. Benjamin goes onto add that the equipment free reality presented by film is made possible "precisely on the basis of the most intensive interpenetration of reality

with equipment" (*Art SV* 116).[57] Whereas Bazin rebukes the theater because its viewers implicitly acknowledge the machination that constitutes its illusion, he celebrates the cinema because it opens up an "artificial world" that shares a common denominator with our own world. "The realism of the cinema," he writes, "follows directly from its photographic nature." Or in Benjamin's terms, what makes it possible is equipment capable of penetrating reality. Furthermore, "Not only does some marvel or some fantastic thing on the screen not undermine the reality of the image, on the contrary it is its most valid justification" (*WC1* 108).

Contemporary Hollywood, digital or otherwise, is primarily if not exclusively invested in rendering a theatrical reality that more or less completely abandons the virtues advocated by Bazin. Indeed, the computer software that automatically renders various life-like effects has supplanted the automatic means of mechanical reproduction that gave the photographic image its credibility. Second, while it would be impossible to fully reconcile the incongruities of both Bazin and Benjamin, it is the case that just as the latter embraced cinema because of its political potential what most enamored the former was the possibility of an aesthetic medium capable of engaging and interpreting the social-historical world. While both projects are utterly lost on contemporary Hollywood, there are at least two examples that are particularly relevant to the present discussion.

---

[57] The paradoxical nature of this formulation is, once again, closely tied to the ambiguities surrounding Benjamin's concept of aura. The most incisive critic to begin the formidable task of analyzing this concept is undoubtedly Miriam Hansen. See most recently "Benjamin's Aura" (*Critical Inquiry* 34 [Winter 2008]: 336-375), as well her earlier essays on Benjamin: "Room-for-Play: Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema" (*October* 109 [Summer 2004]: 3-45), "Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street" (*Critical Inquiry* 25 [Winter 1999]: 306-345), and "Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: 'The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology'" (*New German Critique* 40 [Winter 1987]: 179-224). On something of a side note, Hansen has frequent recourse to the uncanny as an explanatory concept. It would be worth further examining this particular dynamic within Benjamin's thinking.

Consider the extended point-of-view shot in *Robocop* in which viewers witness firsthand the transformation undertaken by Murphy as he becomes a cyborg super-cop. The sequence not only makes literal Roy Batty's glib affront in *Blade Runner* to the geneticist responsible for making his eyes—"If only you could see what I've seen with your eyes"—but further illustrates what Bazin suggests is at stake in cinematic identification.[58] From Tarzan to the curé in Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest*, the common denominator for Bazin is that they really exist and as such the viewer cannot refuse but "to share their adventures and to live them through with them, inside their universe, a universe that is not metaphorical and figurative but spatially real" (*WC1* 113). Over the course of the sequence in *Robocop*, the viewer shares Murphy's experience as he crosses the threshold both from life to death and from human to machine. The point-of-view device in this instance demands identification not simply to engender realism but to accentuate this ubiquitous permeability. The tactic not only creates a bond between character and viewer, but also emphasizes the mutability between seeing as such and the virtual perspective provided by the machine that sees—a classification that might refer to the camera in general, but here is assigned to the cyborg police officer within the diegesis. In drawing these intersections, the film's use of point-of-view further illustrates Bazin's assertion that cinema produces reflection and self-awareness "at the height of illusion" (*WC1* 113).

The second example is found in Spike Lee's *Bamboozled*. As briefly discussed at the conclusion of the previous chapter, the film concerns both the legacy of slavery and

---

[58] Indeed, Batty's petition is misleading insofar as we are frequently provided point-of-view shots from the perspective of Hollywood automata. This practice dates back at least to *Westworld* and is typified by the examples from the *Terminator* films. In what its technicians dubbed 'Termovision', the Terminator's POV resembles a computer screen, clearly distinguished through coloration and overlying graphics.

racism in general and the commodification of black performance more specifically. Within the narrative a series of black collectibles—beginning with the "Jolly Nigger Bank" that Sloan gives to Delacroix as a gift—are seen proliferating exponentially. What's more, several of the collectibles, and the bank in particular, are seen performing their simple mechanical operations on their own accord, literalizing a kind of reanimation. For Bill Brown, this return to life marks the return of the ontological scandal perpetrated by slavery. With the reanimation of the reified black body, he sees, "not some literalization of the commodity fetish, but the reenactment of the breakdown of the person/thing binary…"[59] He further classifies this problem as the American uncanny precisely because the paradox at the root of slavery—that humans could be treated as things or property—remains repressed. In the particular instance of reanimated figurines, it is possible according to Brown to apprehend the ontological instability of the artifact itself—an oscillation between animate and inanimate, subject and object, human and thing. It remains unclear how Spike Lee in fact institutes this reanimation. Regardless of whether it was ultimately through editing or special effect, *Bamboozled* contrives these artificial automata in order to demand a return to history and the world that it has wrought. From Dziga Vertov's 'kinoks' to Eisenstien's cinematic organisms, from the notion of *photogenie* celebrated within France's cine clubs to the art practices variously employed by groups such as the Futurists, the Dadaists, and Surrealists, there has strong and enduring correlation between the avant-garde and automata.[60] While the examples

---

[59] Brown, Bill. "Reification, Reanimation, and the American Uncanny," *Critical Inquiry* 32 (Winter 2006): 197.

[60] Vertov, Dziga. *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*. Ed. Annette Michelson. Trans. Kevin O'Brien. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984. Eisenstein develops this notion in passing throughout many of his writings, but see in particular "The Structure of Film" in *Film Form* (Ed. and trans. Jay Leyda. New York: HBJ, 1949). On the cine clubs, see Richard Abel's *French Film Theory and Criticism, Volume 1:*

from *Robocop* and *Bamboozled* do not by any means belong to this tradition, what they make evident is that even within the conventional limits of Hollywood narrative it is possible to conjure something of the same impetus that anchored these avant-garde movements, namely an aesthetic engagement with the historical world capable of producing social change.

## Bio-Politics and Animal-Machines

The premise that informs Michel Foucault's term biopolitics is relatively straightforward. Concerned with how power is deployed, Foucault identifies two basic models that begin in the seventeenth century. The first he refers to as an anatomo-politics of the human body. This form of power is characterized in terms of discipline and centers on the body as a machine. That is, its focus is the disciplining of the body: "the optimization of [the body's] capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, [and] its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls."[61] The second model, developing slightly later, is what he terms biopolitics. While continuing the practices that administer the body as machine,

---

*1907-1929* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988). For a relevant commentary on the Surrealists, see Hal Foster's *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993). On the Dadaists, see Matthew Biro's *The Dada Cyborg: Visions of the New Human in Weimar Berlin* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009). These variations perhaps culminate in Gilles Deleuze's account of the 'spiritual automaton' (which is extrapolated from comments by Artaud) in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. Just as Hollywood's version of trauma victims diverge notably from what Deleuze considers the representative figure of post-war cinema, Hollywood's rendering of automata bears only the faintest resemblance to the spiritual automaton. Still, further consideration is necessary.

[61] Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction Volume 1*. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage, 1978. 139. See also, Foucault's *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-1976*. Trans. David Macey. New York: Picador, 2003: 239-263. For an elaboration of these circumstances, see Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 200), though these authors ultimately adopt a divergent notion of biopower.

biopolitics are no longer implemented on the threat of punishment, but instead inaugurates an era in which regulatory controls are set-up to "invest life through and through." Foucault's model is particularly useful for our interests in two different regards. First, biopolitics accounts for a range of techniques that are closely associated with late-capitalism. For example, whereas the assembly line that characterized industrial manufacture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century corresponds with explicit bodily discipline, the subsequent rise of a post-industrial, service-based economy, engenders the belief that such labor affords greater freedom and autonomy even as it in fact subjects workers to increasing, if only transparent, regulation and control. Second, and more germane to the previous section, biopolitics is analogous to the new era of digital effects in which technology facilitates the creation of virtual characters uninhibited by conventional boundaries precisely by rendering human actors and their world into measurable units that can be manipulated and controlled. In contradistinction to Manovich's effort to re-inscribe digital effects within the liberating realm of animation, contemporary Hollywood may have more in common with what Lisa Cartwright has shown is cinema's debt to scientific principles of management and control.[62] That is, the re-fabrication of life so fervently celebrated on the screen is as much as anything a byproduct of the techniques of knowledge and power that have traditionally been associated with fields such as science and medicine, fields characterized both by their natural proclivity for instrumental, rational logic and their capacity to lend themselves to corporate interests.

---

[62] Cartwright, Lisa. *Screening the Body: Tracing Medicine's Visual Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995.

While I have noted the recent domination of fantasy-adventure blockbusters, there are certainly a number of films that acknowledge the conditions of their production—either acknowledging the constitutive effect of biopolitics or digital effects as such—even as they adhere to the strict conventions of Hollywood narrative. A classic, if only partial, example is Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936). Featuring the same industrial iconography as seen in *Metropolis*, the film acknowledges the detrimental effects of modern manual labor while also anticipating the impending era of intensified regulation and control. With regard to the former we see that Chaplin, an industrial worker, has internalized to a dangerous degree the repetitive motion that he performs on the assembly line. More machine than human, Chaplin's mechanical routine, not unlike the factory system itself, is always on the verge of losing control. The demands of the assembly line, however, are the least of Chaplin's worries. On a break in the bathroom his moment of solace is interrupted by the corporate boss who has installed a surveillance system so that he can monitor his employees at all times. In another effort to maximize productivity, the company president entertains the possibility of introducing the Bellows Feeding Machine, a rather sadistic apparatus designed to automatically feed each employee while they continue working so that the lunch hour can be eliminated.

