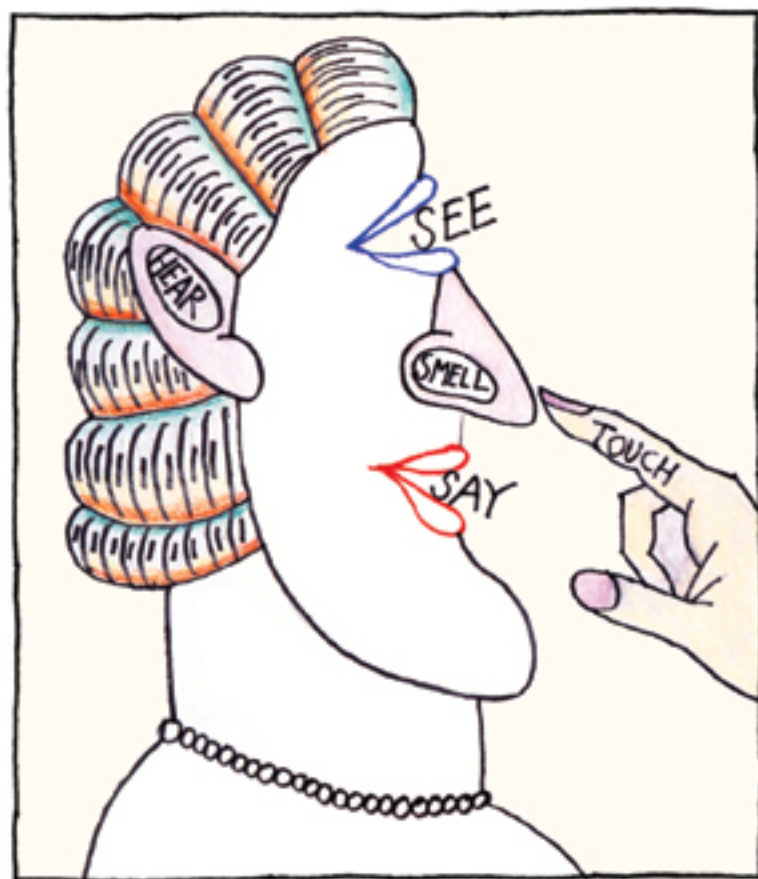


Carnal Thoughts

EMBODIMENT AND MOVING IMAGE CULTURE



VIVIAN SOBCHACK

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Embodiment and Moving Image Culture

Vivian Sobchack

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For Steve Alpert—who insisted that I dance . . .

Western philosophy has betrayed the body; it has actively participated in the great process of metaphorization that has abandoned the body; and it has denied the body. The living body, being at once “subject” and “object,” cannot tolerate such conceptual division, and consequently philosophical concepts fall into the category of the “signs of non-body.”

HENRI LEFEBVRE, *The Production of Space*

Thought and sensibility take on a new dimension, in which every drop of sweat, every movement of muscle, every quick-drawn breath becomes the symbol of a story; and as my body reproduces the particular gait of that story, so does my mind embrace its meaning.

CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS, *Tristes Tropiques*

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Carnal Thoughts

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Five of the twelve essays in this book have been revised and expanded from earlier published English-language versions. In the order in which they appear in the present volume, these are “Scary Women: Cinema, Surgery, and Special Effects,” in *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations*, edited by Kathleen Woodward (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 200–211; “The Scene of the Screen: Envisioning Cinematic and Electronic ‘Presence,’” in *Materialities of Communication*, edited by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and K. Ludwig Pfeiffer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 83–106; “Beating the Meat / Surviving the Text, or How to Get Out of this Century Alive,” in *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk: Cultures of Technological Embodiment*, edited by Mike Featherstone and Roger Burrows (Lon-

don: Sage, 1995), 205–14; “Is Any Body Home? Embodied Imagination and Visible Evictions,” in *Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media, and the Politics of Place*, edited by Hamid Naficy (New York: Routledge, 1999), 45–61; and “Inscribing Ethical Space: 10 Propositions on Death, Representation, and Documentary,” *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 9, no. 4 (fall 1984): 283–300.

Introduction

The object . . . [is] to describe the animation of the human body, not in terms of the descent into it of pure consciousness or reflection, but as a metamorphosis of life, and the body as “the body of the spirit.” —MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY, *Themes from the Lectures at the Collège de France, 1952–1960*

This is, perhaps, an “undisciplined” book, informed as it is by my multidisciplinary grounding and interests in film and media studies, cultural studies, and—an oddity in the United States—existential philosophy. Nonetheless, however undisciplined, the essays brought together in *Carnal Thoughts* are not unruly. Indeed, whatever their specific subject matter and inflection, they share a single overarching theme and emerge from a single—albeit quite open—method.

The major theme of *Carnal Thoughts* is the embodied and radically material nature of human existence and thus the lived body’s essential implication in making “meaning” out of bodily “sense.” Making conscious sense from our carnal senses is something we do whether we are watching a film, moving about in our daily lives and complex worlds, or even thinking abstractly about the enigmas of moving images, cultural formations, and the meanings and values that inform our existence. Thus, whether exploring how we are oriented spatially both off and on the screen or asking about what it means to say that movies “touch us,” whether considering the ways in which technology from pens to computers to prosthetic legs alter the shape of our bodies as well as our lives or the difference between the “visible” and “visual” in an image-saturated culture, or whether trying to think through the “reality” of certain screen images or the way in which our aesthetic and ethical senses merge and emerge “in the flesh,” all the essays in this volume are focused on the *lived body*. That is, their concern is not merely with the body as an abstracted object belonging always to someone else but also with what it means to be “embodied” and to live our animated and metamorphic existences as the concrete, extroverted, and spirited subjects we all objectively are. First and foremost, then, I hope the essays in *Carnal Thoughts* “flesh out” and contribute a descriptive gravity (if also an occasional levity) to the now

extensive contemporary literature in the humanities focused objectively (but sometimes superficially) on “the body.” The focus here is on what it is to *live* one’s body, not merely *look* at bodies—although vision, visibility, and visibility are as central to the subjective dimensions of embodied existence as they are to its objective dimensions. In sum, the essays in *Carnal Thoughts* foreground embodiment—that is, the lived body as, at once, both an objective *subject* and a subjective *object*: a sentient, sensual, and sensible ensemble of materialized capacities and agency that literally and figurally makes sense of, and to, both ourselves and others.

In concert with this overarching theme, *Carnal Thoughts* adopts a method and critical practice guided by existential phenomenology. As philosopher Don Ihde characterizes it, existential phenomenology “is a philosophical style that emphasizes a certain interpretation of human *experience* and that, in particular, concerns *perception* and *bodily activity*.”¹ Indeed, existential phenomenology is philosophically grounded on the carnal, fleshy, objective foundations of subjective consciousness as it engages and is transformed by and in the world. Thus phenomenological inquiry focuses on the phenomena of experience and their meaning as spatially and temporally embodied, lived, and valued by an objective subject—and, as such, always already qualified by the mutable specificities and constraints of history and culture. In this sense embodiment is never a priori to historical and cultural existence. Furthermore, counter to an ahistorical and acultural idealism, the phenomena of our experience cannot be reduced to fixed essences; rather, in existence they have provisional forms and structures and themes and thus are always open to new and other possibilities for both being and meaning. Thus, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the philosopher whose focus on embodiment transformed transcendental (or constitutive) phenomenology into existential phenomenology, tells us that “the greatest lesson of the [phenomenological] reduction is the *impossibility* of a complete reduction.”² Instead of seeking essences, then, a phenomenological approach seeks, in a given case, the meaning of experience as it is embodied and lived in context—meaning and value emerging in the *synthesis* of the experience’s *subjective* and *objective* aspects.³

1. Don Ihde, *Technology and the Lifeworld: From Garden to Earth* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 21.

2. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “What Is Phenomenology?” trans. John F. Banner, *Cross Currents* 6 (winter 1956): 64.

3. For those readers unfamiliar with the history, philosophy, and method of phenomenology (both transcendental and existential), see Herbert Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965). For elaboration of existential phenomenology in particular see David Carr, “Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Incarnate Consciousness,” in *Existential Philosophers: Kierkegaard to Merleau-Ponty*, ed. George Alfred Schrader Jr. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), 369–429. For a gloss on and demonstration

Given both my choice of theme and method, as the essays in *Carnal Thoughts* accumulate in their descriptions and interpretations of embodied experience, it is my hope that their weight and occasional gravity demonstrate how the very nature of our embodied existence “in the flesh” lays the concrete foundations for a *materialist*—rather than idealist—understanding of *aesthetics* and *ethics*. That is, what I hope arises from the volume as a whole is an appreciation of how our own lived bodies provide the material premises that enable us, from the first, to sense and respond to the world and others—not only grounding the logical premises of aesthetics and ethics in “carnal thoughts” but also charging our conscious awareness with the energies and obligations that animate our “sensibility” and “responsibility.” This is a bottom-up emergence of aesthetic and ethical sense as it is written by carnal experience on—and as—our bodies rather than a top-down and idealist imposition on them. In this regard, although the essays that follow focus on particular (and sometimes personal) instances and experiences, these instances are used to open up (rather than close down) our understanding of our more general and always social entailments with others—and, indeed, to suggest the intimate and materially consequential bonds we have (whether we deny or embrace them) with all others and all things.

If the overarching aim of *Carnal Thoughts* is to contribute to a description of, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, “the animation of the human body” and “the body as ‘the body of the spirit,’” this aim must be put into context. As noted, “the body” has been a major focal point for scholars in contemporary humanities and cultural studies. Nonetheless, more often than not, the body, however privileged, has been regarded primarily as an object among other objects—most often like a text and sometimes like a machine. Indeed, even in overt criticism of the ways in which the body has been objectified and commodified in our contemporary image-conscious and consumer culture, many scholars tend to try to redeem the body, as Thomas Csordas writes, “without much sense of bodiliness in their analyses.” Such a tendency, he continues, “carries the dual dangers of dissipating the force of using the body as a methodological starting point, and of objectifying bodies as things devoid of *intentionality* and *intersubjectivity*. It thus misses the opportunity to add sentience and sensibility to our notions of self and person, and to assert an added dimension of *materiality* to our notions of culture and history.”⁴ Thus, Csordas notes, contemporary scholars tend to “study the *body* and its transformations while still taking *embodiment* for granted,” but “this distinction between the body as either an empirical thing

of phenomenological method see Don Ihde, *Experimental Phenomenology: An Introduction* (New York: Paragon, 1979).

4. Thomas J. Csordas, introduction to *Embodiment and Experience*, ed. Thomas J. Csordas (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 4 (emphasis added).

or analytic theme, and embodiment as the existential ground of culture and self is critical.”⁵ Hence the need to turn our attention from the body to embodiment.

Embodiment is a radically material condition of human being that necessarily entails both the body and consciousness, objectivity and subjectivity, in an *irreducible ensemble*. Thus we matter and we mean through processes and logics of sense-making that owe as much to our carnal existence as they do to our conscious thought. Furthermore (and responding to the occasional critique of phenomenology as aiming toward a too facile—and “happy”—adequation of consciousness and bodily being), the irreducibility of embodied consciousness does not mean that body and consciousness, objectivity and subjectivity, are always synchronously entailed or equally valued in our intent or intentionality or that our body and consciousness—even at their most synchronous—are ever fully disclosed each to the other. Furthermore, they are not, in a given experience, necessarily equally valued—sometimes body and sometimes consciousness preoccupy us, and—as in the reversible but differently weighted senses of our existence as “objective subjects” and “subjective objects”—one may hold sway over the other. In sum, as Gary Madison writes: “The perceiving subject is itself defined dialectically as being *neither* (pure) consciousness *nor* (physical, in itself) body. Consciousness . . . is not a pure self-presence; the subject is present to and knows itself only through the *mediation* of the body, which is to say that this presence is always mediated, i.e., is indirect and incomplete.”⁶

Given that the irreducible ensemble that is the lived body is dialectical and, as Madison says, “never succeeds in coinciding with itself” and thus never achieves a fixed identity,⁷ all of the embodied experiences I describe in the essays to follow are not engaged with a naïve sense of experience as “direct.” That is, however direct it may seem, our experience is not only always mediated by the lived bodies that we are, but our lived bodies (and our experience of them) is always also mediated and qualified by our engagements with other bodies and things. Thus, our experiences are mediated and qualified not only through the various transformative technologies of perception and expression but also by historical and cultural systems that constrain both the inner limits of our perception and the outer limits of our world. Indeed, as I hope the phenomenological investigations in *Carnal Thoughts* will demonstrate, direct experience is not so much direct as it is

5. Ibid., 6.

6. Gary Brent Madison, “Did Merleau-Ponty Have a Theory of Perception?” in *Merleau-Ponty and Postmodernism*, ed. Thomas Busch (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), 94.

7. Gary Brent Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1981), 25.

transparent—either because we are primarily intending toward the world and our projects and not toward our modes and processes of perception and expression or because we are historically and culturally habituated so that what is given to us in experience is taken for granted rather than taken up as a potentially open engagement with the world and others.

Thus, although phenomenology begins its descriptions with an experience as it seems directly given in what is called the “natural attitude” (better called the “naturalized attitude”), it then proceeds to “unpack” and make explicit the objective and subjective aspects and conditions that structure and qualify that experience as the kind of meaningful experience it is. Furthermore, although it may begin with a *particular* experience, its aim is to describe and explicate the *general* or *possible* structures and meanings that inform the experience and make it potentially resonant and inhabitable for others. That is, although in historical and cultural existence particular experiences may be lived idiosyncratically, they are also, and in most cases, lived both generally and conventionally—in the first instance, according to general conditions of embodied existence such as temporality, spatiality, intentionality, reflection, and reflexivity and, in the second instance, according to usually transparent and dominant cultural habits that are not so much determining as they are regulative. In sum, a phenomenological description and interpretation, on the one hand, attempts to *adequate* the objective and subjective aspects of a given embodied experience and, on the other, also seeks to acknowledge their historical and cultural *asymmetries*. This means attending not only to the *content* and *form* of embodied experience but also to its *context*. The proof of an adequate phenomenological description, then, is not whether or not the reader has actually had—or even is in sympathy with—the meaning and value of an experience as described—but whether or not the description is resonant and the experience’s structure sufficiently comprehensible to a reader who might “possibly” inhabit it (even if in a differently inflected or valued way).

Given its emphasis on “thick description,” phenomenological inquiry is also often consciously attentive to and reflexive about its own use of language. Certainly, this is meant to achieve philosophical precision (sometimes I spend a very long time trying to choose just the right preposition because of the specific relational and spatial structure it articulates). However, this attentiveness to language is also aimed at really listening to and reanimating the rich but taken-for-granted expressions of vernacular language and of rediscovering the latter’s intimate and extensive *incorporation* of experience. As Paul Ricoeur writes: “Ordinary language . . . appears to me . . . to be a kind of conservatory for expressions which have preserved the highest descriptive power as regards human experience, particularly in the realms of action and feelings. This appropriateness of some of the most

refined distinctions attached to ordinary words provides all phenomenological analysis with linguistic guidelines.”⁸ Hence, in this volume, my tendency to draw not only from specialized philosophical or theoretical works but also from everyday speech, film reviews, advertisements, jokes, self-help manuals, and other popular sources written for and understood by a mass audience. These sources not only foreground the vitality of ordinary language but also suggest a certain common or general understanding of certain embodied experiences—and point to their broad resonance even as they never strike exactly the same chords in every body.

In regard to both language and experience it is my hope that the essays in *Carnal Thoughts* are relatively user friendly, as contrasted with my earlier—and (in my view) historically necessary polemic—*The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*. Not only do I avail myself of an array of popular sources, but also many of the essays in the volume are grounded explicitly in representations of autobiographical and/or anecdotal experience (mine as well as others). Nonetheless, these representations of personal or “subjective” experience—and the bafflement they sometimes express—provide the beginning of inquiry rather than its end. Indeed, grounding broader social claims in autobiographical and anecdotal experience is not merely a fuzzy and subjective substitute for rigorous and objective analysis but purposefully provides the phenomenological—and embodied—premises for a more processual, expansive, and resonant materialist logic through which we, as subjects, can understand (and perhaps guide) what passes as our objective historical and cultural existence. Thus, as Rosi Braidotti writes, it is “particularly important not to confuse [the] process of subjectivity with individualism or particularity: subjectivity is a socially mediated process. Consequently, the emergence of new social subjects is always a collective enterprise, ‘external’ to the self while it also mobilizes the self’s in-depth structures.”⁹

Although many of my colleagues assume that both my interest in embodiment and my use of the autobiographical anecdote began with my experience of cancer surgeries, the amputation of my left leg about ten years ago, and my subsequent incorporation of the prosthetic leg that will make its presence known in several of the following essays, this is not the case. As a female in our culture and often brought up short by the inconsistent and often contradictory ways in which my material being was regarded and valued (or not), I have always found “being a body” not only strange but also

8. Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny, Kathleen McLaughlin, and John Costello (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 321–22.

9. Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Malden, MA: Blackwell/Polity Press, 2002), 7.

relative. Hence my turn to existential phenomenology with its focus on embodiment and the structure of experience—and this long before the amputation and the novel bodily experiences that followed, which, given my curiosity, made my body (not “the” body) a very real (not virtual) laboratory for phenomenological inquiry. In such extreme circumstances I was able to reflect not merely on my pathological situation but also to use it—as phenomenologists often do—to reflect on the usually transparent and normative aspects of being embodied, learning as much during my recovery from my (supposedly) present leg as from my (supposedly) absent one. Even the words *present* and *absent* were up for interrogation—their taken-for-granted representations inadequate to my actual lived-body experience. In this regard (if in another context) Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt are apposite:

In the larger perspective of the cultural text, representations . . . cease to have a settled relationship of symbolic distance from matter and particularly from human bodies. The way bodies are understood to function, the difference between men and women, the nature of the passions, the experience of illness, the border line between life and death, are all closely bound up with particular cultural representations. The body functions as a kind of “spoiler,” always baffling or exceeding the ways in which it is represented.¹⁰

If, however, the body in general always baffles and “exceeds” its representation, then it is also the case—and this became very clear to me as I was recovering and trying to find the words to express the concrete particularity of my experience to myself as well as others—that “my body” (and “yours” insofar as I or you speak or write of it) can sometimes find symbolic expression adequate to—and even extending—its experience. Hence, I would suggest, the contemporary turn to autobiography and anecdote can serve not only as a spoiler but also, dare I say, an antidote to objective accounts of the body that don’t tell us what we really want to know about our living of it.

Finally, to the bodily accounts themselves! *Carnal Thoughts* is divided into two sections: “Sensible Scenes” and “Responsible Visions.” Although all the essays in the volume deal with the lived body as it experiences technical and technological mediation of some kind (often but not always cinematic), these sections are inflected differently. The first focuses on the exploration of certain experiential scenes of representation and “conundrums” that become intelligible and find their provisional resolution not in abstraction but in the lived body’s concrete and active “sense-ability.” Emphasis in this section is on how our carnal thoughts make sense and sensibility not only of the lived body’s subjective sense perception but also of its objective repre-

10. Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 15.

sentations. In “Breadcrumbs in the Forest: Three Meditations on Being Lost in Space,” I explore various forms of spatial perception and the embodied experience of being spatially disorientated to ask whether there are different shapes and temporalities of “being lost” that constitute different existential experiences and meanings—in our culture, particularly in relation to gender. “Scary Women: Cinema, Surgery, and Special Effects” pursues the scene of aging at a time when our bodies are subject to transformation not only by the techniques of surgery but also by the technologies of cinema. In these first two essays movies are not the focal point of inquiry although they do serve as illustration and reference and, I hope, are in turn illuminated by the larger worldly and fleshy context for which they have been mobilized. The next two essays move more particularly toward the screen, specifically dealing with cinema. “What My Fingers Knew: The Cinesthetic Subject, or Vision in the Flesh” attempts to understand the embodied structures that allow for more than a merely cognitive or rudimentary knee-jerk cinematic sensibility and attempts to demonstrate how cinematic intelligibility, meaning, and value emerge carnally through our senses. “The Expanded Gaze in Contracted Space: Happenstance, Hazard, and the Flesh of the World” explores the ambiguous and ambivalent nature of the cinematic gaze, not only as it has been theorized in philosophy but also as it has been specifically embodied and enworlded with others and things in the extraordinary materialist metaphysics articulated in the films of Krzysztof Kieslowski. The last two essays in the section explore the phenomenology of what has been called “the signifying scene”—particularly as this is mediated by the literal incorporation of various expressive and perceptual technologies that function not only as tools but also as spatially, temporally, and materially transformative. “Susie Scribbles”: On Technology, *Technē*, and Writing Incarnate” takes its title from an electronic “writing” doll bought at Toys R Us and looks at the physical activity and techniques of writing, as well as at writing instruments whose various materialities transform not only our consciousness of space and time but also the expressive sense and shape of our bodies. The last essay in the section, “The Scene of the Screen: Envisioning Photographic, Cinematic, and Electronic ‘Presence,’” continues this exploration, turning particular attention to our embodied engagement with the perceptual technologies of photographic, cinematic, and electronic imaging and how they have significantly altered both our sense of the world and our sense of ourselves.

The second section, “Responsible Visions,” is also grounded in the lived body’s sense-making capacities but is focused on those experiences and representations that tend to evoke our carnal “response-ability” and constitute the material foundations for ethical care and consciousness and, perhaps, responsible behavior. Again, the emphasis is on the concrete lessons taught us by our “carnal thought.” “Beating the Meat / Surviving the Text, or How to Get Out of the Century Alive” is a critique of those who,

in the contemporary critical moment, view the body solely as a text and thus gleefully “disabuse” it, disavowing the lived body’s vulnerability to pain and wishing away—often through writing—the mortality that gives us gravity. “Is Any Body Home? Embodied Imagination and Visible Evictions” continues this exploration of the contemporary objectification of the body but, through consideration of three case studies, connects it to an ethically impoverished sense of vision whose accountancy is only in the visible. My cancer surgeries, amputation, and prosthetic leg make their inaugural appearance in these first two essays but are foregrounded in the third. “A Leg to Stand On: Prosthetics, Metaphor, and Materiality” looks at the recent “sexiness” of the prosthetic as metaphor and attempts to responsibly—and materially—reembody and reground it in a phenomenological description of both the prosthetic’s figural and literal use—not only by me but by other cultural critics and amputees. The next two essays are related, the one a further extension of the other. “Inscribing Ethical Space: Ten Propositions on Death, Representation, and Documentary” is interested both in what it means to “represent” death on the screen, particularly in documentary, and in how—and in what modalities—such representation also represents the “ethical gaze” of the filmmaker and “charges” an ethical response from the spectator. Indeed, the second and related essay is called “The Charge of the Real: Embodied Knowledge and Cinematic Consciousness” and, picking up where the previous one left off, focuses on this sense of the real in both documentary and fiction and the way it is constructed not only from extracinematic knowledge but also from a “carnal knowledge” that radically charges it with response-ability. The last essay in *Carnal Thoughts* culminates not only the volume but also, and in many ways, the book’s emphasis on the way in which we cannot set ourselves apart from—or above—our materiality. “The Passion of the Material: Toward a Phenomenology of Interobjectivity” most explicitly demonstrates that we are both—and irreducibly—objective subjects and subjective objects and that it is only by virtue of our radical materiality that any transcendent sense we have of the beauty of things or obligation to others can emerge and flourish. In this regard *Carnal Thoughts* could be said to be demonstratively polemical. That is, by looking closely at what we material beings are and at how we sense and respond to the world and others (never directly, purely, or “nakedly”), I hope that our image-conscious and visible culture might reengage materialism at its most radical and come to recognize as precious both the grounded gravity and transcendent possibilities not only of our technologies and texts but also of our flesh.

In sum, it is my hope that the essays in *Carnal Thoughts* play some small part in making explicit the embodied premises that we implicitly live in a process of constant transformation and that they encourage a deeper and more expansive regard for the incredibly transcendent material that we are.

PART ONE

Sensible Scenes

Breadcrumbs in the Forest

Three Meditations on Being Lost in Space

*It was dark night when they woke up, and Hansel comforted his little sister. "Gretel," he said, "just wait till the moon rises; then we'll see the breadcrumbs I strewed and they'll show us the way home." When the moon rose, they started out, but they didn't find any breadcrumbs, because the thousands of birds that fly around in the forests and fields had eaten them all up. Hansel said to Gretel: "Don't worry, we'll find the way," but they didn't find it. —"HANSEL AND GRETEL," *Grimms' Tales**

What does it mean to be embodied in the multiple and shifting spaces of the world—not only the familiar spaces that seem of our own making and whose meanings we take up and live as “given” but also those spaces that seem to us strange or “foreign” in their shape and value?

When I was a child, I always thought north was the way I was facing. Sure then in my purposeful direction, there was a compelling logic to this phenomenological assumption. Bringing into convergence flesh and sign, north conflated in my child’s consciousness the design of my body and the design of an atlas page. Except when I was dancing or, as a child will, walking backwards, I moved in the direction my eyes were looking—in front and ahead of me. Although I was aware of the space behind and to the sides of me, it was the space in front of me—the space I could see—that was clearly privileged, my whole body directed toward it in the accomplishment of my childish projects. I realize now, of course, that printed maps were also responsible for confusing me. The little compass on every atlas page was composed so that north enjoyed a larger or bolder arrow than did the other directional markers, and this was always pointed in a similar direction as the forward-looking trajectory of my eyes as I read. Maps were positioned on the page so that the important spaces of the world were read “in front” and “ahead” of my body just as they were in my child’s world. As a directional concept, an orientational point, north thus resonated with the naïve faith I had in my own sure direction, in the confidence I had that I would eventually encompass and conquer the world that lay before me. Indeed, this arbitrary and culturally determined semio-logic echoed and confirmed my carnal phenomeno-logic and gave it an (im)proper name: north. As I got a little older and less confident, however,

north became increasingly unstable. As I began to recognize it as all-encompassing, it became disorienting and useless. Everywhere I turned and looked was north, and I started to feel that something was dreadfully wrong.¹

When I was a child, before north became strange to me—or, more precisely, estranged from me—because of the carnal logic that grounded and guided me, I almost never felt lost in the world, even if I often felt lost among directional signs. Occupying the sure and selfish ground of my own interests in the world, existing as the center of my own universe, I nearly always knew where I was and where I was going. With north as the way I was facing, the world radiated out not merely around me but from me.² Others might think I was lost, but—as I, at the age of four, hotly told my mother, who once called the police because she couldn’t find me—“I knew where I was all the time!”³ Such absolute confidence seems a far cry from my confusion now as an adult when I stand before the floor map in the University Research Library and try to figure out where I am relative to its signal pronouncement: “You are here.”⁴ Distrustful after north betrayed me, I never developed a sure sense

1. As a child I also had a problem with “right” and “left” since my “sides” didn’t enjoy the hierarchical privilege of my “front.” Although it seemed clear that north was always in front of—and never in back of—me, the designations “right” and “left” (as well as east and west) seemed arbitrary, directions one had to remember rather than orientations one lived. So, regularly, I wore mnemonic Band-Aids on the fingers of my left hand to guide me through the tasks of my childish life—like putting my right hand over my heart (on the left side) to say the Pledge of Allegiance at school. See, for elaboration of this typical phenomenon, Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), esp. chap. 4, “Body, Personal Relations, and Spatial Values,” 34–50. Tuan writes that regardless of their culture or spatial schemas, “[p]eople do not mistake prone for upright, nor front for back, but the right and left sides of the body as well as the spaces extrapolated from them are easily confused. In our experience as mobile animals, front and back are primary, right and left are secondary” (42).

2. On this anthropocentric and carnal logic see Tuan, *Space and Place*, who writes: “In a literal sense, the human body is the measure of direction, location, and distance” (44). He further points out that “spatial prepositions are necessarily anthropocentric, whether they are nouns derived from parts of the human body or not,” that “folk measures of length are derived from parts of the body,” as in “an arm’s length” or “feet,” as are measures of capacity such as “a handful” or “an armful” (45–47).

3. Certainly, children get lost and, more important, feel lost. But, if they’re independent and confident, they may often feel it’s their parent or caretaker who has gotten lost rather than themselves. This latter experience (which marks both a child’s confidence in his or her own location and a displacement of his or her fear of getting lost) is wonderfully expressed in “Disobedience,” a poem in A. A. Milne’s *When We Were Very Young* (London: Methuen, 1924; Puffin Edition, 1992), 32–35. The poem tells of a three-year-old who warns his mother “never to go down to the end of town” without him—and, when she does, she gets “lost, or stolen or strayed!”

4. As an adult woman (and getting ever older), apparently I am not alone in feeling disoriented in front of such maps. Age and gender and the perceived relation of objective markers to one’s body emerge as significant variables in spatial processing according to Jocelyn B. Aubrey, Karen Z. H. Li, and Allen R. Dobbs, “Age Differences in the Interpretation of Mis-

of direction or geography, far too aware that both are arbitrary systems of locating oneself in the world. Negotiating unfamiliar worldly space is, for me, frequently an anxious state, always mutable and potentially threatening. Thus, the “being lost” I want to explore here is not equivalent to the pleasurable and aimless meandering of the *flâneur*, whose very lack of a specific destination enables him always to get there.⁵

What follows, then, is a palimpsest of three phenomenological meditations on “being lost” that draws data from personal experience and a variety of secondary sources to thematize the “lived geography” of being disoriented in worldly space. Less exhaustive than suggestive, these meditations are meant to foreground (each differently) the spatiotemporal and affective shape of experience and to demonstrate that both our normative systems of spatial orientation and their descriptive vocabularies tend to be extremely limited, however practically useful. There is much more to be said about losing oneself in worldly space than can be referenced—or remedied—by recourse to the abstract objectivity of a map.