A more recent example of a Hollywood film acknowledging its own conditions of possibility might be seen as nothing more than a sustained meditation on Chaplin's culminating experience in *Modern Times*. That is to say, it is almost as if the 1999 film *The Matrix* takes the iconic scene in which Chaplin is ingested by the factory's vast machinery as its point of departure. As the film's most cogent critic puts it, the question

of immersivity is in fact its "central concern."[63] Before elaborating further on what exactly this entails, it is worth simply stating how the film refers to biopolitics. Whereas the machines in the *Terminator* films are determined to vanquish the human race, the robots in *I, Robot* are instead content to pacify and control them. In contrast to both, *The Matrix* reveals in what amounts to a kind of primal scene that the machines remain dependent on their predecessors. More specifically, they must sustain the human species precisely because they are their primary energy supply. As Morpheous further explains, the inter-neural simulation known as the Matrix is nothing more than a distraction designed to inure its human prisoners. Believing that they continue to live their lives as they had in 1999, humans are in actuality rendered completely docile, encapsulated within individual pods so that the machines can systematically 'harvest' their bioelectricity. Morpheous finally concludes that humans have been reduced to mere batteries. This not only recalls Marx's earlier analysis in which workers are transformed into internal appendages subservient to the machines, but also epitomizes what Foucault terms biopolitics. In *Johnny Mnemonic* (Robert Longo, 1995), Hollywood's first official foray into the literary sub-genre of 'cyber-punk', the protagonist partitions his own brain in order to store and transport illicit data.[64] In other words, Johnny is a human hard drive; in the age of digital information his mind is the equivalent to the detachable limbs that once made Mickey Mouse a prescient personification of stolen labor. *The Matrix*, however, takes the notion even further. In accordance with the emphasis on life in the

---

[63] Clover, Joshua. *The Matrix*. London: BFI, 2004: 28.

[64] The literary subgenre known as cyber-punk is most closely associated with William Gibson and his trilogy that began with *Neuromancer* (New York: Ace Books, 1984). Philip K. Dick is often included as a de facto member as is David Cronenberg whose films from *Videodrone* (1984) to *eXistenZ* (1999) share many common themes. For an extended commentary, see Scott Bukaman's *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Post-Modern Science Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

biopolitical era, the machines must keep the humans alive. In order to do this, they construct a psychologically engaging simulation that they in turn scrupulously manage and oversee. While it is crucial that the humans believe they live a normal life, the machines are only concerned with the energy that they can extrapolate—energy which is nothing more than a byproduct of their most basic biological existence. This is labor in its most alienated form.

Although the Matrix is of secondary importance to the machines within the narrative, it was the all-encompassing conceit of this spectacle that was considered by many fans to be the film's most enthralling and significant attribute. In addition to appealing to trademarks of science-fiction paranoia such as incarcerating dream worlds and delusional turns of infinite regress, the explicit reference to manufactured spectacle in *The Matrix* acknowledges not only the role of special effects in contemporary Hollywood but perhaps more importantly, as Clover observes, the influence of interactive video games and the newly emergent DVD market. Bullet time, the film's signature special effect, is to this end both about time in a general sense and, more specifically, the relationship between time and the immersivity—the feeling of being within the fictional world—afforded by video games and DVDs. "The film," Clover points out, "does its best, stylistically and narratively, to replicate the immersivity of a videogame. It offers unimpeded physical identification with its heroes, computer workers who become action heroes immersed in a world of code […] with exceptional fighting skills premised on a mastery over space and particularly over time" (51). In replicating video games' formal and thematic embellishments, bullet time registers the pleasure as well as the danger of immersion. Clover continues his analysis by suggesting that for those locked within the

Matrix bullet time simply reveals their actual condition: "frozen within unmoving time, trapped in the amber of the spectacle" (66). Within the diegesis it is everything else that is a special effect. Bullet time, on the contrary, shows the world as it really is: a world in which history is "concealed under a welter of false appearance" and time effectively stands still. The further danger is that while the film attempts to engender its passive audience as active players, the force of its special effects situate the viewer in the same position as the enslaved humans within the narrative: mesmerized by digital spectacle.

While the film's contradictory embrace and rejection of digital spectacle may be constitutive of, or at least concomitant with, whatever charms or relevance it poses, the pretense of a Messianic hero—Neo whose capacity to transcend the limits of the Matrix will determine the fate of his rebel cohort—belies the inescapable profit motive that authors its ultimate *raison d'être*. As Clover puts it, this is precisely the contrived and formulaic ploy that is expected from the overlords of spectacle, "the sort of fantasy that the Matrix's masters would program" (76). This is to say, as much as the Matrix may resemble ideology in the abstract, *The Matrix* is more concretely an emblem of the corporate consolidation that ran roughshod throughout most of the decade. Anxieties about engulfment necessarily accompanied an era known for its mergers and acquisitions and the most telling sign of such anxiety may be the way the Warner's Brother logo—"The branding image [that] use to be a last promise of the real before the celluloid dream began…the actual place where movies are made"—acquiesces to the same sickly, digital green that is used to denote the synthetic world within the Matrix.[65] The

[65] As Clover implies, *The Matrix* was indeed a sign of its time. Recent films dealing with similar concerns such as *Surrogates* (Jonathan Mostow, 2009) and *Gamer* (Mark Neveldine and Brian Taylor, 2009) have fallen flat and largely failed to find an audience. It seems that *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009) has

implication, as Clover understands it, is that "There are no places any more. Just code." Or perhaps appearances, as was commonly held by a wide range of post-WW II theorists. The individual in this vain to whom the film makes reference is Jean Baudrillard—a copy of his *Simulations and Simulacra* conceals Neo's stash of contraband. The theorist to whom Clover makes extended reference is Guy Debord. His *Society of the Spectacle* proclaims that the spectacle is "at once a faithful mirror held up to the production of things and a distorting objectification of the producers."[66]

There are two further points germane to my interest here. First, in announcing the predominance of the spectacle, Debord describes it as a collection of images detached from everyday life. Reality hence unfolds as a pseudo-world divorced from any kind of contemplation. The spectacle is an "autonomous image, where deceit deceives itself." As such it occasions an inversion of life; it is a realm of non-life (12). Reality itself, in this view, has become a form of artificial life autonomous and automated, totally indifferent to human action, which has been relegated to mere appearance. Invoking the categories of life and non-life to make his case, Debord suggests that the spectacle affords things all the properties normally reserved for the living while the regime of appearances circumscribes human labor to a subordinate realm lacking any vitality whatsoever. This contradictory circumstance is further stated in the following terms: "Though separated from his product, man is more and more, and ever more powerfully, the producer of every detail of his world. The closer his life comes to being his own creation, the more drastically is he cut off from that life" (24). Though Debord's critique of the spectacle

---

completed the swing of the pendulum: its digital world no longer raises anxieties about illusion or simulation, but instead is the utopian natural paradise in which humans are liberated rather than enslaved.

[66] Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Zone Books, 1995: 16.

follows a long line of thinkers who have decried all images as equally illusory and treacherous, his approach is distinct insofar as it remains fundamentally grounded in an economic understanding of society. The second point that can be taken, then, is that the spectacle and biopolitics are closely intertwined. Consider, for example, Thesis 42: "The spectacle corresponds to the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life." In Thesis 44, Debord contends that the logic of the spectacle demands that "Consumable survival must increase," the reason being that "survival itself belongs to the realm of dispossession…" (30-31). He again comments on the biological element of labor noting that "the spectator can have no sense of an individual life moving toward self-realization, or toward death" (115). Life insurance, like the injunction against old age so pervasively admonished by advertisers, stipulates a perpetual alienation from life while preventing the possibility of living alienation within time (116).

An even clearer illustration of the consequences of this intersection between spectacle and biopolitics can be found in *The Island* (Michael Bay, 2005). The film begins with the introduction of a pleasantly homogenous population inhabiting a luxurious, if austere and strictly monitored, ocean-front facility. The year is 2019 and these survivors of an ecological catastrophe reside here without want for anything except to win the lottery. That is, everyday there is a random selection whereby the winner is granted passage to the much renowned island—earth's only remaining pathogen free zone, a virtual garden of Eden. In beginning to question the uniform banality of this existence, however, the film's protagonist Lincoln Six Echo (Ewen McGregor) learns that the entire conceit of the island is just that. Initially he discovers that recent lottery winners are not on their way to the island, but instead subject to horrid medical

procedures—the extreme case being the woman who is administered a lethal injection immediately after giving birth. After completing his escape together with Jordan Two Delta (Scarlett Johansson), Lincoln learns even more.