BEING (DIS)ORIENTED

“Omar!” the old man croaked. “Do you know the way? Are you a guide? . . . There are jinn in Ténéré, Omar, bad spirits. If a jinn gets into your head, you don’t know east from west. The jinn spins your head around. They make you think you know the way when you don’t.” —MICHAEL ASHER, *Impossible Journey*

aligned ‘You-Are-Here’ Maps,” *Journal of Gerontology* 49 (1994): 29–31. Their essay abstract reads: “‘You-Are-Here’ (YAH) maps, common in shopping malls and office buildings, are difficult to interpret if not aligned with their surroundings. Younger and older adults made direction decisions after viewing simple maps representing a university campus. YAH arrows were either upright and coordinated with viewer position or contra-aligned 180°. Contra-alignment caused subjects, especially older adults, to take more time and be less accurate. Women were slower on contra-aligned maps, although no less accurate, than men. The need to mentally realign such incongruent maps in order to make correct direction decisions can cause serious difficulty for older adults trying to navigate through large, complex environments” (29).

5. My gender selection here is purposeful and references the *flâneur* of the nineteenth century, described thus by Anke Gleber: “Surrounded by visual stimuli and relying on the encompassing power of his perception, the *flâneur* moves freely in the streets, intent solely on pursuing [a] seemingly unique and individual experience of reality” (“Women on the Screens and Streets of Modernity: In Search of the Female *Flâneur*,” in *The Image in Dispute: Art and Cinema in the Age of Photography*, ed. Dudley Andrew [Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997], 55). Certainly, there is a history of the *flâneuse*, but it seems to me much more literally “grounded”; see Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). A more postmodern and still male form of *flânerie* is expressed in a line used in not one but two contemporary science fiction films—*The Adventures of Buckaroo Bonzai: Across the 8th Dimension* (W. D. Richter, 1984); and *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome* (George Miller, 1985): “Wherever you go, there you are.”

In *Space-Perception and the Philosophy of Science* Patrick Heelan describes what he calls the “hyperbolic” curved space of our lived and embodied experience and shows how it is incommensurable with the spaces “engineered” by the Euclidean geometry and Cartesian perceptions of perspectival space that have dominated Western culture since the Renaissance.⁶ According to Heelan we perceive and navigate both kinds of space, although never at once—even if, in the near mid-distance, the “shape” of both spaces is isomorphic. (Hence, perhaps, my childish mistake about north as simultaneously grounded in my body and motivating a Cartesian sign system.) Exploring the hermeneutic and context-dependent character of embodied visual perception, Heelan’s project is to “show that, despite the fact that we perceive a visual Cartesian world, our natural mode of unaided visual perception is hyperbolic: mediating our everyday perception of a Cartesian world is the carpentered environment that we have learned to ‘read’ like a ‘text’” (xiii). In this regard, as James Barry Jr. points out, it is important to realize that “as the latest of post-Renaissance perceivers,” our quotidian perception is “not so much in what we take it to be as in what we overlook or deny in it” and that the “geometrical approach of Renaissance perspective” was once a “new form of revelation, a new world possibility.”⁷ Thus, he reminds us (quoting Maurice Merleau-Ponty) that Renaissance perspective

is “not an ‘infallible’ device; it is only a particular case, a date, a moment in a poetic investigation of the world which continues after it.” . . . The fact that we continue to follow the historical lines drawn by this perceptual form, continue to take it as at least potentially infallible and currently applicable, is not a recognition of its historical truth and power, but rather a diminution of the same. . . . The transformation of perception by technology holds as its most negative, historical possibility, the danger of entirely forgetting itself as perception and appearance.⁸

Against this normative “forgetting,” against this culturally dominant experience of “the” (rather than “our”) physical environment as Cartesian and Euclidean in visual arrangement, Heelan notes that “from time to time we actually experience it as laid out before us in a non-Euclidean visual space, in one belonging to the family known as ‘finite hyperbolic spaces.’” Unlike Euclidean visual space, the geometrical structure of visual hyperbolic space is essentially curved; thus, “scenes—real scenes—construed in such visual

6. Patrick A. Heelan, *Space-Perception and the Philosophy of Science* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983). Subsequent references will be cited in the text.

7. James Barry Jr., “The Technical Body: Incorporating Technology and Flesh,” *Philosophy Today* (winter 1991): 399.

8. Ibid. Barry is translating and quoting from the French edition of Merleau-Ponty’s “Eye and Mind,” in *L’Oeil et l’esprit* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 51.

spaces will appear to be distorted in specific ways" (28). Heelan broadly characterizes this sense of distortion in relation to the appearance of objects in various divisions of space as they are proximate to the embodied subject viewing them. In the "near zone" directly in front of the viewer "visual shapes are clearly defined and differ little from their familiar physical shapes," but on the periphery of this "Newtonian oasis, depth appears to be dilated," and "frontal surfaces appear to bulge convexly." Furthermore, "parallel lines appear to diverge, as if seen in reverse perspective" (29). Other distortions appear in the "distant zone." Rather than appearing to extend infinitely, space seems "finite, shallow in depth, and slightly concave," and "distant phenomena are experienced visually as if seen through a telephoto lens"; that is, they appear to be "closer, flatter, and with their surface planes turned to face the viewer." In addition, parallel lines "bend upward and come together to meet at a point in front of the viewer on the horizon and at a finite distance" (29). Looking at an extended horizon below eye level "such as the sea seen from the top of a cliff," the viewer "seems to be at the center of a great bowl with its rim on the horizon." An extended horizon above eye level, such as the sky, is experienced as "a vaulted structure." Finally, the "apparent size of very distant objects" in hyperbolic space is mutable and "depends on whether there are local cues and how these are construed" (31).⁹

Because Euclidean visual space is culturally normative, the terms used to describe hyperbolic space ("distortion," "optical illusion") connote aberrance from the norm—yet it is hyperbolic visual space that is grounded in the human body, its phenomeno-logic informed not only by external material forces but also by the intentional directedness of consciousness toward its objects. As Heelan puts it: "A Body defines the human subject functionally in relation to a World as the ground for an interlocking set of enviroing horizons. Being-in-the-World implies being now related to one horizon, now to another" (13). Which horizon, which system of orientation and coordination one lives, depends ultimately on what "makes sense" in a specific context. For a situation to provide "a Euclidean perceptual opportunity, . . . it must . . . be virtually populated with familiar (stationary) standards of length and distance, and be equipped with instantaneous means for communicating information about coincidences from all parts of space to the localized visual observer, wherever he/she happens to be" (51). A situation that provides "a hyperbolic perceptual opportunity" is incommensurable with the Euclidean situation in that its sense emerges precisely from the localized visual observer, wherever he/she happens to be. The visual

9. Perceptual shifts such as Heelan points to are precisely solicited by artist James Turrell's extraordinary earthwork, *Roden Crater*. For discussion of this work and excellent photos of the spatial phenomena see Calvin Tomkins, "Flying into the Light," *New Yorker*, Jan. 13, 2003, 62–71.

observer making sense in hyperbolic space, rather than relying on abstract, standardized, and stationary measures, “must . . . use the rule of congruence which . . . is embodied in the capacity of the unaided visual system to order the sizes, depths and distances of all objects in the unified spatial field of vision.” What is involved on these perceptual occasions is a “purely visual estimation” of size and distance and a reliance on “a significant local standard of length relative to which the surrounding environment could be spatially structured” (51).

Without either an abstract or local standard of measure, worldly space and the objects within it lose their meaning and become hermeneutically ambiguous, indeterminate, and disorienting. Furthermore, one begins to doubt one’s own body. Phenomenological geographer Yi-Fu Tuan describes the spatial and bodily effects of one such situation of “being lost” when neither Euclidean nor hyperbolic standards of measure are at first available:

What does it mean to be lost? I follow a path into the forest, stray from the path, and all of a sudden feel completely disoriented. Space is still organized in conformity with the sides of my body. There are regions to my front and back, to my right and left, but they are not geared to any external reference points and hence are quite useless. Front and back regions suddenly feel arbitrary, since I have no better reason to go forward than to go back. Let a flickering light appear behind a distant clump of trees. I remain lost in the sense that I still do not know where I am in the forest, but space has dramatically regained its structure. The flickering light has established a goal. As I move toward that goal, front and back, right and left, have resumed their meaning: I stride forward, am glad to have left dark space, and make sure that I do not veer to the right or left.¹⁰

Reading this passage, making sense of it with our bodies and recalling some similarly anxious disorientation, we can understand quite carnally how Hansel and Gretel, lost in the forest and darkness, must have hurried ahead—eagerly, indeed gratefully—toward the light shining from the window of the house of the wicked witch.

Similar spatial ambiguity and its permutations and resolutions are dramatically recounted by Michael Asher, a Westerner and travel writer, who became briefly lost with companions in the Sahara desert. In response to the problem of people becoming spatially disoriented and dying in the desert, he tells us that “the government had put up a series of markers” without which “it was almost impossible to travel in a straight line.” And he continues:

10. Tuan, *Space and Place*, 36. For another—and visual—version of such spatial and bodily disorientation in a forest see Tamás Waliczky’s video *The Forest* (Karlsruhe: Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie, 1993), in which there is no flickering light to stabilize space and orient the viewer.

I soon understood the need for markers. The desert we walked out into the next day was utterly featureless. . . . There was nothing at all to attract the eye but the metal flags spaced out every kilometre. It was like walking on a cloud, an unreal nebula that might cave in at any moment. Sometimes its dappling ripples looked like water, a still, untided ocean undulating to every horizon. In all that vastness there was not a tree, not a rock, not a single blade of grass.¹¹

For a solitary human being (like Tuan in the forest before he saw the flickering light), the space of this featureless desert without objects would be neither hyperbolic (with some known thing or someone else to provide local measure in terms of one's own body) nor Euclidean (with given objects known to be spaced, as were the markers, at an abstract measure of one kilometer apart). In such a contextless context "one" (the pronoun chosen precisely here) would be truly "lost in space."

Asher is not solitary, however; his companions provide him "local measure" relative to his own body, and, suddenly lost and without markers in the desert, he and they live the Sahara hyperbolically. That is, close to him, others have "intelligible" shapes and sizes, but objects, shapes, distances, and motion that are not in the "near zone" are grossly distorted:

In the afternoon we passed [a] caravan. . . . From afar the columns of [camels] seemed to stand still. They appeared to remain motionless until we came abreast of them, then they sprang out suddenly into three dimensions. It was a strange phenomenon caused by the lack of anything to mark the distance between us. . . . Then we heard the boom of engines and pinpointed two trucks in the sand. Like the . . . caravan earlier, they appeared not to be moving. Not until we passed them did they seem to accelerate into action, roaring by a mile away. Or was it 2 miles? Or even 10? There was no way to judge distance or scale in Ténéré.¹²

Asher also remarks on the difficulties of orienting oneself and moving against the featureless landscape:

I watched Marinetta once as she ran away from our caravan. . . . She zig-zagged crazily over the sand. . . . When I tried it myself I realized that without anything to fix on, it was impossible to run in a direct line. Any ripples or shadows on the surface gave the impression of relief. We found ourselves moving towards what appeared to be a mass of dunes only to find them dissolving into sandy waves a few inches high. A piece of discarded firewood could be mistaken for a camel or a tent, a blackened sardine can for an abandoned car.¹³

11. Michael Asher, *Impossible Journey: Two against the Sahara* (London: Viking, 1988), 164–65. (The epigraph for this section is located on 169.)

12. *Ibid.*, 165.

13. *Ibid.*, 166.

Everything in Asher's vision is measurable only locally, in terms of the human body and the meaningful size and order it confers on known things. Hyperbolic space, then, is primordial and subjectively lived—and, in terms of human sense-making, it precedes Euclidean abstraction and Cartesian objectivity. As Dorothea Olkowski puts it: "Lived space is not linear, it is a field and an environment. . . . [T]he primordial space of our existence is 'topological'; it corresponds to the diacritical oppositions of our perception. . . . [I]t is a 'milieu in which are circumscribed relations of proximity, of envelopment,' . . . [relations] which are not merely geometrical or cultural but are *lived*."¹⁴

Indeed, this topological space is precisely the space of a child's world *before* it and the child have been properly "disciplined" and "sized." Here it is illuminating to point to the lived difference between Euclidean and hyperbolic geometries by contrasting the model of Renaissance perspective with a child's survey of the subject/horizon/world relationship. As those of us in film studies know, much has been made of the subject's "mastery" of the world according to Renaissance perspective: the representation sets up a *triangulated* relationship with the unseen spectator positioned at the *apex* in relation to a *flat* horizon line (at which parallel lines converge). For the child, however, and for adults put in a situation with no Euclidean markers (as elaborated above), one's lived relationship to the world is body based. In this system the body is positioned in the *center* of a surrounding world; thus the horizon is not flat but radially *curved* (with parallel lines diverging in the distance).¹⁵

This is a world in which the abstraction north lies (purposefully, but deceptively) in any—and every—direction one looks. Thus, for a young child whose universe is hyperbolically curved to the radiating space of her embodied purpose, north, when it is named, becomes the direction of intent and, within this phenomeno-logic, its motility and shiftiness comprehensible. Later, of course, north's shiftiness—its "lie"—is recognized in its inherent abstraction from one's body, its arbitrary designation as a fixed and standardized direction meant to guide that body, but no longer emergent

14. Dorothea Olkowski, "Merleau-Ponty's Freudianism: From the Body of Consciousness to the Body of Flesh," *Review of Existential Psychology & Psychiatry* 18, nos. 1–3 (1982–83): 111. Olkowski's interior quotation comes from Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 210.

15. See also, in relation to the child's non-Cartesian spatial perception, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Expression and the Child's Drawing," in *The Prose of the World*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. John O'Neill (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 147–52. A wonderful and precise visual expression of the child's non-Cartesian spatial perception can be found in Tamás Waliczky's video *The Garden* (Karlsruhe: Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie, 1992).

from its purpose. Thus, for an adult whose world is normatively Euclidean and organized and directed abstractly, a return to hyperbolic space in which the measure of things is generated primordially by his or her own body and his or her contingent tasks can be disorienting, unsettling, even perilous.

LOST IN SPACE

"I don't know where we are or where we are going." —The Lost Patrol

[C]ertain circumstances . . . awaken an uncanny feeling, which recalls that sense of helplessness sometimes experienced in dreams. . . . As, for instance, when one is lost in a forest in high altitudes, caught . . . by the mountain mist, and when every endeavor to find the marked or familiar path ends again and again in a return to one and the same spot, recognizable by some particular landmark.

—SIGMUND FREUD, *"The Uncanny"*

What is the "shape" and "temporality" of being lost in worldly space? Every human experience has a phenomenological structure that emerges as a meaningful spatial and temporal form. Thus, one might well expect to find an extensive morphology of the worldly spaces in which one loses oneself articulated concretely in at least two significant "imaginary geographies": namely, American movies and Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*.¹⁶ However, in both the American cinema and the most famous collection of dreamscapes, scenes and dramatizations of being lost in the world *literally* are few and far between. With the exception of cinematic adaptations of children's fairy tales and fantasies such as "Hansel and Gretel" or travel or exploration narratives (like Asher's above), it would seem that the literal experience of "being lost" is itself generally displaced into allegory and metaphor.