The Merrick Biotech corporation, we eventually gather, has orchestrated the entire enterprise. The facility itself is engulfed within a holographic illusion so as to better perpetuate belief in the counterfeit island. As the operation occupies an old military missile silo, the residents in fact live deep underground—making the Platonic allusion even more glaring than in *The Matrix*. Moreover, the facility's inhabitants are not human but, rather, clones or as the company refers to them, agnates. To be even more precise, they are products. The company markets itself as a kind of life insurance policy in the most literal sense—clients pay for the clones so that if emergency or any other medical necessity should arise they'll have an entire repertoire of spare parts, so to speak, ready for 'harvest'. The only glitch is that there are laws designed to preserve some degree of ethical integrity; more specifically, they provide that the clones remain in a persistent pre-conscious state. Dr. Merrick and his company have learned, however, that, just as the machines discovered with regard to protracting the Matrix, without some modicum of consciousness the clones are not able to biologically subsist. As a result Merrick has illegally rendered agnates imprinted with the shared memory of a cataclysmic event and the collective desire to reach the island. While inhabiting their enclosed society, the clones are further edified through rudimentary forms of education, work, and leisure. More complicated human emotions and behavior such as sexuality are carefully scrutinized or eliminated all together. Wearing the same monotonous outfits, their perfunctory daily routines are prescribed by anonymous computerized voices and

scrolling text messages, they live without physical proximity or emotional intimacy, and, most tellingly in the case of Lincoln Six, they live without bacon. The life of the clones, in other words, can hardly be considered life at all.[67] Again like the encapsulated bodies held hostage by the machines in *The Matrix*, Merrick's clones are caught in a paradox: they are compelled to live yet their lives are so utterly circumscribed that their existence ceases to constitute life as such. In both cases, humans are subjugated so as to render them into mere commodities: batteries in *The Matrix* and spare parts in *The Island*. While the nature of this reduction emphasizes their status either as measurable machines or discrete, inanimate parts, it also recalls the Greek distinction between *zoe* and *bios*. Whereas the latter term refers to the particular mode of living appropriate to human beings, the former term represents life in its most common form—life in its most impoverished sense, a distinction therefore that cannot be limited to the human species alone.[68] In short, the sub-human existence to which the clones in *The Island* are relegated leaves them closer not only to machines or inanimate objects but to the world of animals as well.

Just as Donna Haraway's pioneering work on cyborgs once did, the emergent field of animal studies has begun to address the ways in which animals, as an exemplary of bare life, potentially pose a significant, even radical, counter-point capable of

---

[67] The film *Gattaca* (Andrew Niccol, 1997) provides a more subdued example of this same type of social stratification—society is divided between a genetically flawless elite and a 'degenerate' underclass. Some of these issues are raised again in *Minority Report* (Steven Speilberg, 2002) where 'pre-cogs'—the children of drug addicts who are themselves treated as deities and sub-humans—allow police to incarcerate criminals before they actually commit any crime.

[68] This distinction, which very much stems from Foucault's work, is the subject of Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer: Soverign Power and Bare Life* (Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998). For further consideration, see Roberto Esposito's *Bíos: Biopolitics and Philosophy* (Trans. Timothy Campbell. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

disrupting or resisting the hegemony of human subjectivity.[69] Jacques Derrida, in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, claims that the animal, and more specifically the look of the animal, brings to bear the "abyssal limit of the human," the threshold across which man announces himself as such.[70] The animal further serves as an instance of "being standing in [the] place of nonbeing," "a spark in the place of nothingness" —descriptions that might just as easily be applied to the machines and automata that encourage the moniker artificial life (66). The most interesting and relevant example of this larger undertaking, however, is Akira Lippit's consideration of the convergence between technology and wildlife. Cinema, he suggests in what amounts to an emblem of the medium's uncanniness, "is like an animal."[71] Moreover, cinema commemorates and incorporates the natural order that technology displaces. Animals within the cinematic medium become a form of language or expression in their own right. That is, the environment or discursive space provided by the cinematic medium preserves "the speechless semiotic of the animal look" (197). I will shortly return to how animals and technology coalesce in what Lippit terms animetaphor. Before doing so, however, I entertain two of the most prevalent, and perhaps all too literal, instances of what is described as the animal look. Lest we forget the basis of this parallel, *The Island* reminds us in two rather ephemeral

---

[69] Examples of this field include Carey Wolf's *Zoontologies*: *The Question of the Animal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2003) and Matthew Calarco's *Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida* (New York: Columbia University Press, 200). The convergence of these two fields has more recently coalesced around the term post-human. Compare N. Katherine Hayles's *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) and Wolf's *What is Posthumanism? (*Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010). Or, more simply, consider Haraway's most recent title, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

[70] Derrida, Jacques. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Ed. Marie-Louise Mallet. Trans. David Wills. New York: Fordham University Press, 2008: 12.

[71] Lippit, Akira Mizuta. *Electric Animal: Toward A Rhetoric of Wildlife*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000: 186.

moments of admission. At the conclusion of the film, Laurent (Djimon Hounsou), the leader of a private security force contracted to detain the fugitive clones, prevents Merrick from murdering Jordan, revealing a branding that he had received as the son of a Burkinabé rebel. The mark, he explains, is meant to distinguish him as biologically inferior, a subhuman in the eyes of his ethnic counterparts. A more cursory reference occurs earlier when Mac (Steve Buscemi), an employee at Merrick who has befriended Lincoln, jokes about the clone's plan to find his 'sponsor', the client who pays to have his biological copy produced. Just because someone wants to eat a hamburger, Mac quips, does not mean that they want to meet the cow. As both analogies serve to underscore, the existence to which clones and automata are confined closely resembles the bare life to which all species ranging from animals to ethnic minorities have been subject. Though these strands open as many new and difficult questions as they serve to clarify, their brief consideration nonetheless serves to conclude this chapter.

Cinema has found reason throughout its history to frequently return to the scene of animal slaughter. From the heavily symbolic sacrificial butcherings that conclude both *Strike* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1925) and *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979), to the more tangential episodes included in *Rules of the Game* (Jean Renoir, 1939) and *Roger and Me* (Michael Moore, 1989), animal slaughter has proved to be a fertile source of narrative signification.[72] The mise-en-scene of the slaughterhouse has more literally been employed in films ranging from *In the Year of Thirteen Moons* (Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1978), to *Killer of Sheep* (Charles Burnett, 1977) and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974)—each summoning an affect of abjection and ruin, albeit in very different contexts and to very different ends. The footage for which *Benny's*

[72] See also Akira Lippit's "The Death of an Animal," *Film Quarterly* Vol. 56, no. 1 (Autumn 2002): 9-22.

*Video* (Michael Haneke, 1992) is named comprises the slaughter of a pig in intimate detail. The chronic repetition of this footage no doubt serves as a meta-commentary on cinema's own infernal fascination with the scene of slaughter—the sadistic pleasure of this gaze informs both an entire cycle of exploitation films, most notably the so-called *Mondo* films, and the furtive footage circulated on behalf of organizations such as PETA; arguably, these are the two sides of a tradition that dates back to Edison's 1903 *Electrocuting an Elephant*. One of the most recent examples to rehearse this familiar scene is *Fast Food Nation* (Richard Linklater, 2006). The film is a fictional dramatization, adapted from Eric Schlosser's best selling investigation into "The Dark Side of the All-American Meal."[73] In a corollary to philosophy's recently renewed interest in the animal, Schlosser's work is representative of a growing concern about industrialized food production, specifically the way that it exemplifies the efficiency and rational logic of the factory system.[74] To be sure, the most distressing form of artificial life in light of such studies is nowhere to be found in contemporary Hollywood's various automata, but rather in the inescapable ubiquity of what have been termed 'Franken-

---

[73] Schlosser, Eric. *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal*. New York: Harper, 2004.

[74] Nichole Shukin reminds us that amongst the exemplary time-motion economies of the modern era, animal disassembly in fact serves as the primary model for both automobile assembly line and motion picture production. That is, while many have noted similarities between the Frederick Winslow Taylor and the early time-motion studies of Muybridge and Marey (as well as the more general correlation between what became known as Fordism and the Hollywood studio system), both practices were preceded by the vertical abattoirs in which carcasses moved continuously and stationary laborers repeated the same task over and over. See *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009). Also of interest here is Shukin's genealogy of the term rendering. She points out that the term has entered into the discourse of Hollywood cinema and, more specifically, computer generated special effects. Rendering in this regard concerns the amount of data processed in order to translate various algorithms into 3-D images. For instance, one recent movie boasts about the 23 million render hours that it required. Such demands are in turn met by establishing render farms or massive clusters of computer processors. As Shukin details, this recent appropriation merely redoubles the term's already euphemistic function. Just as digital rendering abstracts any link to its industrial precursor, the term itself gained currency because of its ability to deflect the violence of industrialize slaughter in particular and the logic of the assembly line more generally. Something similar can be seen in the use of the term harvest in *The Matrix* and *The Island*.

foods'. The reference names foods that have been genetically modified, however, in alluding to the monstrous progeny of Dr. Frankenstein, the term registers the general threat associated with all synthetic life forms, plant, animal and otherwise. While such labels are certain to elicit some combination of consternation, anxiety, and anger from consumers, the animals featured in all the films mentioned here are rarely if ever depicted as monsters to be feared. Instead, they often appear all too familiar, as kin demanding the viewer's empathy.