Given the relative dearth of ready-to-hand representations of "being lost" in both film and Freud and wanting to find relevant data for a phenomenological "reduction" (or thematization) of sorts, I decided to try an Internet list. There I posted an inquiry asking for figurations in American cinema of being lost—with the caveat that I was not interested in accounts of the "incredible journeys" of lost dogs and cats or in allegorical or metaphorical treatments (that is, science fiction films about being lost in "outer" or "inner" space or dramas in which characters were identified or read as "existentially" or "morally" lost). Responses confirmed my intuition that, oddly (given the great interest and libidinal investment in the topic evidenced by colleagues and friends), literal and relatively sustained depictions of being lost in the cinema were scarce. Some were located in films set in non-Euclid-

16. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Avon, 1965).

ean, “uncivilized,” or “exotic” places, such as *The Lost Patrol* (John Ford, 1934), in which a British military unit gets lost in the Mesopotamian desert, and *The Comfort of Strangers* (Paul Schrader, 1991), in which a tourist couple becomes disoriented by and lost in the non-Euclidean geometry of Venice. A few others mark disorientation against an American landscape of vast empty spaces and featureless freeways: Marion Crane losing her way in the rain on the interstate until she stops forever at the Bates Motel in *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960); amnesiac Travis wandering aimlessly in the desert looking for home in *Paris, Texas* (Wim Wenders, 1984); narcoleptic Mike awakening from his seizures “on the road” and unsure of his bearings or how he got there in *My Own Private Idaho* (Gus Van Sant, 1991); a host of characters appearing and disappearing in the spatially and temporally uncoordinated road trip on *Lost Highway* (David Lynch, 1997); and, most recently, two young men named “Gerry” who get fatally lost in Death Valley in the eponymous *Gerry* (also Gus Van Sant, 2003). There have also been a small but significant number of relatively contemporary films in which central characters become literally lost in the “wilds” of the urban “jungles” of New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago, where they encounter hostile “natives” as they try to find their way home: saying something about the phenomenology of white male urban experience in the late 1980s and early 1990s are *After Hours* (Martin Scorsese, 1985), *Bonfire of the Vanities* (Brian DePalma, 1990), *Quick Change* (Howard Franklin and Bill Murray, 1990), *Grand Canyon* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1991), and *Judgment Night* (Stephen Hopkins, 1993).¹⁷ And, of course, there is *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez, 1999), which returns us to the “lost in the woods” scenario—albeit its hyperbolic spatial disorientation takes place not in

17. I thank all those colleagues on H-Film who responded to my query. Many films suggested were relevant (directly or indirectly), although most veered off into science fiction allegory, many into less concrete and spatial modes of being lost, and several were not American (my focus here). Two not mentioned in the text that are resonant in relation to my discussion are *The Brother from Another Planet* (John Sayles, 1984), an SF film but one in which there’s a scene of two tourists from Indiana literally lost in Harlem; and *Mystery Train* (Jim Jarmusch, 1989), which deals with being lost both literally and metaphorically. If one begins to speculate as to why there are fewer scenes of people literally getting lost in cinema than one might expect and why such scenes tend to be displaced into the fantastic space of SF, a primary reason might be that since the cinema, itself, is made up of bits and pieces of discontinuous and discontinuous time and space, the goal of both the cinematic apparatus and the traditional narrative is to make these fragments cohere into a coordinated geography the viewer can navigate. Evoking literal disorientation reminds cinema and the spectator to varying degrees of the cinema’s initial premises, which are incoherent. Thus, unless displaced into allegory or metaphor, long sequences of being lost in a narrative might well threaten to *undo* narrative and take us into the realm of a more materially reflexive, nonnarrative, “experimental” cinema. “Getting lost” in narrative cinema, then, tends to be a rare occurrence, marked out against our—and the character’s—“familiar”—orientation as “unusual.”

Grimm's fairy tales but in Burkittsville, Maryland. All in all, however, in terms of sustained narrative focus, the filmography of being lost in worldly space is startlingly small.

As mentioned previously, Freud was not initially helpful either. For all its emphasis on scenarios involving losing objects or missing trains or falling, to my surprise *The Interpretation of Dreams* glossed not a single one about being lost in the real spaces of the world—or, for that matter, in phantasmatic spaces. Rather, it was Freud's famous essay "The Uncanny" that ultimately provided a recounting of at least one major scenario (and form) of being lost—and it did so not through the dreamwork of a neurotic patient but through a concrete event experienced by an anxious Freud himself. In the context of introducing the notion of "involuntary repetition" as a constituent quality of the uncanny, Freud recalls a personal situation that evoked in him the "sense of helplessness sometimes experienced in dreams":

Once, as I was walking through the deserted streets of a provincial town in Italy which was strange to me, on a hot summer afternoon, I found myself in a quarter the character of which could not long remain in doubt. Nothing but painted women were to be seen at the windows of the small houses, and I hastened to leave the narrow street at the next turning. But after having wandered about for a while without being directed, I suddenly found myself back in the same street, where my presence was now beginning to excite attention. I hurried away once more, but only to arrive yet a third time by devious paths in the same place. Now, however, a feeling overcame me which I can only describe as uncanny, and I was glad enough to abandon my exploratory walk and get straight back to the plaza I had left a short while before.¹⁸

Freud's experience suggests one shape to being lost—and it is *round*. Indeed, in the vernacular we call it "going round in circles." Informed with a specific temporal dimension, the experience of going round in circles is oriented toward the *past* since one finds oneself continually revisiting and relocating there. The present seems pale in comparison, and the future extremely remote, its achievement arrested and forestalled. In this regard Freud's tale of getting lost in and returning several times to a street of "painted women" can be read not only as a tale of sexual anxiety but also as a tale that displaces anxiety of another kind: anxiety about being spatially and temporally "arrested" and stuck in place in a present become the past, about the future's foreclosure, about the literal prohibition of forward movement

18. Freud, "The Uncanny," in *Studies in Parapsychology*, ed. Philip Rieff (New York: Collier, 1963), 42. (The epigraph for this section can be found on 42–43.)

literally intended by “red lights.” (Yes, sometimes a cigar is significantly just a cigar—and a red light, a red light.)¹⁹

With its round and hermetic shape and a present tense always chasing its own tail (and tale), “going round in circles” produces a context in which purposive activity and forward momentum are sensed as futile and, in response, become increasingly desperate and frenetic in quality. Here, the comically painful—and male—nightmare of Scorsese’s *After Hours* elaborates on Freud’s experience.²⁰ Also fraught with “painted women” as objects of both male desire and fear, the film is structured as a perverse “la ronde” in which spatial disorientation and “arrest,” increasing anxiety, and the futility of frenetic activity are the keynotes. Paul Hackett, a midlevel office worker with a dull life who longs for an amorous adventure, meets a young woman in a coffee shop who invites him to hook up with her in Soho later that night. The victim of various mishaps that leave him moneyless and stranded in unfamiliar space, Paul goes “round in circles” in Soho, where streets and lives and objects interconnect, forming a hermetic space-time in which he seems desperately trapped and doomed to uncanny repetition. Indeed, the film’s structuring joke and its eventual resolution is that, in the larger scale of the narrative and the rounded and repetitive nature of his normal life, Paul ends up the next morning at the mundane office building where he (and the film) began. Like Freud, after finally finding the adventure he seeks, all Paul wants to do is go home, but—just as in Freud’s experience on the street of painted women—the comic anxiety of the film derives from the idea of being hopelessly lost “after hours” not only in space but also in the dangerous and hermetic world of one’s latent desire.

19. There is an illuminating bit of text that gives us a “mirror image” of Freud’s recurrent—and unwanted—return to the street of painted women and also involves spatial directions, brothels, and famous men. In his essay “The Image of Proust,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), Walter Benjamin reveals not only his ostensible subject but also himself when, discussing Proust’s “love of ceremony” and his resourcefulness in “creating complications,” he writes:

Once, late at night, he dropped in on Princess Clermont-Tonnerre and made his staying dependent on someone bringing him his medicine from his house. He sent a valet for it, giving him a lengthy description of the neighborhood and of the house. Finally, he said: “You cannot miss it. It is the only window on the Boulevard Haussmann in which there still is a light burning!” Everything but the house number! Anyone who has tried to get the address of a brothel in a strange city and has received the most long-winded directions, everything but the name of the street and the house number, will understand what is meant here. (207)

My gratitude to Marc Siegel for bringing this passage to my attention.

20. Also informed by male desire and its frustration in the comic mode, a provocative companion film relating the spatial disorientation of going round in circles to its literal counterpart in temporal disorientation is *Groundhog Day* (Harold Ramis, 1993).

There are other shapes to being lost than round, however, and other modalities of spatial disorientation that do not necessarily entail temporal recurrence and the past. Perhaps the most fearsome of all forms of being lost is “not knowing where you are.” Not knowing where you are is not about the loss of a future destination or the return to a previous one; rather, spatially it is about a loss of *present grounding* and temporally about being lost in the *present*. This form of being lost seems an existential condition rather than a hermeneutic problem. Its structure is perilously open rather than hermetic, its horizons indefinite, its ground unstable, and its emphasis on the vertical axis (“forward” and “backward” are not the problem, but “here” most certainly is). The shape of “not knowing where you are” is elastic, shifting, telescopic, spatially and temporally elongated; one is orientationally imperiled not so much on the horizontal plane as on the vertical. (Vertigo is often described as “the bottom falling out.”) The primary temporal dimension of this form of being lost is the present—but a present into which past and future have collapsed and that is stretched endlessly. Not knowing where you are is, in effect, the “black hole” of being lost: the experience of the unmarked Mesopotamian desert and sandstorms of *The Lost Patrol* or of the vast landscape of Death Valley in *Gerry*.

This form of disorientation and its resultant existential anxiety also may occur, however, when worldly space and time are “overmarked”—that is, when one’s present spatial and temporal orientation are overlaid and conflated with other (and equally compelling and vivid) space-times. After the great French novelist who described an unusual condition he experienced while traveling, Florentine psychiatrist Graziella Magherini points to what she has called “Stendhal’s Syndrome”: a temporary set of symptoms that feature disorientation, panic, heart palpitations, loss of identity, fear and dizziness, and beset certain foreign tourists in cities like Florence and Venice, where centuries of intensely vivid art and architecture overwhelm them and destabilize both the grounded space on which they stand and their temporal mooring in the present.²¹ “Afflicted tourists,” we are told, “usually snap back after two or three days of rest,” but “[t]he best cure is to go home.”²² Clinically, then, not knowing where you are seems to be experienced as more vertiginous than uncanny, more existentially dangerous than exotically strange, a “fugue state” that, akin to the polyphonic, interwoven, and multivalenced themes and orientational demands of its musical namesake, psychiatry

21. Graziella Magherini, *La sindrome di Stendhal* (Firenze: Ponte Alle Grazie, 1989). For brief accounts in English of Stendhal’s Syndrome see “Prey to Stendhal Syndrome,” *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 21, 1987, sec. 1, pp. 1–2; and “Tourists Turn Up Artsick in Florence,” *Los Angeles Times* (Orange County edition), Sep. 15, 1988, sec. 6, p. 6.

22. “Prey to Stendhal Syndrome,” *Los Angeles Times*, 2.

describes as “a flight from or loss of the awareness of one’s own identity, sometimes involving *wandering away from home*, and often occurring as a reaction to shock or emotional stress.”²³

In the cinema, too, we can find similar, if scarce, examples of losing one’s orientational moorings in a vertically elongated and polyphonic space-time that collapses and conflates past and future in and with what becomes a vertiginous and all-consuming present. Indeed, noted Italian horror film director Dario Argento has made a movie called *La Syndrome di Stendhal* (1996)²⁴—although the syndrome is used as little more than an inaugural device in a plot about a woman police detective who suffers from dizziness and hallucinations when exposed to “masterpieces” of art and her attempts to capture a serial rapist and murderer. At the film’s beginning we see the detective (who is from Rome) “inexorably drawn to a painting in the Uffizi gallery in Florence,” where “swooning, she collapses to the floor and dreams of actually entering the oceanic painting to swim (and caress) the fish within.”²⁵ Perhaps, however, Paul Schrader’s *The Comfort of Strangers* is more apposite, for the film not only evokes but also sustains the vertigo and existential peril of not knowing where you are, the dissolution of the very spatial and temporal grounding necessary to placing and securing one’s self-identity. Two tourists, a British couple trying to reanimate their romantic relationship by going abroad, get lost one night in the non-Euclidean, hyperbolic streets of Venice—where there seem to be no right angles, only oblique curves and indirections. After a night of wandering they are eventually “rescued” by a wealthy Venetian who, with his wife, systematically (if insanely) dislocate and dissolve the couple’s grounding and identity on a much larger, more vertiginous, and ultimately fatal scale. All about not knowing where you are, *The Comfort of Strangers* resonates in both theme and mood with echoes of Stendhal’s Syndrome. (Magherini says of her tourist patients in Florence, “the complaint is most often one of confusion and panic,” whereas in Venice, “it is depression with suicidal tendencies.”)²⁶

The spatial ungrounding and elongation of a present distended by its consumption of the past and future, the threat to the very moorings of identity itself, that characterize not knowing where you are and cause it to generate panic and vertigo can be located closer to home, however—its disorientation and distended present informed by the terrors of the American urban context and historical moment. Indeed, in several American films of the late

23. *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “fugue” (emphasis added).

24. The film was given limited release in the United States in 1999 under the English title *The Stendhal Syndrome*.

25. Marc Savlov, review of *The Stendhal Syndrome*, dir. Dario Argento, *Austin Chronicle*, Oct. 25, 1999.

26. “Prey to Stendhal Syndrome,” *Los Angeles Times*, 1.

1980s and early 1990s the terrors of being ungrounded have been enacted not only in spatial and temporal terms but also in terms of race. *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, *Grand Canyon*, and *Judgment Night* all link the disorientational panic generated by “not knowing where you are” with the disorientational panic generated by the perceived threat posed by a suddenly “disadvantaged” white male confrontation with the racialized male other.²⁷ In this regard, although its dramatization of not knowing where you are is not as temporally distended as in *Judgment Night* (where an elongated present structures and consumes the entire narrative),²⁸ *Bonfire of the Vanities* is particularly telling. Not only does the simple wrong turn that gets upper-class, white, “Master of the Universe” Sherman McCoy and his mistress lost in the South Bronx motivate the entire plot, turning Sherman’s world and existential orientational system completely “topsy-turvy,” but it also begins what is perhaps the failed satire’s only scathingly satiric—and compelling—scene. Mistakenly getting off the freeway somewhere north of Manhattan in their expensive car (a screeching announcement of radical class difference in all these films), Sherman’s mistress becomes more and more agitated in the unfamiliar streets: “Where are all the white people?” she frets. Comic bewilderment turns into something else, however, when the fearful couple in their car encounter two black youths walking on an empty street under the freeway and mistakenly believe they are going to be attacked. The scene of their confrontation is affectively charged with a vertigo and panic that leads ultimately to both the death of one of the young men and the complete collapse and dissolution of those structures and things that grounded Sherman’s complacent arrogance and warranted his supposed “mastery” of the universe. It is in this scene of literal spatial disorientation that we see—both concretely and culturally—“the bottom fall out” of Sherman’s “here” and his life. Suddenly, without warning, no longer knowing where he is, Sherman becomes lost forever.

There is yet a third form of being lost, a more mundane and less threatening form of spatial disorientation we tend to call “not knowing how to get to where you’re going.” Unlike the other two forms of being lost, its spatial struc-

27. This triadic relation of being lost, being male, and being white played out in terms of race appears earlier in a sequence in the comedy/satire *National Lampoon’s Vacation* (Harold Ramis, 1983; the film is also known as *National Lampoon’s Summer Vacation*); here, the bumbling father of a vacationing family driving across country gets lost in the inner city of St. Louis and pays a “racial other” five dollars for directions but is given for his money only directions to another “racial other” who will supposedly give him directions.

28. Not a satire, *Judgment Night* attempts to be “politically correct” about urban terrors. It displaces and inverts its barely latent fear of the racial other by providing a manifest racial mix of four suburban buddies who get lost in a “tough” section of Chicago, where, in their fancy RV, they accidentally run over the victim of a shooting and are chased by a racial mix of gang-bangers, the film’s real heavies foregrounded as Caucasian.

ture is linear and *forward-directed* toward a reachable distant point—even if both the direction that is “forward” and its intended destination cannot be precisely located. As well, and isomorphic with its spatial orientation, the temporal structure of this form is shaped by the *future*. Not knowing how to get to where you’re going tends to be experienced as neither uncanny nor vertiginous; rather, its effects seem much more mundane. This form of being lost is focused on the real possibility of pragmatic resolution. It presents itself as a hermeneutic problem rather than as a recurrent nightmare or an existential crisis, and its major affective charge tends to be frustration rather than desperation or panic. Because it is a problem that invites resolution, it is future oriented—with the future at an intentionally near but presently unreachable temporal distance. Although, as in the experience of going round in circles, this future is forestalled, unlike that experience, the past has little purchase here. Instead, temporal movement streams forward in a directed manner against an ambiguous landscape, seeking purposive release from a definite present and resolution in a determinate arrival at a specified future.

Here the comedy *Quick Change* is exemplary. Two men and a woman successfully rob a bank and, for most of the film, attempt to get to Kennedy Airport and out of the country before the police can identify and catch them. They, like Sherman McCoy, make a wrong turn in their car and end up in an unfamiliar part of the city; unlike Sherman, however, the narrative on which they embark is less one marked by panic and the dissolution of identity than it is by frustration. They are lost but not completely ungrounded; even though, at the beginning of their forestalled getaway, they don’t know where they are, their problems are experienced as primarily practical ones. Indeed, looking for the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, first they unsuccessfully ask for help from some workmen who are in the process of changing critical directional markers at an intersection; next, in a Spanish neighborhood, they ask for directions and are not understood. When they then spot a man standing near his car looking at a roadmap and stop to ask him for directions, he robs them—although he does leave the map (and their undiscovered heist money) behind. Later, and for various reasons now without a car, they hail a taxicab whose driver neither speaks English nor understands where they want to go. Finally, they end up on a public bus—where they are again forestalled by having to adhere to the inflexible rules and logic of an overly precise bus driver if they are to get anywhere; and, as Roger Ebert puts it, “when they do, it’s not where they’re going (‘I didn’t say the bus went *to* the airport. I said the bus went *to near* the airport’).”²⁹ This particular form of being lost, then, is intensely directed toward a specific endpoint, and it has an entirely

29. Roger Ebert, review of *Quick Change*, dir. Howard Franklin and Bill Murray, *Cinemanía* '94, CD-ROM (Microsoft, 1993) (emphasis added).

possible if presently unrealized future. Until the film's very satisfying resolution, where narrative and destination converge on a plane bound for the tropics, being lost in *Quick Change* is an exercise not in existential desperation or dissolution but in comic frustration.

I've drawn out here a very quick sketch of the spatial and temporal morphology, the "imaginary geography," of three primary forms of being lost in worldly space. There are surely other variants with their own phenomenology. What this brief elaboration demonstrates, however, is that the experience of being lost calls for something more than the only partial descriptions provided by recourse to the traditional coordinates of cartography or geography.³⁰ Being lost in space has a phenomeno-logic that exceeds such descriptions, even as it may normatively depend on them for both its generation and resolution.

BEING DIRECTED

After about twenty minutes and going around the same block a few times, it was clear to Mary that Tom was lost. She finally suggested that he call for help. Tom became very silent. They eventually arrived at the party, but the tension . . . persisted the whole evening. Mary had no idea of why he was so upset.

—JOHN GRAY, PH.D., *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*

"They're making a Lost in Space movie. The Robinson family is still lost. Even after thirty years, the dad still refuses to pull over and ask for directions."

—ROSIE O'DONNELL, *The Rosie O'Donnell Show*

When Freud was lost in Italy, going round in circles in the street of painted women, did he eventually ask for directions? He makes a point in his account

30. There is a subfield of geography called "behavioral geography" that uses cognitive psychology to explicate and understand human orientation in worldly space. Although many of its experiments are useful in tracing "cognitive maps" of space and the strategies and choice making used in human navigation, as well as forms of spatial disorientation, its insights do not illuminate the *values* and *affects* that inform navigation and spatial disorientation. In "Experiments in Wayfinding: Cognitive Mapping and Human Cognition" (a lecture presented to the UCLA Marschak Colloquium, Jan. 31, 1997), Reginald G. Golledge, professor of geography and director of the Research Unit on Spatial Cognition and Choice at the University of California, Santa Barbara, studied blind adults and children to explore "how route following strategies can build up a cognitive map [to] explain why cognitive maps may be fragmented, distorted, and irregular" (lecture abstract). Golledge identifies the types of "errors" that can occur in relation to navigation and thus cause spatial disorientation: "sequencing of places or route segments; route versus configural understanding; interpoint distance comprehension; locational displacement; variable place recognition; directional misunderstandings; misaligned landmarks (anchors); poor spatial integration; angle generalization; changing perspective; incorrect orientation; incorrect directional comprehension" (lecture handout). My thanks to Louise Krasniewicz for bringing this lecture to my attention.

to tell us that, once he determined its unsavory character, he “hastened to leave the narrow street” and “wandered about for a while without being directed,” only to find himself returned to the same spot. He is less forthcoming about the dénouement of his anxious adventure, and all he tells us is that he “was glad enough to abandon [his] exploratory walk and get straight back to the plaza [he] had left a short while before.” It is a truism among American women (and pop psychology books about relationships between the sexes) that men almost never ask for directions.³¹ Indeed, their whole identity seems to depend on the sense that they can get about the world on their own. Hansel takes charge of finding the way home from the forest, and Freud tells us (in passing) that he wandered “without being directed” but manages to say not a word about how he managed to find his way back to known territory. Women laugh among themselves about what seems to us a libidinal overinvestment in men’s negotiation of worldly space. We think it childish that the very idea of being lost (let alone the act of asking for directions) so threatens men’s identity that they tend to evidence what seems disproportionate defensiveness, anger, or even hysteria when they are—what must seem to them—“caught out” in a “shameful” instance of—what seems to us—minor spatial disorientation.³²

Although it has real and critical consequences in people’s actual relationships, this gender difference is so familiar as to seem comic or banal.³³

31. There is evidence that, as a cultural phenomenon, male reluctance to ask for directions is not limited to the United States. Sociologist Bernd Jürgen Warneken of the University of Tübingen, in southwest Germany, and his colleagues Franziska Roller and Christiane Pyka have noted the same phenomenon in the German context. See “Of Course I’m Sure,” *People*, Sep. 6, 1999, 135–36.

32. The gendered connection of shame to this kind of being lost or having to ask for directions is illuminated by the phenomenological sociology of shame wonderfully explicated by Jack Katz, *How Emotions Work* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). Katz speaks not only of the feelings of social vulnerability, moral incompetence, fear, and chaos that attach to and constitute shame but also of shame’s humbling effect: “When put to shame, one is cut down, forced to abandon a prior, arrogant posture” (166). Insofar as the space of the world is seen by men in a given culture as “posited” and “mastered” by them, they are socially and morally shamed by “not knowing where they are” and by having to further display this lack of knowledge by asking for directions. The humbling here is felt ontologically as it is exposed socially and emerges as “the shame of discrepancy arising from the sudden loss of all known landmarks in oneself and in the world” (167; Katz is quoting Helen Merrill Lynd, *On Shame and the Search for Identity* [New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1958], 39). Katz also makes the point that, given its passive nature, shame can only be “gotten rid of” through its transformation into other more active emotions (very often resentment and anger) or through engaging in certain “ordinary” but “ritual practices” that honor “the congruence of one’s nature and an order—any order—that is clearly moral” (167).

33. Indeed, although almost all the men I know say that they don’t have a problem asking for directions (at the same time acknowledging that most other men won’t), the phenomenon is enough of a commonplace to be a frequent subject not only of comedy (see the Rosie O’Don-

It is apposite, then, that getting lost provides a key scenario of gender conflict in many best-selling pop psychology books, among them John Gray, Ph.D.'s *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* and Deborah Tannen, Ph.D.'s slightly less condescending (and less sexist) *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*.³⁴ For Gray, if a woman acknowledges a man is lost by casually suggesting he ask for directions, she is heard by the man as saying, "I don't trust you to get us there. You are incompetent!" Better for her, he suggests, to indulge in benevolent tolerance—and silence: "Tom greatly appreciated her warm acceptance and trust."³⁵ For Tannen, the conflict engendered in this scenario can be attributed to the fact that women in our culture see the exchange of information as an acknowledgment of community, whereas men see it as an articulation of unequal power relations: "To the extent that giving information, directions, or help is of use to another, it reinforces bonds between people. But to the extent that it is asymmetrical, it creates hierarchy."³⁶ Although these analyses of the different psychic investments of men and women in getting—and appearing—lost don't seem

nell joke that is epigraph to this section) but also of advertising. Ford Motor Company published a full page ad aimed at women announcing a free copy of a booklet called "Car & Truck Buying Made Easier." The large ad headline read: "Because women aren't afraid to ask directions." Similarly, a garment tag on a brand of "Activewear for Women Only" reads: "And while it is not specifically forbidden for men to wear these garments, such misappropriation may result in a svelter form, a secure feeling of support, and an uncanny ability to ask for directions." There are also many cartoons on the subject. One shows a man saying to his male companion: "Do you realize that if Columbus was a woman we'd never have been discovered? She would have been willing to *ask* directions to Asia!" Another shows Moses leading his people through the desert as a woman behind him says: "We've been wandering in the desert for forty years. But he's a man—would he ever ask for directions?" A joke in a similar vein asks the question: "Why does it take one million sperm to fertilize one egg?" The answer: "Because they refuse to stop and ask for directions." Two more recent cartoons are inflected by new scientific and technological developments. Both show a couple in a car; in one, the male driver says to the woman beside him: "Because my genetic programming prevents me from stopping to ask directions—that's why!" In the other a woman says to her grim-looking male companion: "Are you telling me you won't even ask the computerized navigational system for directions?" The joke has even turned up in the recent children's film *Finding Nemo* (Disney/Pixar, 2003), when its lost CGI animated male and female fish protagonists, Marlin and Dory, find themselves in nihilistically dark waters; faced with the possibility of being able to ask directions from a single lurking but suspicious fishy figure, Marlin keeps shushing Dory, saying they'll find the way themselves, until Dory, exasperated, asks, "What is it with men and asking for directions?" (My gratitude to Victoria Duckett, Chen Mei, Louise Krasniewicz, and Kate Lawrie for sending me some of these materials.)

34. John Gray, Ph.D., *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 20–21; and Deborah Tannen, Ph.D., *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* (New York: Ballantine, 1990), 61–64. (I use the uncharacteristic "PhD" designation here and in the text since, it seems, psychologists and sociologists need such manifest warranting in popular trade book publication.)

35. Gray, *Men Are from Mars*, 21.

36. Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand*, 63.

untrue, they do seem somewhat superficial. They are, quite literally, not yet fleshed out, their truth not substantiated at the deeper, carnal levels of our existence.

Being a “master of the universe” presumes an existential relationship and reciprocity with space that is centered in, tethered to, and organized contiguously around one’s embodied intentionality and its perceived possibility of realizing projects in the world. This is a relationship informed by the confidence that one is immanently and transcendentally, as both a body and a consciousness, the *constitutive* source of meaningful space—that one is, indeed, the compass of the world. And space, thus constituted, is a space in which one should not be able to really get lost, a space in which one should never need guidance. This is the existential space of the young world-making child—and, in our culture, also the presumed (and assumed) existential space of the adult man. It is very rarely the space of the adult woman.

In a phenomenological description of the reciprocity between culturally informed, engendered bodies and the morphology of worldly space, philosopher Iris Marion Young has distinguished the general forms through which men and women differently perceive and live space in our culture.³⁷ This difference is less a function of sexual difference than it is of situational difference. All human beings experience their existence as embodied and therefore immanent, that is, as materially situated in a specific “here” at a specific “now.” All human beings also experience their existence as conscious and therefore as transcendent, that is, as able to transcend their material immanence through intentional projection to a “where” and “when” they are not but might be. However, given this universal condition of human existence as both immanent and transcendent, the ratio—or rationality—of their relationship each to the other is often different for men and women in our culture. More often than men, women are the objects of gazes that locate and invite their bodies to live as merely material “things” immanently positioned in space rather than as conscious subjects with the capacity to transcend their immanence and posit space. Thus, according to Young, there is a dominant tendency for “feminine spatial existence” to be “*positioned* by a system of coordinates that does not have its origins in [women’s] intentional capacities” (152).³⁸ Certainly, women also exist as intentional subjects who can and do

37. Iris Marion Young, “Throwing like a Girl,” in *Throwing like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 141–59. Subsequent references will be cited in the text.

38. It might be added that although there would be certain variations in the structure, ratio, and experience of the immanent/transcendent relationship to worldly space, the same might be said of human beings objectified as other on different bases than gender. In our present culture it would be predominantly persons of color, the disabled, the aged, the diseased, and the homeless. Insofar as it was made visible to others through manifest codes of behavior and dress,

transcend their immanence, but, because of their prominent objectification, they do so ambivalently and with greater difficulty. That is, feminine spatial experience in our culture, Young suggests, exhibits “an *ambiguous transcendence*, an *inhibited intentionality*, and a *discontinuous unity* with its surroundings. A source of these contradictory modalities is the bodily self-reference of feminine comportment, which derives from the woman’s experience of her body as a *thing* at the same time she experiences it as a capacity” (147). Women, therefore, tend to inhabit space tentatively, in a structure of self-contradiction that is inhibiting and self-distancing and that makes their bodies—as related to their intentionality—less a transparent capacity for action and movement than a hermeneutic problem. As a consequence, women in our culture tend not to enjoy the synthetic, transparent, and unreflective unity of immanence and transcendence that is a common experience among men.