*Fast Food Nation*, the film, combines a series of vignettes that draw together different components of the industrial food system: the illegal immigrants who work in meat packing plants, the restaurant chains that both structure and dominate suburban sprawl, and the fast food executives looking for every competitive edge among others. Scenes from the abattoir itself are held in abeyance until the film's final moments. As it's structured, then, the slaughter of cattle serves as the (most) primal scene of industrial food production. It is the moment that epitomizes why one does not want to meet the cow that one otherwise so readily consumes. Two observations follow. First, it should be noted that a similar scene is featured in Dziga Vertov's *Kino-Glanz* (1924). From the market where the beef is sold the film suddenly reverses its motion and we follow the commodity backward to the abattoir from which it came. Rather than stressing the horror of this primal scene, it is as if Vertov reanimates the commodity in order to illustrate the vitality that largely remains concealed within the end product. Though certainly eliciting echoes of Marx's dancing table, Vertov foregrounds the living presence of labor in an even more literal way. That is, in contrast to the workers whose labor is necessary to disassemble the animals—and which is on elegant, if forlorn, display in the most graphic

foray into the slaughterhouse: *Blood of the Beast* (Georges Franju, 1949)—what cattle and other livestock illustrate with complete precision and poignancy is the living labor that haunts every commodity that ever makes it to market.

The second observation concerns the fact that the treatment of such livestock all too readily recalls the biopolitical situation acknowledged within films such as *The Matrix* and *The Island*. These animals are not only reduced to measurable machines and inanimate parts, but their labor is also alienated in the most extreme sense possible. It is no longer a question of their ability to produce work—horsepower per se, but instead their biological existence as a species that renders them mere commodities. This correlation is further underscored by John Berger's comment that the modern-day zoo—which in effect is nothing more than the inverse of the slaughterhouse—inexorably shares something in common with all "sites of enforced marginalization" including "ghettos, shanty towns, prisons, madhouses, [and] concentration camps."[75] Derrida further notes the violence to which animals have been subject. Comparing this violence to genocide, he observes that the annihilation of certain species is undertaken "through the organization and exploitation of an artificial, infernal, virtually interminable survival, in conditions that previous generations would have judged monstrous, outside of every presumed norm of a life proper to animals that are thus exterminated by means of their continued existence or even their overpopulation."[76] Even with this in mind, *Fast Food Nation*, like *Kino-Glanz* before it, resists advocating for the wholesale elimination of

---

[75] Berger, John. "Why Look at Animals?" in *About Looking* (New York: Vintage, 1992): 24.

[76] *The Animal That Therefore I Am*: 26. Along these lines we might also consider Martin Heidegger's troubling remark made in a lecture that would later appear as "The Question Concerning Technology": "Agriculture is now a mechanized food industry, in essence the same as the manufacture of corpses in the gas chamber and extermination camps, the same as the blockading and starving of nations, the same as the manufacture of hydrogen bombs" (Quoted in Timothy Clark's *Martin Heidegger* [New York: Routledge, 2002]).

industrial food production. Rather both films suggest that it is necessary to confront the process of production in order to critically understand and appreciate the value of labor. If, as the more recent film makes clear, it is increasingly difficult to grasp this process because the entire system of food production has become exponentially more complicated, more intricate—or should we simply say biopolitical—then perhaps it is necessary to take an alternate angle of approach in order to illustrate the totality of what's at stake. Considering the regimented existence of today's livestock (in which they live entirely indoors, are cultivated on aberrant diets, and infused with various drugs and remedies), these animals are clearly more synthetic than natural.[77] One of the most controversial practices in this regard is the use of "animal protein" as an inexpensive food additive designed to increase the mass of livestock. In more literal terms, cattle are commonly fed fat from slaughtered cattle. While this practice has drawn fire because of its possible links to 'Mad Cow' disease, the principle itself is nothing new—it's most vivid instantiation may be found in George Romero's series of *Dead* films, most notably *Dawn of the Dead* in which zombies, surely the most arresting satirist ever conceived, roam aimlessly amongst the material goods of a generic suburban mall. Consuming their own dead labor, such animals blur the boundary between the living and the dead. You are indeed what you eat. Likewise, then, humans are as artificial or synthetic as the manufactured food products they consume.

---

[77] In the case that we might believe vegetarians are somehow exempt from this analysis we would do well to recall Michael Pollan's account in *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History in Four Meals* (New York: Thorndike Press, 2006) whereby processed foods as well as the primary cash crop from whence they are fabricated are every bit as manufactured as the livestock discussed here. Perhaps appropriate to the biopolitical era, Pollan describes the crop in question, corn, as a commodity without qualities—quantity is the only thing that counts (59). Like Schlosser in *Fast Food Nation* (at least with regard to the rise of IBP, the meatpacking company that pressed the industry to relocate west of Chicago), Pollan's investigation of industrialized agriculture leads him straight to Iowa—the 'no place' of our contemporary food system to borrow a phrase from Noélie Vialles's *Animal to Edible* (Trans. J. A. Underwood. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

Throughout the many scenes of slaughter, the animal's look is simultaneously important and obscure. At the conclusion of *Fast Food Nation*, for example, as we see several cows lead into the kill zone, there is never a sustained emphasis on their gaze. Nonetheless, their reluctant and darting glances are enough for us to intuit the animals' understanding of their own impending death. To further understand this moment of identification it is finally necessary to address the equally extensive trope of animal companionship. It is impossible to even begin listing, as with the tradition of animal slaughter, films that appeal to this convention, though it may be safe to assume that the gaze of the animal inevitably appears in every one. If one film were to suffice, it might be *Umberto D* (Vittorio De Sica, 1952). The dog's look virtually single-handedly prevents the old man from committing suicide. This in turn evokes Emmanuel Levinas's short text, "The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights," in which he recounts his time as a Jewish prisoner of war in Nazi Germany.[78] Whereas interactions with anyone outside of the prison simply reaffirmed their subhuman status—that "we were no longer part of the world"—Levinas describes a wandering dog that the prisoners named Bobby who barks with delight as they came and went each day. "For him, there was no doubt that we were men." And the same can be said of Flick in *Umberto D*. While our understanding of the cow's understanding may be undone by the reassurance that it is only an animal, many of the animal companions featured throughout narrative cinema have demonstrated greater sentience in refusing to recognize the arbitrary and artificial distinctions that society uses to render human life less than human. Descartes likens animals to machines precisely because they lack a soul. In these instances, however, there is evidence of a reversal, one

[78] Levinas, Emmanuel. "The Name of a Dog or Natural Rights" in *Difficult Freedom*, trans. Sean Hand (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

which Derrida has had occasion to discuss at length.[79] The soul that is supposed to be intrinsic to man is more clearly manifest in the reflective gaze of the animal-other. In what might be mistaken for anthropomorphism, the recognition of an animal's recognition causes interiority and exteriority to coincide, rendering the distinction between animal and human meaningless.

For John Berger, the animal is the original metaphor. Lippit goes further contending that the animal is a living metaphor, a metaphor made flesh—this is what he terms animetaphor (165). Because the "animal brings to language something that is not a part of language," the animal is a foreign presence, "a metaphor that originates elsewhere" (166). Lippit compares animals to photographs because both provide beings without subjectivity. Cinema, then, serves as a virtual repository in which the material and immaterial are no longer bound. Automata, as Daniel Tiffany has shown, serve as a similar kind of metaphor, not only because of their affinity with animals, but because historically they have functioned as a material model for invisible matter with correlates in both lyric poetry and atomic physics.[80] In the films I have examined, whether as metaphors for commodities or the cinema itself, automata most forcefully call into question the distinction between life and artificial life. In seeing that commodities and cinema among others have a kind of life of their own, automata are no longer in opposition to life but a metaphor for life. As Derrida details in "White Mythology," metaphor is what he calls a philosopheme. "The consequences of this are double and contradictory." As such, metaphor can no longer be considered external to philosophy

---

[79] As the title indicates, Derrida goes to length to recast Descartes' famous formulation: "I think, therefore I am."

[80] Tiffany, Daniel. *Toy Medium: Materialism and Modern Lyric*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000: 52.

and, yet at the same time, philosophy cannot properly engage its own internal features. As a result,

> there is no properly philosophical category to qualify a certain number of tropes that have conditioned the so-called 'fundamental', 'structuring', 'original' philosophical oppositions… one would have to posit that the sense aimed at through these figures is an essence rigorously independent of that which transports it, which is already philosophical thesis, one might even say philosophy's unique thesis, the thesis which constitutes the concept of metaphor, the opposition of the proper and nonproper, of essence and accident, of intuition and discourse, of thought and language, of the intelligible and the sensible.[81]

If automata serve along the same lines—as a metaphor that both frames western civilization in general and holds a particular currency within contemporary debates—then it amounts to what Herman Rapaport identifies as a "disseminative conjunction." The automaton cannot be reduced to a singular concept. It is symptomatic of a temporal and conceptual disruption. That is, this metaphor brings together what is near with what is far.[82]

---

[81] Derrida, Jacques. "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy" in *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982: 229.

[82] Rapaport, Herman. *Heideger and Derrida: Reflections on Time and Language*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989: 41.

# CONCLUSION
# UNCANNY HOLLYWOOD

Recent scholarship has recast contemporary Hollywood as part of a neo-baroque paradigm. Echoing an earlier movement within art, architecture, and music, Hollywood cinema is characterized by its extravagance, its capacity for spectacle, and an attachment to ornamental details as its structuring aesthetic principle. In its initial configuration, the baroque functioned as a cultural corollary to the Counter-Reformation, or more broadly speaking, a period of collusion between Church and State amid overarching aims of absolutism. In its current resurgence, aesthetic practices are once again tied to specific shifts in social and economic conditions. For Angela Ndalianis, features such as polycentric seriality and the proliferation of labyrinthine intertextuality in contemporary entertainment "are the result of the rise of conglomeration, multimedia interests, and new digital technology."[1] While Ndalianis generally applauds these attributes, they dovetail not only with more pessimistic accounts of postmodernity but also with an underlying sense of disorientation which, as I suggested at the outset of this study, is fundamentally tied to the uncanny.

The two decades under analysis here (1990-2010) are distinguished by a number of industrial practices that intensify the alienating conditions that inhere in capitalist society. The exponential growth of ancillary and foreign markets resulted in an industry increasingly diffuse in its exhibition channels and, simultaneously, disjointed by new platforms, technologies, and peripheral byproducts. As the entertainment industry

---

[1] Ndalianis, Angela. *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004): 17.

consolidated, a small group of strategically integrated media conglomerates leveraged these developments and increased their overall control of the market. The consolidation of power was further augmented by the acquisition of independent studios and distributors, ensuring that the mounting pressures of product differentiation would play out within an entirely homogenous commercial aesthetic. While these transformations serve as the material backdrop defining contemporary Hollywood, it has been my argument that the overarching alienating economic conditions that they belie are legible within the films produced during this period, both through a thematic attachment to various uncanny tropes and, more specifically, through the narrative and discursive maneuverings that are necessary in order to reconcile traces of the uncanny with Hollywood's commercial and ideological imperatives.

Whereas the tropes used to organize each of the four chapters provide an occasion for analyzing different aspects of the uncanny and exploring overlapping theoretical concerns, the films analyzed throughout the dissertation go beyond the objectives of each individual chapter and provide a representative cross-section of contemporary Hollywood cinema. In the introduction I described the films discussed in the first two chapters as emblematic of a kind of middle ground. Conversely, these films might be considered peripheral insofar as they are neither among the most financially successful nor the more critically acclaimed films produced over this period. The significance of these films lies instead in their strategic recourse to novel formal and thematic concerns. Sometimes described in terms of puzzle films, David Bordwell chronicles the propensity for zones of indeterminacy within the 1990s proliferation of "paradoxical time schemes, hypothetical futures, digressive and dawdling action lines, stories told backward and in loops, and

plots stuffed with protagonists."[2] However, as evident in the examples *Adaptation* and *The Prestige*, unreliable narration and other unconventional devices are neither disruptive nor fundamentally alienating, but rather vestiges of economic circumstance, gimmicks simultaneously designed to ensure product differentiation in a saturated media market and encourage repeated viewings through subsequent exhibition windows. Just as recent instances of the doppelgänger occasion intricate, and even flamboyant, narrative experiments ultimately compatible with the demands of commercial and aesthetic norms, the second chapter examines several films hedging between the spectacle of formal innovation and the burden of cultural resonance. As the final two chapters move on to Hollywood's more recognizable poles, films distinguished by various awards such as *American Beauty* in chapter three and the special effects driven blockbuster in chapter four, my concern remains the tenuous balance between novelty and familiarity, innovation and convention, complexity and simplicity. The dynamic interaction between these countervailing aims results in an underlining undecidibility or ambiguity that individual films are always at pains to suppress. In making the subsequent incongruities and contradictory reversals that permeate these films one of the cornerstones of this study I have attempted to elucidate the way contemporary Hollywood symptomatically registers the industrial basis of its production as well as the broader economic circumstances that inform capitalist society as we currently know it.

In addition to serving as a representative cross-section of contemporary Hollywood, the films considered here are linked by more tacit similarities such as growing anxieties about the nature of representation and, more specifically, Hollywood's affinity for what has variously been characterized as allusionism, self-reflexivity, and

[2] *The Way Hollywood Tells It*: 73.

intertextuality, which will be further discussed below. In terms of both articulating Hollywood's symptomatic resonance and its thematic commonalities I have relied on a mode of interpretive analysis. That is, I have analyzed various emblematic texts, interrogating their narrative and discursive construction, deciphering their implicit meanings and connotations, while also diagnosing their relationship to broader cultural, economic, and historical developments. Although I would not necessarily equate this undertaking with deconstruction in any strong sense, there is some degree of resemblance especially insofar as I am largely concerned with teasing out and explicating the "warring forces of signification within the text itself."[3] Furthermore, in accordance with Gayatri Spivak's account, I have aimed to "take apart, to produce a reading, to open the textuality" of these Hollywood films placing particular emphasis on the moments that are undecidable or uncanny in terms of their own apparent "system of meaning."[4] Without necessarily replicating Derrida's exact methodology, I have invoked his work throughout much of this project mainly because it is germane to developing the uncanny as a theoretical concept but also because, more tangentially, it merits serious consideration both for the purpose of analyzing popular cinema and for rethinking the central debates within film theory. As the other major cornerstone of this project, the uncanny has also provided an opportunity to return to Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, examining fundamental principles such as castration anxiety and repetition compulsion as well as how these concepts develop over the course of Freud's work and how they are enlisted by subsequent theorists and related critical discourses. Overall, the purpose of mounting an

---

[3] Johnson, Barbara. "Translator's Introduction," *Dissemination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981): xiv.

[4] Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Translator's Preface," *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974): xlix.

explicitly theoretical analysis of contemporary Hollywood has been not only to develop an expanded genealogy of the uncanny but also to explore the unusual and unexpected parallels between theory and popular culture. As François Cusset has recently shown, the academy like the culture industries inevitably serves as an agent of dissemination and though they differ widely in method and effect, evidence of such strange bedfellows illustrates the need to scrutinize the dynamic relationship between seemingly inexorable disparities.[5]

To return to my earlier discussion and now conclude with the neo-baroque, Sean Cubitt builds on the foundation established by Ndalianis to provide a more critical formal analysis of contemporary Hollywood.[6] In doing so, he identifies several pronounced incongruities. For example, the proliferation of supernatural motifs coincides not only with the broad fetishization of science and technology but also with an escalation of religious fundamentalism. In both cases, the contradictory beliefs are ultimately complementary. Just as technology facilitates these supernatural worlds, their narratives revolve around a predetermined and absolute distinction between good and evil that easily lends itself to doctrinaire moral agendas. In another incongruity, contemporary Hollywood continually emphasizes the importance of individuality while simultaneously exalting the benefits of media convergence, an increasingly interconnected environment in which everything is infinitely interchangeable and individuals are immersed in perpetual connectivity.

---

[5] Cusset, François. *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States* (Trans. Jeff Fort. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2008): 262.

[6] Cubitt, Sean. "The Supernatural in Neo-Baroque Hollywood," *Film Theory and Contemporary Hollywood Movies* (Ed. Buckland, Warren. New York: Routledge, 2009): 47-65.

For Cubitt, these thematic or cultural incongruities are paralleled by formal shifts that go beyond what David Bordwell qualifies as mere 'intensification'.[7] While the neo-baroque generally adheres to the parameters of classical narrative cinema, it also exploits available technical advantages to the point of altering the system's formal principles. Cubitt, for example, suggests that the use of moving or navigating shots instead of an establishing shot result in fundamentally less coherent spatial relations. He additionally notes that the vertical axis is used in a way that compounds this confusion. The aggregate effect of these and other formal features is an ersatz and indecipherable space that engulfs the spectator, "much as the old baroque drew the faithful into rapt contemplation of immense *trompe l'oeil* ceilings" (Cubitt 52). The necessarily disorienting effect of this immersive experience has its corollary in the conflicting forces that shape contemporary Hollywood, not only the divergent pull of consolidation and globalization but also the simultaneously centrifugal sway of seriality and the centripetal inertia of intertextuality. Together with the new and distorted order of spatial-temporal relations evident within Hollywood cinema, these forces reveal a fundamental instability, an abyss of absolute disorder that the baroque acknowledges while also attempting to suppress.