Although “any” body lives worldly space as encounters with both “opacities and resistances correlative to [the body’s] own limits and frustrations” and with a horizon of open possibilities for action, to women, for whom “feminine bodily existence is an inhibited intentionality, . . . the same set of possibilities that appears to be correlative to [their] intentions also appears to be a system of frustrations correlative to [their] hesitations.” A woman’s possibilities for action and self-realization of her projects—even mundane ones like finding *her own way* from here to there—are certainly perceived as possibilities but, more often than not, “as the possibilities of ‘someone,’ and not truly *her* possibilities” (149). Correlative to this ambiguous transcendence and inhibited intentionality, Young also stresses the “discontinuous unity” experienced by women—both in relation to themselves and to their surroundings. There is an intentional gap between the space of “here” that is the spatial “position” I can and do occupy and the spatial “positing” of a “yonder” that I grasp in its possibilities but, as a woman in our culture, do not quite comprehend as potentially mine. Examining this sense of “double spatiality” (152), Young glosses various psychological studies that show women as more “field-dependent” than men. Males demonstrate “a greater capacity for lifting a figure out of its spatial surroundings and viewing relations in space as fluid and interchangeable, whereas females have a greater tendency to regard figures as embedded within and fixed by their surroundings.” Young suggests that women’s field dependence is hardly surprising, however, in a cultural context in which women tend to live space in a structure and mode of partial estrangement: the space of her “here” is substantial and rooted in her objective carnality, but it is discontinuous with the space of a “yonder” that seems the unfam-

one could include homosexuals and lesbians—and the poor. For further discussion of this issue see the section “Whose Body? A Brief Meditation on Sexual Difference and Other Bodily Discriminations,” in my *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 143–63.

miliar and abstract province of others. Thus, as Young puts it, for feminine existence “objects in visual [that is, projected] space do not stand in a fluid system of potentially alterable and interchangeable relations correlative to the body’s various intentions and projected capacities. Rather, they too have their own *places* and are anchored in immanence” (153).

Materially embedded and positioned in a worldly space usually experienced as discontinuous and not of their own making, women find asking for directions from others a familiar, mundane, and reassuring activity that provokes no existential crisis. Rather, it creates social continuity as a substitute for fragmented spatial contiguity. Furthermore, asking for directions is also consistent with regularly living one’s body in the world as a hermeneutic problem. Men, however, cannot generally accept negotiating space as a hermeneutic problem. They disavow the possibility of being lost, even if they sometimes do admit to being spatially “mistaken.”³⁹ Unlike women, who often view maps as arbitrary in relation to their own bodies (the “You are here” on the library map, to me, the confusing equivalent of Magritte’s painting about representation, *This Is Not a Pipe* [1926]), men see maps as confirmations of and continuous with their spatial location. Thus, maps, for men, do not offer “solutions” to a present disorientation; rather, they are taken up as potential and future extensions of a bodily being that always knows (or should) where it stands in the world. For a man in our culture to acknowledge being lost in worldly space would be to generate an existential crisis—for he would be admitting he was lost in the very intentional spaces his agency had supposedly posited. He would be admitting also to an experience in which he perceived the ground beneath his feet (here) as discontinuous with the projected space of his intentions (yonder). Given the threat it poses to the literal grounding of male identity, being lost is an experience of space that men struggle to repress. Refusal, denial, disavowal, displaced anger thus both manifestly affirm this experience and fend off the existential vertigo, panic, and loss of identity it provokes. (In this regard it is particularly telling that in the aforementioned film *The Blair Witch Project*, there is a significant scene in which one of the lost male filmmakers rages at the uselessness of their map and throws it away in a nearby stream.)

Among the three different forms of being lost we have seen that “not

39. This telling distinction was revealed to me through an intense personal experience. After playing out a typical, very lengthy, and very hostile “lost couple” scenario, when I and my male companion arrived at our restaurant destination extremely late and were asked what happened by our hungry friends, I responded, “We got lost.” My companion, furious and clearly in denial, countered, “I was *not* lost; I made a wrong turn.” Note, along with the variance in interpretation of and cathexis to the event of our spatial disorientation, my plural attribution (less of guilt than of condition) and my companion’s singular assumption of both agency and responsibility.

knowing where you are” is the most global and existentially threatening and “not knowing how to get to where you want to go” the most local and mundane. In the scenario about Tom and Mary recounted in the epigraph that began this section, given his assumed “mastery of the universe,” Tom hears Mary interrogate the very subjective ground of his existence and identity when she suggests that he ask for directions, and he is defensive and coldly furious at the implication that he doesn’t know where he is. Mary, however, used to moving herself about as an object in unfamiliar spaces not of her own making, makes reference to that other much more mundane, localized, and, to her, familiar form of being lost—“not knowing how to get to where you want to go”—and, both consciously and somatically, she cannot comprehend either Tom’s excessive reaction or the shape of the cosmos he is presently in danger of losing. In a culture where Tom and Mary posit and are positioned in space differently, in which they live and value their embodied relations with space differently, is it any wonder that they don’t understand each other, the space of being lost (or mistaken) now become the shape of the distance between them?

After north betrayed my body and my forward-looking purposiveness to become an abstract sign, after I lost my child’s confidence that *I* was the compass of the world and became a girl, I never developed a really sure sense of direction or geography. Both “direction” and “geography” seemed to me the discontinuous and arbitrary systems of others rather than projected possibilities for the fluid orientation of my own being. Now definitely field-dependent, I have to walk through a space and have it become a concrete and contiguous here for me if I am to later remember it as coherent. I also feel more secure locating an unknown place if I follow a narrative trajectory involving a series of grounded landmarks rather than the abstract schematic orientations of a map. Even then, however, sometimes I experience the metallic taste of fear when I try to follow someone’s directions to somewhere new and an anticipated McDonald’s on a corner or the carwash to follow on the left don’t appear quite soon enough to assure me that I am, indeed, going the right way. It is at these moments that I force myself to remember what I’ve disclosed here, take a deep breath, and attempt to posit the world before me as a set of possibilities that are not inherently terrifying. What really dissipates my anxiety, however (and also makes me smile), is remembering that, despite the fact it was Hansel who had “a sense of direction,” Gretel was the one who killed the wicked witch, sprung her brother, and found the way out of the forest and safely back home.

Scary Women

Cinema, Surgery, and Special Effects

I once heard a man say to his gray-haired wife, without rancor: "I only feel old when I look at you." —ANN GERIKE, "On Gray Hair and Oppressed Brains"

"I'm prepared to die, but not to look lousy for the next forty years."

—ANONYMOUS WOMAN TO ELISSA MELAMED, *Mirror, Mirror: The Terror of Not Being Young*

What is it to be embodied quite literally "in the flesh," to live not only the remarkable elasticity of our skin, its colors and textures, but also its fragility, its responsive and visible marking of our accumulated experiences and our years in scars and sags and wrinkles? How does it feel and what does it look like to age and grow old in our youth-oriented and image-conscious culture—particularly if one is a woman? In an article on the cultural implications of changing age demographics as a consequence of what has been called "the graying of America," James Atlas writes: "Americans regard old age as a raw deal, not as a universal fate. It's a narcissistic injury. That's why we don't want the elderly around: they embarrass us, like cripples or the terminally ill. Banished to the margins, they perpetuate the illusion that our urgent daily lives are permanent, and not just transient things."¹ This cultural—and personal—sense of aging as "embarrassing" and as a "narcissistic injury" cannot be separated from our objectification of our bodies as what they look like rather than as the existential basis for our capacities, as images and representations rather than as the means of our being. Thus, insofar as we subjectively live both our bodies and our images, each not only informs the other, but they also often become significantly confused.

What follows, in this context, is less an argument than a meditation on these confusions as they are phenomenologically experienced, imagined, and represented in contemporary American culture, where the dread of

1. James Atlas, "The Sandwich Generation," *New Yorker*, Oct. 13, 1997, 59.

aging—particularly by women—is dramatized and allayed both through the wish-fulfilling fantasies of rejuvenation in certain American movies and the more general, if correlated, faith in the “magic” and “quick fixes” of “special effects,” both cinematic and surgical. This conjunction of aging women, cinema, and surgery is also the conjunction of aesthetics and ethics, foregrounding not merely cultural criteria of beauty and desirability but also their very real as well as representational consequences. As Susan Sontag writes: “Growing older is mainly an ordeal of the imagination—a moral disease, a social pathology—intrinsic to which is the fact that it afflicts women much more than men. It is particularly women who experience growing older with distaste and even shame.”²

Thus, it is not surprising that, at sixty-three and as a woman with the privilege of self-reflection, I am always struggling with such distaste and shame in response to the various processes and cultural determinations of my own aging. Indeed, for a long time, despite my attempts at intellectual rationalization, cultural critique, or humor, I found myself unable to dismiss a recurrent image—one that still horrifies me as I reinvoke it. The image? It’s me and her, an other—and as her subjective object of a face has aged, the blusher I’ve worn every morning since I was a teenager has migrated and condensed itself into two distinct and ridiculously intense red circles in the middle of her cheeks. This image—which correspondingly brings a subjective flush of shame and humiliation to my cheeks for the pity and unwilling disgust and contempt with which I objectively regard hers—is that of an aging woman who not only deceives herself into thinking she is still young enough to wear makeup, and poorly applies it, but who also inscribes on her face the caricature both of her own desire and of all that was once (at least to some) desirable. This is not only my face but also the face of clutchy and desperate Norma Desmond. It is whatever happened to Baby Jane, the child star who never grew up but did grow old: ludicrous, grotesque, overpowered and -rouged, mascara and lipstick bleeding into and around her wrinkled eyes and mouth, maniacally proclaiming an energy that defies containment, that refuses invisibility and contempt.³

2. Susan Sontag, “The Double Standard of Aging,” reprinted in *No Longer Young: The Older Woman in America* (Ann Arbor: Institute of Gerontology, University of Michigan/Wayne State University Press, 1975), 31. (Sontag’s original article was published in *Saturday Review*, Sep. 1972, 29–38.) Sontag’s insights are echoed in the epigraphs that begin this chapter; see Ann Gerike, “On Gray Hair and Oppressed Brains,” in *Women, Aging, and Ageism*, ed. Evelyn R. Rosenthal (New York: Haworth, 1990), 38; and Elissa Melamed, *Mirror, Mirror; The Terror of Not Being Young* (New York: Linden Press/Simon and Schuster, 1983), 30.

3. I’ve invoked these images before in an earlier companion piece on aging. See Vivian Sobchack, “Revenge of *The Leech Woman*: On the Dread of Aging in a Low-Budget Horror Film,” in *Uncontrollable Bodies: Testimonies of Identity and Culture*, ed. Rodney Sappington and Tyler Stallings (Seattle: Bay Press, 1994), 79–91. The specific film characters mentioned here—now

Although I no longer imagine the extremity of my blusher converging into shameful red circles on my cheeks or fear producing the chilling white-face of the self-deluded Baby Jane, I still despair of ever being able to reconcile my overall sense of well-being, self-confidence, achievement, and pleasure in the richness of my present with the problematic and often distressing image I see in my mirror. Over the past several years, most of my exaggerated fantasies gone, I nonetheless have become aware not only of my mother's face frequently staring back at me from my own but also of an increasing inability to see myself with any real objectivity at all (as if I ever could). In less than a single minute I can go from utter dislocation and despair as I gaze at a face that seems too old for me, a face that I "have," to a certain satisfying recognition and pleasure at a face that looks "pretty good for my age," a face that I "am." Most often, however, in the middle register between despair and self-satisfaction I stand before the mirror much like "The Vain but Realistic Queen" who intones, in a wonderful *New Yorker* cartoon, "Mirror, mirror, on the wall: Who—if she lost ten pounds and had her eyes and neck done, and had the right haircut, could, in her age group—be the fairest one of all?"⁴

Whatever my stance, I live now in heightened awareness of the instability of my image of myself, and I think about cosmetic surgery a lot: getting my eyes done, removing the furrows in my forehead, smoothing out the lines around my mouth, and lifting the skin around my jaw. But I am sure I would be disappointed. I know the effects wouldn't last—and I feel, perhaps irrationally but perhaps not, that there would be awful consequences. Indeed, after reading an earlier version of this essay, a friend told me the following joke: "One night, in a vision, God visits a seventy-five-year-old woman. 'How much time do I have left to live?' she asks him; and he replies, 'Thirty-five years.' Figuring that as long as she is going to live another thirty-five years, she might as well look young again, she spends the following year having a ton of cosmetic surgery: a face lift, a tummy tuck, her nose reshaped, liposuction, a whole makeover. After all this is finally done, she is hit by a car and killed instantly. Inside the pearly gates she angrily asks God, 'What happened? I thought you said I had another thirty-five years.' And God replies: 'Sorry, but I didn't recognize you.'" Indeed, I not only dread others not recognizing me, but I also dread not recognizing myself. I have this sense that surgery would put me physically and temporally out of sync with myself, would create of me an uncanny and disturbing double who would look the way I "was" and forcibly usurp the moment in which I presently "am." There

icons for certain generations of women—occur, respectively, in *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950) and *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (Robert Aldrich, 1962).

4. *New Yorker*, Feb. 19 and 26, 2001, 166.

is a certain irony operative here, of course, since even without surgery I presently don't ever quite recognize myself or feel synchronous with my image when I look at it in mirrors or pictures. And so, although I don't avoid mirrors, I also don't seek them out, and I'm not particularly keen on being photographed. Rather, I try very hard to locate myself less in my image than in (how else to say it?) my "compartment."

It is for this reason that I was particularly moved when I first read in *Entertainment Weekly* that Barbra Streisand (only a year younger than I am, a Brooklyn-born Jew, a persistent and passionate woman with a big mouth like me) was remaking and updating *The Mirror Has Two Faces*, a 1959 French film about a housewife who begins a new life after plastic surgery. Barbra's update was to tell the story of "an ugly duckling professor and her quest for inner and outer beauty"⁵ Obviously, given that I'm an aging academic woman who has never been secure about her looks, this struck a major chord. Discussing the film's progress and performing its own surgery (a hatchet job) on the middle-aged producer, director, and star, *Entertainment Weekly* reported that the "biggest challenge faced by the 54-year-old" and "hyper-picky" Barbra

was how to present her character. In the original, the mousy housefrau undergoes her transformation via plastic surgery. But Streisand rejected that idea—perhaps because of the negative message—and went with attitude adjustment instead. Which might work for the character, but does it work for the star? "Certain wrinkles and gravitational forces seem to be causing Streisand concern," says one ex-crew member. "She doesn't want to look her age. She's fighting it." (9)

The Mirror—indeed—*Has Two Faces*. Except for the income and, of course, the ability to sing "People," Barbra and I have a lot in common.