Though there are certainly intriguing overlaps between these accounts of the neo-baroque and the uncanny, more substantial points of intersection are relatively circumstantial. The one correspondence worth elaborating further concerns the intricate or labyrinthine intertextuality identified by Ndalianis. Without using that precise term, each chapter explores an underlining or residual self-reflexivity within Hollywood cinema. As introduced by Freud, the double quickly converges with the logic of duplication, division, and repetition as it informs nearly every aspect of psychoanalytic

[7] See Part II in *The Way Hollywood Tells It*.

theory. Derrida, in turn, links this double logic with writing, mimesis, and, representation more generally. Film theorists such as Bazin and Kracauer, akin to Derrida, applaud the power of the cinematic image to both maintain fidelity to the original while also surpassing or dislocating it. In this regard, the appearance of doppelgängers within contemporary Hollywood—or even more oblique references to duality—tacitly recalls the double logic inherent within cinematic representation and all technologies of reproduction. This reference is often made explicit through theme or narrative as in *Adaptation,* in its self-indulgent account of a Hollywood screenwriter, and in *The Prestige,* where magic and performance metonymically stand in for cinematic spectacle.

The chapters that follow similarly elicit concerns about cinema's formal basis through a combination of thematic, narrative, and discursive elements. In the case of the double, these concerns are accentuated and embodied through the figure of the double, a virtual redoubling within the diegesis of the anxieties and contradictions that permeate and inform the medium as a whole. Conversely, trauma and the undead are both unrepresentable. As a result, it is instead their lack of presence that serves as the structuring principle. In both chapters, various instances of the mise-en-abyme appear as symptomatic features stemming from this underlining dissymmetry. The flashback devices used in films about war trauma draw a corollary between the perpetually receding traumatic primal scene and the flashback image itself. In, for example, *In the Valley of Elah*, the trauma experienced in Iraq is literally rendered as video footage recorded on a soldier's cellular telephone. Although there are copious instances in which Hollywood explicitly depicts the undead, *American Beauty* provides a particularly interesting case study because of the way Lester Burnham's status as such remains transparent except

through a series of marginal disruptions. And once again it is the appearance of video footage within the diegesis that illustrates the importance of framing already evident through the subtle dissonance between the sound and image, plot and narrative, and the thematic play between interiority and exteriority.

In contrast, the final chapter harks back to the double in that automata converge with the technologies used to render virtual life forms, a reminder or reiteration that cinema itself has long been considered a form of (artificial) life. It is also in these films that Hollywood most clearly recalls the baroque. The epic blockbusters driven by special effects such as *Terminator 2* and *Lord of the Rings* are indeed amongst the most exuberant in their technical virtuosity, the most blatant and extravagant in their efforts to enrapture viewers in overwhelming spectacle. Even in this regard, however, my notion of intertextuality differs from the sense in which Ndalianis employs it. The films discussed in each chapter inevitably refer back to themselves as images, as forms of representation, as narrative constructions, and as products of an economic system. These references are intricate and convoluted, ingrained within multiple and overlapping textual operations, and symptomatically acknowledged through recursive thematic concerns. For Ndalianis, intertextuality reflects the expansion of media and cultural literacy. The ability to recognize and situate specific references not only provides pleasure in its own right but engenders a kind of cognitive mapping whereby viewers fortify and expand their grasp of popular culture. In my own sense, Hollywood's ubiquitous intertextuality is neither entirely deliberate or effectual. Consequently, not all references are easily extrapolated or parlayed into pleasurable knowledge. In my account, intertextuality not only requires more critical attention, but divulges an inexplicable inward force, the abyss embedded

within every mise-en-abyme that both enables and betrays the production of meaning. As Cubitt notes, the stylistic excess and proliferation of meaning fueled by the baroque goes hand-in-hand with the consolidation of power (50-51). Signs of the abyss, as a result, coincide with rigorous efforts to suppress or contain them, typically through the establishment of a highly structured and formulaic set of overarching conventions.

The slippery dynamic between the excesses of the baroque and its social function epitomizes a similar challenge faced in accounting for the uncanny. Whereas the baroque, at least now, is established as an artistic style, the uncanny, as Freud notes at the outset of his 1919 essay, represents a more tenuous and elusive aesthetic offshoot concerned with feelings of "repulsion and distress" as opposed to the "beautiful, attractive and sublime" (*U* 219). While I have organized each chapter around tropes drawn from Freud's essay, evidence of these tropes within individual texts is not taken as explicit evidence of the uncanny. That is to say, textual examples of the double, war trauma, the undead, and automata bring the uncanny to the surface through their thematic concerns. However, the various operations that symptomatically evoke these concerns simultaneously work to conceal and suppress their attendant anxieties and therefore ultimately nullify any explicit or lasting sense of uncanniness. Unlike the contradiction that simply divides the baroque as an aesthetic enterprise from the context of absolutism, the paradoxical result with regard to contemporary Hollywood is that its films are uncanny precisely insofar as they are not uncanny. The manner in which uncanny tropes and their symptomatic textual incongruities are superseded by aesthetic, economic, and ideological normalcy serves to further highlight this paradoxical state of affairs. If the uncanny inheres within contemporary Hollywood cinema, it is not, then, in spite of but because of its sanguine

familiarity, its ability to surmount or suppress any sign of anything fundamentally unfamiliar.

In this regard, I'm suggesting that Hollywood cinema functions as a kind of cultural and ideological home front and it is precisely in this homely function that it is always also uncanny. As paradoxical as this may sound, there are several cases that support similar claims. The most basic account can be found in Freud's etymology, which as I pointed out serves as a more precise conceptual definition of the uncanny. Because Freud is unable to delineate the uncanny on its own accord, he turns to its opposite, *heimliche,* only to discover a structural slippage between the antonyms whereby one is "a direct outgrowth of the other."[8] Namely, there is already an internal difference within *heimliche* that both dissolves and redoubles the difference between it and its counterpart, *unheimliche*. In a very different context, Walter Benjamin identified the commercial arcades built throughout the early nineteenth century as the architectural locus of modernity precisely because of the way they blur oppositions such as inside and outside, material and imaginary. Variously referring to these structures as "interior boulevards," "a world in miniature," and the "intoxicated interpenetration of street and residence," Benjamin believed that the nineteenth century fascination with such enclosures belied a latent desire to turn to the outside, "to blast a specific era out of the homogenous course of history."[9] Elisabeth Bronfen provides a more germane example in her analysis, *Home in Hollywood*, illustrating the ways in which efforts to circumscribe an imaginary place of belonging always coincide with dislocation, exile, and

---

[8] Vidler, Anthony. *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992): 23.

[9] Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999.

displacement.[10] Employing a psychoanalytic model whereby the subject is driven to return to an originary state, this desire is doomed to fail and films featuring successful homecomings are inevitably haunted and uncanny.

The clearest parallel, however, can be found in the work of Martin Heidegger who, like Benjamin, enlisted a wide-ranging architectural rhetoric in order to address what he identified as the underlining rootlessness or homelessness of contemporary existence. Throughout his remarks, home is generally referred to as analogous with presence or metaphysics. While this space is treated as itself alienating, it also "veils a more fundamental and primordial homelessness." In which case, reminiscent of Freud's account of *heimliche*, "To be at home in such a space is precisely to be homeless."[11] Mark Wigley continues his analysis of Heidegger's rhetoric with two key observations. First, the reason for the term home per se is that it connotes the most primitive or fundamental division between inside and outside. This line "acts as a mechanism of domestication," the means of establishing proximity, immediacy, nearness, in other words, the definitive characteristics of presence (Wigley 104). Second, the same line that renders an enclosed space simultaneously produces its opposite, an unimaginable abyss. Insofar as the home conceals this abyss, the abyss already infiltrates it. "In this way, that which is most familiar becomes unfamiliar. The house is no longer the paradigm of presence." And instead, "The ostensible realm of proximity, immediacy, nearness, and so on becomes a realm of extreme detachment" (Wigley 117). For Heidegger, the project of metaphysics is to establish a stable ground, a secure house that denies its own essence. As

---

[10] Bronfen, Elisabeth. *Home In Hollywood: The Imaginary Geography of Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

[11] Wigley, Mark. *The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida's Haunt* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993): 98.

a corollary, I'm claiming that Hollywood systematically produces an overriding sense of homelessness by repressing the traces of homelessness that surface within its own formal and narrative construction. While Hollywood perpetually domesticates its own uncanny basis, such efforts, as Freud long ago realized, only ensure its perpetual return.

The apparent convergence between alienation and familiarity suggests a potential stalemate of sorts. I would argue, however, that this is not at all the case. Hollywood's paradoxical status provides a productive opportunity not only to analyze the formal operations and symptomatic admissions that betray the all-out effort at domestication but also to question the role of economic and industrial conditions as they aim to preserve Hollywood in its traditional guise. With regard to contemporary Hollywood, I have suggested that the formal maneuverings within the films analyzed here are at least partially the result of the intensifying pressures of commodification, the disorienting and divergent interests of consolidation and globalization. At this point, it is also worth recalling that at the outset I implied that Hollywood's uncanniness is closely linked to the untimely. Even as contemporary Hollywood is a product of these historically specific developments and its thematic concerns address current social and cultural issues, commercial cinema on the whole bears a very different relationship to history. Benjamin noted throughout his arcades project that, "hell is not something that awaits us, but this life here and now," likening modernity to an infernal repetition divorced from historical progress (*Arcades* 473). Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri describe 'Empire' as an all-encompassing regime that suspends history while presenting itself as "permanent, eternal, and necessary."[12] Guy Debord describes the spectacle as, "the reigning social organization of a paralyzed history, of a paralyzed memory, of an abandonment of any

[12] Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri. *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000: 11.

history founded in historical time, [it] is in effect a false consciousness of time."[13] It is perhaps not entirely incidental that one of the most emblematic terms of contemporary Hollywood is 'time shifting'. The term originally referred to the possibility of using a videocassette recorder to watch a television program at a time other than its scheduled broadcast. With the exponential rise of home video, even as the literal practice of time shifting would decline, the term can be used to more generally characterize an era in which entertainment is decontextualized, removed both in terms of exhibition and reception from any kind of historical framework. The irony is that the adjective contemporary in the formulation contemporary Hollywood implies not only some kind of distinct periodization but the immediacy of the current moment, historical presence in its strongest sense. It is difficult to say what might come after contemporary Hollywood, but strangely enough, at least for now, contemporary seems to be without end precisely because it has been drained of any historicity, a purveyor of the false consciousness of time.

[13] Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle* (Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Zone, 1995): 114.

# BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abraham, Nicolas and Maria Torok. *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonomy*. Trans. Nicholas Rand. Foreward by Jacques Derrida. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.

---. *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*. Ed and Trans Nicholas Rand. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life.* Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998.

Altman, Rick (ed.). "Cinema/Sound," *Yale French Studies*, No. 60 (1980).

Balio, Tino. *The American Film Industry*. Rev. ed. Masison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985.

Bass, Alan. "The Double Game: An Introduction," *Taking Chances: Derrida, Psychoanalysis, and Literature.* Eds. Joseph H. Smith and William Kerrigan. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984.

Bazin, André. *What is Cinema?* (Two volumes). Ed. and trans. Hugh Gray. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967 and 1971.

Beller, Jonathan. *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle*. Hanover, New Hampshire: Dartmouth College Press, 2006.

Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999.

---. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Trans. John Osborne. New York: Verso, 1998.

---. *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 2, 1931-1934*. Ed. Michael Jennings. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999.

---. *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 3, 1935-1938*. Eds. Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2002.

Blanchot, Maurice. *The Madness of the Day.* Trans. Lydia Davis. *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader.* Ed. George Quasha. New York: Station Hill Press, 1998.

---. *Death Sentence.* Trans. Lydia Davis. New York: Station Hill Press, 1978.

---. "The Narrative Voice," In *The Infinite Conversation*. Trans. Susan Hanson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

Bordwell, David et. al. *Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film style and mode of production to 1960*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985.

Bordwell, David. *Narration in the Fiction Film.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985.

---. *The Way Hollywood Tells It*. Berkeley: University of California, 2006.

Breuer, Josef and Sigmund Freud. *Studies on Hysteria* (1895). Trans. and ed. James Strachey. New York: Basic Books, 2000.

Bronfen, Elisabeth. *Home in Hollywood: The Imaginary Geography of Cinema*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.

Brown, Bill. "Reification, Reanimation, and the American Uncanny," *Critical Inquiry* 32 (Winter 2006).

Brunette, Peter and David Wills. *Screen/Play: Derrida and Film Theory*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989.

Buckland, Warren (ed.). *Film Theory and Contemporary Hollywood Movies.* New York: Routledge, 2009.

Buck-Morss, Susan. *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997.

Burgoyne, Robert. *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at U.S. History*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

---. *The Hollywood Historical Film.* Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008.

Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History.* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

Caruth, Cathy (ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory.* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.

Castle, Terry. *The Female Thermometer: 18th Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Castricano, Jodey. *Cryptomimesis: The Gothic and Jacques Derrida's Ghost Writing.* Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001.

Chatman, Seymour. *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990.

Chion, Michel. *The Voice in Cinema*. Ed. and trans. Claudia Gorbman. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.

Cixous, Hélène. "Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's *Das Unheimliche*."

Clover, Joshua. *The Matrix*. London: BFI, 2004.

Collins, Jo and John Jervis (eds.). *Uncanny Modernity: Cultural Theories, Modern Anxieties.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

Corrigan, Timothy. *A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture After Vietnam*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991.

Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Zone Books, 1995.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.

---. *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.

Derrida, Jacques. *Positions*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.

---. *Dissemination*. Trans. and introduction by Barbara Johnson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.

---. *Of Grammatology.* Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974.

---. *The Postcard: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*. Trans. and introduction by Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

---. *Margins of Philosophy.* Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

---. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. New York: Routledge, 1994.

---. "Living On: Border Lines," *Deconstruction and Criticism.* Trans. James Hulbert. Ed. Harold Bloom et. al. New York: Seabury Press, 1979.

---. "Economimesis," Trans. R. Klein. *Diacritics* vol. 11, no. 2 (Summer 1981): 3-25.

---. *Writing and Difference.* Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.

---. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression.* Trans. Eric Prenowitz. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

---. *Speech and Phenomena And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*. Trans. David B. Allison. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973.

---. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Ed. Marie-Louise Mallet. Trans. David Wills. New York: Fordham University Press, 2008.

Derrida, Jacques and Bernard Stiegler: *Echographies of Television.* Trans. Jennifer Bajorek. Malden, MA: Polity, 2002.

Doane, Mary Ann. "The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space," *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology.* Ed. Philip Rosen. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.

Dolar, Mladen. "'I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-Night': Lacan and the Uncanny" *October*, vol. 58 (Autumn 1991): 5 – 23.

Eisenstein, Sergei. *The Eisenstein Reader.* Ed. Richard Taylor. London: BFI, 1998.

---. *Eisenstein on Disney*. Ed. Jay Leyda. Trans. Alan Upchurch. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1986.

Elsaesser, Thomas. *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imagination.* New York: Routledge, 2000.

Felman, Shoshana and Dori Laub. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History.* New York: Routledge, 1992.

Ferenczi, Sandor et al. *Psychoanalysis and the War Neuroses*. London: International Psycho-Analytic Press, 1921.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction Volume 1*. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage, 1978.

---. "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," *Foucault Reader*. Ed. Paul Rabinow. Trans. Donald Bouchard and Sherry Simon. New York: Pantheon, 1984.

Freud, Sigmund. "The 'Uncanny'" (1919), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*: Vol. XVII. Ed. and trans. James Strachey. London: Hogarth Press, 1953.

---. “On Narcissism: an Introduction” (1922), *Standard Edition:* Vol. XIV. London: Hogarth Press, 1955.

---. “Psycho-analytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia” (1911), *Standard Edition:* Vol. XII. London: Hogarth Press, 1955.

---. *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics* (1913). Trans. and ed. James Strachey. New York: Norton, 1950.

---. “Some Remarks on a Case of Obsessive-compulsive Neurosis” (1909), *Standard Edition*: Vol. X. London: Hogarth Press, 1955.

---. “Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through: Further Recommendations on the Technique of Psycho-Analysis” (1914), *Standard Edition:* Vol. XII. London: Hogarth Press, 1955.

---. *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (1916). Trans. and ed. James Strachey. New York: Norton, 1966.

---. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). Trans. and ed. James Strachey. New York: Norton, 1961.

---. *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (1926). Trans. Alix Strachey. Ed. James Strachey. New York: Norton, 1959.

---. “Fetishism” (1927), *Standard Edition:* Vol. XXI. London: Hogarth Press, 1961.

---. *Moses and Monotheism* (1939). Trans. Katherine Jones. New York: Vintage, 1955.

---. “From the History of an Infantile Neurosis” (1918), *SE XVII*.

---. “Thoughts for the Times On War and Death” (1915). *SE XVI*.

Gaudreault, André. *From Plato to Lumière: Narration and Monstration in Literature and Cinema*. Trans. Timothy Barnard. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009.

Gomery, Douglas. *The Hollywood Studio System: A History*. London: BFI, 2005.

Gordon, Avery F. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

Grosz, Elizabeth. “Ontology and Equivocation: Derrida’s Politics of Sexual Difference,” *Feminist Interpretations of Jacques Derrida*. Ed. Nancy J. Holland. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997.

Gunning, Tom. "Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations: Spirit Photography, Magic Theater, Trick Films, and Photography's Uncanny," *Fugitive Images: From Photography to Video*. Ed. Patrice Petro. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.

---. "Uncanny Reflections, Modern Illusions: Sighting the Modern Optical Uncanny," *Uncanny Modernity: Cultural Theories, Modern Anxieties*. Eds. John Jervis and Jo Collins. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

---. "Gollum and Golem: Special Effects and the Technology of Artificial bodies," *From Hobbits to Hollywood: Essays on Peter Jackson's* Lord of the Rings. Eds. Ernest Mathijs and Murray Pomerance. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006.

---. "Re-Newing Old Technologies: Astonishment, Second Nature, and the Uncanny in Technology from the Previous Turn-of-the-Century," *Rethinking Media Change: The Aesthetics of Transition.* Eds. David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003.

---. "'Animated Pictures': Tales of Cinema's Forgotten Future, After 100 Years of Films," *Reinventing Film Studies.* Eds. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams. London: Arnold, 2000.

---. "Phantasmagoria and the Manufacturing of Illusions and Wonder: Towards a Cultural Optics of the Cinematic Apparatus," *The Cinema, A New Technology for the 20th Century.* Eds. Andre Gaudreault, Catherine Russell, and Pierre Veronneau. Lausanne: Payot Lausanne, 2004.