Before actually seeing the film (eventually released in 1996), I wondered just what, as a substitute for surgery, Barbra's "attitude adjustment" might mean. And how would it translate to the superficiality of an image—in the mirror, in the movies? Might it mean really good makeup for the middle-aged star? Soft focus? Other forms of special effects that reproduce the work of cosmetic surgery? It is of particular relevance here that recent developments in television technology have produced what is called a "skin contouring" camera that makes wrinkles disappear. In a *TV Guide* article rife with puns about "vanity video" and "video collagen" we are told of this "indispensable tool for TV personalities of a certain age" that "can give a soap opera ingenue a few extra years of playing an ingenue" but was first used "as a news division innovation" to make aging news anchors look

5. Jeffrey Wells, "Mirror, Mirror," *Entertainment Weekly*, Apr. 12, 1996, 8. Subsequent references will be cited in the text.

younger. According to one news director, the camera “can remove almost all of someone’s wrinkles, without affecting their hair or eyes.” However, for the “top talents” who “get a little lift from the latest in special effects, . . . the magic only lasts as long as the stars remain in front of the camera.”⁶ This marvelous television camera aside, however, just how far can these special effects that substitute for cosmetic surgery take you—how long before really good makeup transforms you into a grotesque, before soft focus blurs you into invisibility, before special effects transform you into a witch, a ghoul, or a monster? Perhaps this *is* the cinematic equivalent of attitude adjustment. The alternative to cosmetic surgery in what passes for the verisimilitude of cinematic realism is a change in *genre*, a transformation of sensibility that takes us from the “real” world that demonizes middle-aged women to the world of “irreal” female demons: horror, science fiction, and fantasy.

Indeed, a number of years ago I published an essay on several low-budget science fiction / horror films made in the late 1950s and early 1960s that focused on middle-aged female characters.⁷ I was interested in these critically neglected films because, working through genres deemed fantastic, they were able to displace and disguise cultural anxieties about women and aging while simultaneously figuring them in your face, so to speak. For example, in *Attack of the 50-Ft. Woman* (Nathan Juran, 1958), through a brief (and laughable) transformative encounter with a giant space alien, wealthy, childless, middle-aged, and brunette Nancy achieves a literal size, power, and youthful bloneness her philandering husband, Harry, can no longer ignore as she roams the countryside, wearing a bra and sarong made out of her bed linens, looking for him. In *The Wasp Woman* (Roger Corman, 1959) Janet Starlin, the fortyish and fading owner of a similarly fading cosmetics empire, can no longer serve as the model for advertising her products (“Return to Youth with Janice Starlin!”) and overdoses in secret experiments with royal “wasp jelly,” which not only reduces but also reverses the aging process. There are, however, side effects, which regularly turn the again youthful cosmetics queen into a murderous insect queen (with high heels, a sheath dress, and a wasp’s head). And, in *The Leech Woman* (Edward Dein, 1960), blowzy, alcoholic, despised June becomes her feckless endocrinologist husband’s guinea pig as they intrude on an obscure African village to find a secret “rejuvenation serum.” Made from orchid pollen mixed with male pituitary fluid (the extraction of which kills its donors), the serum allows June to experience, if only for a while, the simultaneous pleasures of youth, beauty, and

6. J. Max Robins, “A New Wrinkle in Video Technology,” *TV Guide* (Los Angeles metropolitan edition), Sep. 28–Oct. 4, 1996, 57. The news anchors who have benefited from the camera and their ages at the time of the *TV Guide* piece were Dan Rather, 64; Peter Jennings, 58; Tom Brokaw, 56; and Barbara Walters, 65.

7. See Sobchack, “Revenge of *The Leech Woman*.”

revenge—in the tribal ritual of her transformation, she chooses her husband as pituitary donor. *The Leech Woman* is the most blatant of these movies about ageism, not only in plot but also in dialogue. The wizened African woman who offers June her youth speaks before the ritual:

For a man, old age has rewards. If he is wise, the gray hairs bring dignity and he is treated with honor and respect. But for the aged woman, there is nothing. At best, she's pitied. More often, her lot is of contempt and neglect. What woman lives who has passed the prime of her life who would not give her remaining years to reclaim even for a few moments of joy and happiness and know the worship of men. For the end of life should be its moment of triumph. So it is with the aged women of Nandos, a last flowering of love, beauty—before death.

In each of these low-budget SF-horror films scared middle-aged women are transformed into rejuvenated but scary women—this not through cosmetic surgery but through fantastical means, makeup, and special effects. Introduced as fading (and childless) females still informed by—but an affront to—sexual desire and the process of biological reproduction, hovering on the brink of grotesquerie and alcoholism, their flesh explicitly disgusting to the men in their lives, these women are figured as more horrible in—and more horrified by—their own middle-aged bodies than in or by the bodies of the “unnatural” monsters they become. In this regard Linda Williams's important essay, “When the Woman Looks,” is illuminating. Williams argues that there is an affinity declared and a look of recognition and sympathy exchanged between the heroine and the monster in the horror film. The SF-horror films mentioned here, however, collapse the distance of this exchange into a single look of *self-recognition*. Touching on this conflation of woman and monster in its link with aging, Williams writes:

There is not that much difference between an object of desire and an object of horror as far as the male look is concerned. (In one brand of horror film this difference may simply lie in the age of its female stars. The Bette Davises and Joan Crawford considered too old to continue as spectacle-objects nevertheless persevere as horror objects in films like *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* [1962] and *Hush . . . Hush, Sweet Charlotte* [1965]).⁸

Indeed, such horror and SF films dramatize what one psychotherapist describes as the culture's “almost visceral disgust for the older woman as a physical being,” and they certainly underscore “ageism” as “the last bastion of sexism.”⁹ These films also recall, particularly in the male—and self—dis-

8. Linda Williams, “When the Woman Looks,” in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 21.

9. Melamed, *Mirror, Mirror*, 30.

gust they generate, Simone de Beauvoir's genuine (if, by today's standards, problematic) lament:

[W]oman is haunted by the horror of growing old. . . . [T]o hold her husband and to assure herself of his protection, . . . it is necessary for her to be attractive, to please. . . . What is to become of her when she no longer has any hold on him? This is what she anxiously asks herself while she helplessly looks on at the degeneration of this fleshly object which she identifies with herself. She puts up a battle. But hair-dye, skin treatments, plastic surgery, will never do more than prolong her dying youth. . . . But when the first hints come of that fated and irreversible process which is to destroy the whole edifice built up during puberty, she feels the fatal touch of death itself.¹⁰

How, in the face of this cultural context, *as* a face in this cultural context, could a woman not yearn for a rejuvenation serum, not want to realize quite literally the youth and power she once seemed to have? In the cinematic—and moral—imagination of the low-budget SF-horror films I've described above, aging and abject women are thus “unnaturally” transformed. Become suddenly young, beautiful, desirable, powerful, horrendous, monstrous, and deadly, each plays out grand, if wacky, dramas of poetic justice. No plastic surgery here. Instead, through the technological magic of cinema, the irrational magic of fantasy, and a few cheesy low-budget effects, what we get is major “attitude adjustment”—and of a scope that might even satisfy Barbra. The leech woman, wasp woman, and fifty-foot woman each literalize, magnify, and enact hyperbolic displays of anger and desire, their youth and beauty represented now as lethal and fatal, their unnatural ascendance to power allowing them to avenge on a grand scale the wrongs done them for merely getting older. Yet, not surprisingly, these films also maintain the cultural status quo—even as they critique it. For what they figure as most grotesque and disgusting is not the monstrousness of the transformation or the monster but rather the “unnatural” conjunction of middle-aged female flesh and still-youthful female desire. And—take heed, Barbra—the actresses who play these pathetic and horrific middle-aged women are always young and beautiful under their latex jowls and aging makeup. Thus, what these fantasies of female rejuvenation give with one hand, they take back with the other. They represent less a grand masquerade of feminist resistance than a retrograde striptease that undermines the double-edged and very temporary narrative power these transformed and empowered middle-aged protagonists supposedly enjoy—that is, “getting their own back” before they eventually “get theirs.” And, as is the “natural” order of things in both patriarchal culture and SF-horror films of this sort, they do get theirs—each narrative

10. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Bantam, 1968), 542.

ending with the restoration and reproduction of social (and ageist) order through the death of its eponymous heroine-monster. Attitude adjustment, indeed!

These low-budget films observe that middle-aged women—as much before as after their transformations and attitude adjustments—are pretty scary. In *Attack of the 50-Ft. Woman*, for example, as Nancy lies in her bedroom after her close encounter of the third kind but before she looms large on the horizon, her doctor explains to her husband the “real cause” of both her “wild” story of an alien encounter and her strange behavior: “When women reach the age of maturity, Mother Nature sometimes overworks their frustration to a point of irrationalism.” The screenwriter must have read Freud, who, writing on obsessional neurosis in 1913, tells us: “It is well known, and has been a matter for much complaint, that women often alter strangely in character after they have abandoned their genital functions. They become quarrelsome, peevish, and argumentative, petty and miserly; in fact, they display sadistic and anal-erotic traits which were not theirs in the era of womanliness.”¹¹

Which brings us back again to Barbra, whom it turns out we never really left at all. In language akin to Freud’s, the article on the production woes of Barbra’s film in *Entertainment Weekly* performs its own form of ageist (psycho)analysis. The “steep attrition rate” among cast and crew and the protracted shooting schedule are attributed to both her “hyper-picky” “perfectionism” and to her being a “meddler” (8). We are also told: “Among the things she fretted over: the density of her panty hose, the bras she wore, and whether the trees would have falling leaves” (9). A leech woman, wasp woman, fifty-foot woman—in Freud’s terms, an obsessional neurotic: peevish, argumentative, petty, sadistic, and anal-erotic. Poor Barbra. She can’t win for losing. Larger than life, marauding the Hollywood countryside in designer clothes and an “adjusted” attitude doesn’t get her far from the fear or contempt that attaches to middle-aged women in our culture.

Perhaps Barbara—perhaps I—should reconsider cosmetic surgery. Around ten years younger than Barbra and me and anxious about losing the looks she perceived as the real source of her power, my best friend recently did—although I didn’t see the results until long after her operation. Admittedly, I was afraid to: afraid she’d look bad (that is, not like herself or like she had surgery), afraid she’d look good (that is, good enough to make me want to do it). Separated by physical distance, however, I didn’t have to confront—and judge—her image, so all I initially knew about her extensive face-lift was from e-mail correspondence. (I have permission to use her words but

11. Sigmund Freud, “The Predisposition to Obsessional Neurosis,” in *Collected Papers*, vol. 1, ed. Ernest Jones, trans. Joan Riviere (London: Hogarth and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1950), 130.

not her name.) Here, in my face, so to speak, as well as hers were extraordinary convergences of despised flesh, monstrous acts, and malleable image (first “alienated” and later proudly “possessed”). Here, in the very prose of her postings, was the conjunction of actuality and wish, of surgery and cinema, of transformative technologies and the “magic” of “special effects”—all rendered intimately intelligible to us (whether we approve or not) in terms of mortal time and female gender. She wrote, “IT WORKED!” And then she continued:

My eyes look larger than Audrey Hepburn’s in her prime. . . . I am the proud owner of a fifteen-year old’s neckline. Amazing—exactly the effect I’d hoped for. Still swollen . . . but that was all predicted. What this tendon-tightening lift did (not by any means purely “skin deep”—he actually . . . redraped the major neck and jaw infrastructure) was reverse the effects of gravity. Under the eyes—utterly smooth, many crow’s feet eradicated. The jawline—every suspicion of jowl has been erased. Smooth and tight. Boy, do I look good. The neck—the Candice Bergen turkey neck is gone. The tendons that produce that stringy effect have been severed—forever! OK—what price (besides the \$7000) did I pay? Four hours on the operating table. One night of hell due to . . . a compression bandage that made me feel as if I were being choked. Mercifully (and thanks to Valium) I got through it. . . . Extremely tight from ear to ear—jaw with little range of motion—“ate” liquids, jello, soup, scrambled eggs for the first week. My sutures extend around 80% of my head: *Bride of Frankenstein* city. All (except for the exquisitely fine line under my eyes) are hidden in my hair. But baby I know they’re there. Strange reverse-phantom limb sensation. I still have my ears, but I can’t exactly feel them. . . . I took Valium each evening the first week to counteract the tendency toward panic as I tried to fall asleep and realized that I could only move ¼ inch in any direction. Very minimal bruising—I’m told that’s not the rule. . . . I still have a very faint chartreuse glow under one eye. With makeup, *voilà!* I can’t jut my chin out—can barely make my upper and lower teeth meet at the front. In a few more months, that will relax. And I can live with it. My hair, which was cut, shaved and even removed (along with sections of my scalp), has lost all semblance of structured style. But that too is transitory. The work that was done by the surgeon will last a good seven years. I plan to have my upper eyes done in about three years. This message is for your eyes only. I intend, if pressed, to reveal that I have had my eyes done. Period. Nothing more.¹²

12. An illuminating comparison might be made between my friend’s detailing of her cosmetic surgery and its aftermath with J. G. Ballard’s “Princess Margaret’s Face Lift,” in *The Atrocity Exhibition*, new rev. ed. (San Francisco: Re/Search, 1990), 111–12. Its opening paragraph reads (and note the focus again on jowls and neck): “As Princess Margaret reached middle age, the skin of both her cheeks and neck tended to sag from failure of the supporting structures. Her naso-labial folds deepened, and the soft tissues along her jaw fell forward. Her jowls tended to increase. In profile the creases of her neck lengthened and the chin-neck contour lost its youthful outline and became convex” (111). For similar graphic description see also Larissa

But there's plenty more. And it foregrounds the confusions and confluences of surgery and cinema, technology and "magic," of effort and ease, that so pervade our current image culture. Indeed, there is a bitter irony at work here. Having willfully achieved a "seamless" face, my best friend has willingly lost her voice. She refuses to speak further of the time and labor and pain it took to transform her. The whole point is that, for the magic to work, the seams—both the lines traced by age and the scars traced by surgery—must not show. Thus, as Kathleen Woodward notes in her wonderful essay "Youthfulness as Masquerade": "Unlike the hysterical body, whose surface is inscribed with symptoms, the objective of the surgically youthful body is to speak nothing."¹³ But this is not the only irony at work here. At a more structural level this very lack of disclosure, this silence and secrecy, is an *essential* (if paradoxical) element of a culture increasingly driven—by both desire and technology—to extreme extroversion, to utter disclosure. It is here that cosmetic surgery and the special effects of the cinema converge and are perceived as phenomenologically reversible in what has become our current morphological imagination. Based on the belief that desire—through technology—can be materialized, made visible, and thus "realized," such morphological imagination does a perverse, and precisely superficial, turn on Woodward's distinction between the hysterical body that displays symptoms and the surgically youthful body that silences such display. That is, symptoms and silence are conflated as *the image of one's transformation* and *one's transformation of the image* become reversible phenomena. These confusions and confluences are dramatized most literally, of course, in the genre of fantasy, where "plastic surgery" is now practiced through the seemingly effortless, seamless transformations of digital morphing.