---. "Moving Away from the Index: Cinema and the Impression of Reality," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* Vol. 18, no. 1 (Spring 2007).

Hansen, Miriam. "Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: 'The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology.'" *New German Critique* 40 (Winter 1987): 179-224.

---. "Of Mice and Ducks: Benjamin and Adorno on Disney." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 92:1 (Winter 1993): 27-61.

---. "Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street." *Benjamin's Ghosts: Interventions in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*. Ed. Gerhard Richter. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002. 41-73.

---. "Room-for-Play: Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema," *October* 109 (Summer 2004): 3-45.

---. "Benjamin's Aura," *Critical Inquiry* 34 (Winter 2008): 336-375,

Hanssen, Beatrice. *Walter Benjamin's Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

Haraway, Donna. “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature.* New York: Routledge, 1991.

Harvey, David. *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1990.

Hausmann, Vincent. “Envisioning the (W)hole World “Behind Things”: Denying Otherness in American Beauty,” *Camera Obscura* 55, Vol. 19 No. 1, 2004.

Hill, Leslie. *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary.* New York: Routledge, 1997.

Hoffmann, E. T. A. “The Sandman (1816),” *Tales of Hoffmann*. Ed. and trans. R. J. Hollingdale. New York: Penguin, 2004.

Horkheimer, Max and Theodor W. Adorno. “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception.” *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002.

Jameson, Fredric. *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971.

---. *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992.

Jay, Martin. “The Uncanny Nineties,” *Cultural Semantics: Keywords of Our Time.* Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998.

Jentsch, Ernst. “On the Psychology of the Uncanny.”

Kamuf, Peggy. “Deconstruction and Feminism: A Repetition,” *Feminist Interpretations of Jacques Derrida*. Ed. Nancy J. Holland. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997.

Kittler, Friedrich. “Romanticism—Psychoanalysis—Film: A History of the Double,” *Literature, Media, Information Systems.* Trans. Stefanie Harris. Ed. John Johnston. New York: Routledge, 1997

---. *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter.* Trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999.

Kofman, Sarah. “The Double is/and the Devil: The Uncanniess of The Sandman.” *Freud and Fiction*. Trans. Sarah Wykes. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991.

Kozloff, Sarah. *Invisible Storytellers: Voice-Over Narration in American Fiction Film.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.

Kracauer, Siegfried. *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997.

---. *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*. Trans. and ed. Thomas Y. Levin. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995.

Lacan, Jacques. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function, as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," *Écrits: A Selection*. Trans. Bruce Fink with Héloïse Fink and Russell Grigg. New York: Norton, 2002.

Laplanche, Jean and J.-B. Pontalis. *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Norton, 1973.

Lerner, Paul. *Hysterical Men: War, Psychiatry, and the Politics of Trauma in Germany, 1890 – 1930.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003.

Leslie, Esther. *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant-Garde.* New York: Verso, 2002.

Levi, Primo. *Survival in Auschwitz.* Trans. Stuart Woolf. New York: Touchstone, 1996.

Lewis, Jon (ed). *The New American Cinema*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1998.

---. *The End of Cinema as We Know It: American Film in the Nineties*. New York: New York University Press, 2001.

Leys, Ruth. *Trauma: A Genealogy.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

Linville, Susan E. "'The *Mother* of All Battles': *Courage Under Fire* and the Gender-Integrated Military," *History Films, Women, and Freud's Uncanny.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004.

Lippit, Akira Mizuta. *Electric Animal: Toward A Rhetoric of Wildlife*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

---. *Atomic Light (Shadow Optics*). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2005.

---. "The Only Other Apparatus of Film (A Few Fantasies About Différance, Démontage, and Revision in Experimental Film and Video)," *Derrida, Deleuze, Psychoanalysis*. Eds. Gabriele Schwab and Erin Ferris. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.

Lukacher, Ned. *Primal Scenes: Literature, Philosophy, Psychoanalysis*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986.

Lukács, Georg. *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. Trans Rodney Livingstone. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1971.

Maltby, Richard. *Hollywood Cinema*. Second Ed. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003.

Maria Remarque, Erich. *All Quiet on the Western Front.* Trans. A. W. Wheen. New York: Ballantine Books, 1982 (originally 1928).

Marx, Karl. *Capital, Volume 1.* Trans. Ben Fowkes. New York: Vintage Books, 1977.

Mehlman, Jeffrey. *Revolution and Repetition: Marx/Hugo/Balzac*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977.

Metz, Christian. "*Trucage* and the Film." Trans. Françoise Meltzer. *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 3, no. 4 (Summer 1977): 657-675.

Miller, Toby et. al. *Global Hollywood*. London: BFI, 2001.

Morin, Edgar. *The Cinema, or the Imaginary Man.* Trans. Lorraine Mortimer. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.

Muller, John P. and William J. Richardson (eds.). *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988.

Mulvey, Laura. *Fetishism and Curiosity*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996.

---. *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*. London: Reaktion Books, 2006.

Ndalianis, Angela. *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004.

Neale, Steve and Murray Smith (eds). *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*. New York: Routledge, 1998.

Nichols, Bill. *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.

Penley, Constance. "Time Travel, Primal Scene, and the Critical Dystopia," *Close Encounters: Film, Feminism, and Science Fiction.* Eds. Constance Penley, Elisabeth Lyon, Lynn Spigel, and Janet Bergstrom. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.

Peucker, Brigitte. *Incorporating Images: Film and the Rival Arts.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995.

Pietz, William. "Fetishism and Materialism: The Limits of Theory in Marx," *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse.* Eds. Emily Apter and William Pietz. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993.

Prince, Stephen. "True Lies: Perceptual Realism, Digital Images, and Film Theory." *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (Spring 1996), 27 – 37.

---. *A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood Under the Electronic Rainbow, 1980-1989*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.

Radstone, Susannah (ed.). "Trauma and Screen Studies: Opening the Debate." *Screen* 42:2 (Summer 2001). 190 – 193.

---. "Screening Trauma: *Forrest Gump*, Film and Memory," *Memory and Methodology*. Ed. Susannah Radstone. Oxford: New York, 2000.

Rank, Otto. *The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study*. Trans. and ed. by Harry Tucker, Jr. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press,

Rapaport, Herman. *Heideger and Derrida: Reflections on Time and Language*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989.

---. *The Theory Mess: Deconstruction in Eclipse.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.

Rickels, Laurence A. *Aberrations of Mourning: Writing on German Crypts*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988.

Royle, Nicholas. *The Uncanny*. New York: Routlege, 2003.

Rutsky, R. L. *High Techné: Art and Technology from the Machine Aesthetic to the Posthuman.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

Schatz, Thomas. "The New Hollywood." *The Film Cultures Reader*. Ed. Graeme Turner. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Shklovsky, Viktor. *Theory of Prose.* Trans. Benjamin Sher. Elmwood Park, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990.

Short, Sue. *Cyborg Cinema and Contemporary Subjectivity.* New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005.

Shukin, Nichole. *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

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

---. *Male Subjectivity at the Margins.* New York: Routledge, 1992.

Sjogren, Britta. *Into the Vortex: Female Paradox in Film.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006.

Sobchack, Vivian (ed.). *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event.* New York: Routledge, 1996.

Spadoni, Robert. *Uncanny Bodies: The Coming of Sound Film and the Origins of the Horror Genre*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Displacement and the Discourse of Woman," *Feminist Interpretations of Jacques Derrida*. Ed. Nancy J. Holland. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997.

Stewart, Garrett. *Framed Time: Toward a Postfilmic Cinema*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

---. "Digital Fatigue: Imaging War in Recent American Film" *Film Quarterly* Vol. 62, No. 4 (Summer 2009): 45-55.

Tasker, Yvonne. "Soldiers' Stories: Women and Military Masculinities in *Courage Under Fire*," *The War Film.* Ed. Robert Eberwein. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005.

Thompson, Kristin. *Storytelling in the New Hollywood: understanding classical narrative technique.* Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999.

Tiffany, Daniel. *Toy Medium: Materialism and Modern Lyric*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.

Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Trans. Richard Howard. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975.

Tucker, Robert (ed.). *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Second ed. New York: Norton, 1978.

Vidler, Anthony. *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1992.

Wasko, Janet. *Movies and Money: financing the American film industry*. Norwood, NJ: ABLEX, 1982.

Wasko, Janet. *Hollywood in the Information Age: beyond the silver screen*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1995.

Weber, Samuel. *The Legend of Freud*. Expanded Ed. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000.

Westwell, Guy. *War Cinema: Hollywood on the Front Line.* London: Wallflower, 2006.

White, Hayden. "The Modernist Event," *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event.* Ed. Vivian Sobchack. New York: Routledge, 1996.

Wigley, Mark. *The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida's Haunt*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993.

Wolfreys, Julian. *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny and Literature*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002.

Wood, Gaby. *Edison's Eve: A Magical History of the Quest for Mechanical Life.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002.

Wyatt, Justin. *High Concept: movies and marketing in Hollywood*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994.