Indeed, the morphological figurations of fantasy cinema not only allegorize impossible human wish and desire but also extrude and thus fulfill them. In this regard two such live-action films come to mind, each not only making visible (and seemingly effortless) incredible alterations of an unprecedented plastic and elastic human body but also rendering human affective states with unprecedented superficiality and literalism. The films are *Death Becomes Her* (Robert Zemeckis, 1992) and *The Mask* (Chuck Russell, 1994)—

MacFarquhar, "The Face Age," *New Yorker*, July 21, 1997, 68: "Consider the brutal beauty of the face-lift. . . . If you're getting a blepharoplasty (an eye job), the doctor will slice open the top of each of your eyelids, peel the skin back, and trim the fat underneath with a scalpel, or a laser. If you're also in for a brow-lift, the doctor might carve you to the bone from the top of your forehead down along your hairline; slowly tear the skin away from the bloody muck it's attached to underneath; and then stretch it back and staple it near the hairline. You may suffer blindness, paralysis, or death as a consequence, but most likely you'll be fine."

13. Kathleen Woodward, "Youthfulness as Masquerade," *Discourse* 11, no. 1 (fall-winter 1988-89), 133-34.

both technologically dependent on digital morphing, both figuring the whole of human existence as extrusional, superficial, and plastic. *The Mask*, about the transformation and rejuvenation of the male psyche and spirit, significantly plays its drama out on—and as—the surface of the body. When wimpy Stanley Ipkiss is magically transformed by the ancient mask he finds, there is no masquerade, no silence, since every desire, every psychic metaphor, is extroverted, materialized, and made visible. His tongue “hangs out” and unrolls across the table toward the object of his desire. He literally “wears his heart on his sleeve” (or thereabouts). His destructive desires are extruded from his hands as smoking guns. Thus, despite the fact that one might describe Jim Carrey’s performance as “hysterical,” how can one possibly talk about the Mask’s body in terms of hysterical “symptoms” when everything “hangs out” as extroverted id and nothing is repressed “inside” or “deep down”? Which makes it both amusing and apposite, then, that one reviewer says of *The Mask*: “The effects are show-stopping, but the film’s hollowness makes the overall result curiously depressing.”¹⁴ Here, indeed, there is no inside, there are no symptoms, there is no silence; there is only display.

Death Becomes Her functions in a similar manner, although, here, with women as the central figures, the narrative explicitly foregrounds age and literal rejuvenation as its central thematic—youth and beauty are the correlated objects of female desire. Indeed, what’s most interesting (although not necessarily funny) about *Death Becomes Her* is that plastic surgery operates in the film twice over. At the narrative level its wimpy hero, Ernest Menville, is a famous plastic surgeon—seduced away from his fiancée, Helen, by middle-aged actress Madeline Ashton, whom we first see starring in a musical flop based on Tennessee Williams’s *Sweet Bird of Youth*. Thanks to Ernest’s surgical skill (which we never actually see on the screen), Madeline finds a whole new career as a movie star. Here, J. G. Ballard, in a chapter of his *The Atrocity Exhibition* called “Princess Margaret’s Face Lift,” might well be glossing Madeline’s motivations in relation to Ernest in *Death Becomes Her*. Ballard writes: “In a TV interview . . . the wife of a famous Beverly Hills plastic surgeon revealed that throughout their marriage her husband had continually re-styled her face and body, pointing a breast here, tucking in a nostril there. She seemed supremely confident of her attractions . . . as she said: ‘He will never leave me, because he can always change me.’”¹⁵ *Death Becomes Her* plays out this initial fantasy but goes on to exhaust the merely human powers of Madeline’s surgeon husband to avail itself of “magic”—both through narrative and “special” morphological effects. Seven quick years of screen time into the marriage, henpecked, alcoholic Ernest is no longer much use

14. CineBooks’ Motion Picture Guide, review of *The Mask*, dir. Chuck Russell, *Cinemania* 96, CD-ROM (Microsoft, 1992–95).

15. Ballard, “Princess Margaret’s Face Lift,” 111.

to Madeline. Told by her beautician that he—and cosmetic surgery—can no longer help her, the desperate woman seeks out a mysterious and incredibly beautiful “Beverly Hills cult priestess” (significantly played by onetime Lancôme pitchwoman, Isabella Rossellini), who gives her a youth serum that grants eternal life, whatever the condition of the user’s body.

At this point the operation of plastic surgery extends from the narrative to the representational level. Indeed, *Death Becomes Her* presents us with the first digitally produced skin—and the “magic” transformations of special computergraphic and cosmetic effects instantaneously nip and tuck Madeline’s buttocks, smooth and lift her face and breasts with nary a twinge of discomfort, a trace of blood, or a trice of effort, and reproduce her as “young.” Indeed, what Rossellini’s priestess says of the youth serum might also be said of the cinematic effects: “A touch of magic in this world obsessed by science.” Thus, in the service of instant wish fulfillment this phrase in the narrative disavows not only the extensive calculations of labor and time involved in its own digital effects but also the labor and time entailed by the science and practice of cosmetic surgery.

The film’s literalization of anxiety and desire in relation to aging is carried further still. That is, inevitably, the repressed signs of age return and are also reproduced and literalized along with the signs of youth and beauty. When rejuvenated Madeline breaks her neck after being pushed down a flight of stairs by Ernest, she lives on (although medically dead) with visible and hyperbolic variations of my friend’s despised “Candace Bergen turkey neck.” (Her celebration of the fact that “the tendons that produce that stringy effect have been severed—forever!” certainly resonates here in the terrible, but funny, computergraphic corkscrewing of Madeline’s neck after her fatal fall.) And, after Madeline shoots the returned and vengeful Helen (who has also taken the serum), Helen walks around with a hole in her stomach—a “blasted” and “hollow” woman, however youthful. (“I can see right through you,” Madeline says to her.) Ultimately, the film unites the two women—“Mad” and “Hel”—in their increasingly unsuccessful attempts to maintain their literally dead and peeling skin, to keep from “letting themselves go,” from “falling apart”—which, at the film’s end, they quite literally do.

In both *The Mask* and *Death Becomes Her* cinematic effects and plastic surgery become reversible representational operations—literalizing desire and promising instant and effortless transformation. Human bodily existence is foregrounded as a material surface amenable to endless manipulation and total visibility. However, there is yet a great silence, a great *invisibility*, grounding these narratives of surface and extroversion. The labor, effort, and time entailed by the real operations of plastic surgery (both cinematic and cosmetic) are ultimately disavowed. Instead, we are given a screen image (both psychoanalytic and literal) that attributes the laborious, costly, and technologically based reality that underlies bodily transformation to the nontech-

nological properties of, in the one instance, the mask, a primitive and magical fetish, and in the other, a glowing potion with “a touch of magic.” Of course, like all cases of disavowal, these fantasies turn in and around on themselves like a Möbius strip to ultimately break the silence and reveal the repressed on the same side as the visible screen image.

That is, on the screen side the technological effects of these transformation fantasies are what we came for, what we want “in our face.” But we want these effects without wanting to see the technology, without wanting to acknowledge the cost, labor, time, and effort of its operations—all of which might curb our desire, despoil our wonder, and generate fear of pain and death. As Larissa MacFarquhar notes: “Surely, the eroticizing of cosmetic surgery is a sign that the surgery is no longer a gory means to a culturally dictated end but, rather, an end in itself.”¹⁶ Indeed, like my friend who wants the effects of her face-lift to be seen but wants the facts of her costly, laborious, lengthy, and painful operation to remain hidden, our pleasure comes precisely from this “appearance” of seamless, effortless, “magical” transformation. Yet on the other repressed side we are fascinated by the operation—its very cost, difficulty, effortfulness. We cannot help but bring them to visibility. There are now magazines, videos, and Web sites devoted to making visible not only the specific operations of cinematic effects but also surgical effects. (Perhaps the most “in your face” of these can be found on a Web site called—no joke—“Dermatology in the Cinema,” where dermatologist Dr. Vail Reese does a film survey of movie stars’ skin conditions, both real and cinematic.)¹⁷ These tell-all revelations are made auratic by their previous repression and through a minute accounting of the technology involved, hours spent, effort spent, dollars spent. My friend, too, despite her desire for secrecy, is fascinated by her operation and the visibility of her investment. Her numeracy extends from money to stitches but is most poignant in its temporal lived dimensions: four hours on the operating table, one night of hell, a week of limited jaw motion, time for her hair to grow back, a few months for her upper and lower jaws to “relax,” three years before she will do her eyelids, seven years before the surgeon’s work is undone again by time and gravity. The “magic” of plastic surgery (both cinematic and cosmetic) costs always an irrecoverable—and irrepressible—portion of a mortal life.

And a mortal life must *live through* its operations, not magically, instantaneously, but *in time*. It is thus apposite and poignant that, offscreen, Isabella Rossellini, who plays and is fixed forever as the eternal high priestess of youth and beauty in both *Death Becomes Her* and old Lancôme cosmetic ads, has joined the ranks of the onscreen “wasp woman,” Janet Starlin. After fourteen

16. MacFarquhar, “The Face Age,” 68.

17. See <http://www.skinema.com> (accessed Oct. 24, 2003).

years as the “face” of Lancôme cosmetics, she was fired at age forty-two for getting “too old.”¹⁸ Unlike the wasp woman, however, Rossellini can neither completely reverse the aging process nor murder those who find her middle-aged flesh disgusting. Thus, it is also apposite and poignant that attempts to reproduce the fantasies of the morphological imagination in the real world are doomed to failure: medical cosmetic surgery never quite matches up to the seemingly effortless and perfect plastic surgeries of cinema and computer. This disappointment with the real thing becomes ironically explicit when representational fantasies incorporate the real to take a documentary turn. Discussing the real face-lift and its aftermath of a soap opera actress incorporated into the soap’s televised narrative, Woodward cites one critic’s observation that “the viewer inspects the results and concludes that they are woefully disappointing.”¹⁹

This disappointment with the “real thing” also becomes explicit in my friend’s continuing e-mails. Along with specific descriptions of her further healing, she wrote:

Vivian, I’m going through an unsettling part of this surgical journey. When I first got home, the effect was quite dramatic—I literally looked twenty years younger. Now what’s happened: the swelling continues to go down, the outlines of the “new face” are still dramatically lifted. BUT, the lines I’ve acquired through a lifetime of smiling, talking, being a highly expressive individual, are returning. Not all of them—but enough that the effect of the procedure is now quite natural and I no longer look twenty years younger. Maybe ten max. . . . I’m experiencing a queasy depression. Imagining that the procedure didn’t work. That in a few weeks I’ll look like I did before the money and the lengthy discomfort. Now I scrutinize, I imagine, I am learning to hate the whole thing. Most of all, the heady sense of exhilaration and confidence is gone. In short, I have no idea any longer how the hell I look.

Which brings me back to myself before the mirror—and again to Barbra, both behind and in front of the camera. There is no way here for any of us to feel superior in sensibility to my friend. Whether we like it or not, as part of our culture, we have all had “our eyes done.” As Jean Baudrillard writes: “We are under the sway of a surgical compulsion that seeks to excise negative characteristics and remodel things synthetically into ideal forms. Cosmetic surgery: a face’s chance configuration, its beauty or ugliness, its distinctive traits, its negative traits—all these have to be corrected, so as to

18. For more on the Lancôme episode and Rossellini’s bitterness about it see Isabella Rossellini, *Some of Me* (New York: Random House, 1997).

19. Woodward, “Youthfulness as Masquerade,” 135. (Woodward is citing film and cultural critic Patricia Mellencamp.)

produce something more beautiful than beautiful: an ideal face.”²⁰ With or without medical surgery we have been technologically altered, both seeing differently and seeming different than we did in a time before either cinema or cosmetic surgery presented us with their reversible technological promises of immortality and idealized figurations of magical self-transformation—that is, transformation without time, without effort, without cost.

To a great extent, then, the bodily transformations of cinema and surgery inform each other. Cinema *is* cosmetic surgery—its fantasies, its makeup, and its digital effects able to “fix” (in the doubled sense of repair and stasis) and to fetishize and to reproduce faces and time as both “unreel” before us. And, reversibly, cosmetic surgery *is* cinema, creating us as an image we not only learn to enact in a repetition compulsion but also must—and never can—live up to. Through their technological “operations”—the work and cost effectively hidden by the surface “magic” of their transitory effects, the cultural values of youth and beauty effectively reproduced and fixed—we have become subjectively “derealized” and out of sequence with ourselves as, paradoxically, these same operations have allowed us to objectively reproduce and “realize” our flesh “in our own image.” These days, as MacFarquhar puts it, “sometimes pain, mutilation, and even death are acceptable risks in the pursuit of perfection”—and this because the plasticity of the image (and our imagination) has overwhelmed the reality of the flesh and its limits. Indeed, as of 1996, “three million three hundred and fifty thousand cosmetic surgical procedures were performed, and more than one and a half million pounds of fat were liposuctioned out of nearly three hundred thousand men and women.”²¹

Over e-mail, increments of my friend’s ambiguous “recovery” from realizing her fantasies of transformation and rejuvenation seemed to be in direct proportion to the diminishing number of years young she felt she looked: “Vivian, I’ve calmed down, assessed the pluses and minuses and decided to

20. Jean Baudrillard, “Operational Whitewash,” in *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena*, trans. James Benedict (New York: Verso, 1993), 45. Of special interest in surgically constructing the ideal face is the French performance artist Orlan, who has publicly undergone any number of surgeries in an ironic attempt to achieve the forehead of Mona Lisa, the eyes of Psyche (from Gérôme), the chin of Botticelli’s Venus, the mouth of Boucher’s Europa, and the nose from an anonymous sixteenth-century painting of Diana. On Orlan and the connection between special effects and cosmetic surgery see Victoria Duckett, “Beyond the Body: Orlan and the Material Morph,” in *Meta-Morphing: Visual Transformation and the Culture of Quick Change*, ed. Vivian Sobchack (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 209–23.

21. MacFarquhar, “The Face Age,” 68. In regard to the meaning of these statistics (and I don’t fully agree with her), MacFarquhar writes: “It doesn’t make sense to think about cosmetic surgery as a feminist issue these days, since more and more men—a fifth of all patients in 1996—are electing to undergo it” (68).

just fucking go on with it. Life, that is. They call it a ‘lift’ for a reason. . . . The face doesn’t look younger (oh, I guess I’ve shaved five to eight years off), but it looks better. OK. Fine. Now it’s time to move on.” But later the fantasy of realization reemerges—for the time being, at least, with real and sanguine consequences: “Vivian, the response has been terrific—everybody is dazzled, but they can’t quite tell why. It must be the color I’m wearing, they say, or my hair, or that I am rested. At any rate, I feel empowered again.”

In sum, I don’t know how to end this—nor could I imagine at the time of my friend’s rejuvenation how, without cosmetic surgery, Barbra would end her version of *The Mirror Has Two Faces*. Thus, not only for herself, but also for the wasp woman, for my friend, for Isabella Rossellini, and for me, I hoped that Barbra—both onscreen and off—would survive her own cinematic reproduction. Unfortunately, she did not. “Attitude adjustment” was overwhelmed by image adjustment in her finished film: to wit, a diet, furious exercise, good makeup, a new hairdo, and a Donna Karan little black dress. Despite all her dialogue, Barbra had nothing to say; instead, like my friend, she silenced and repressed her own middle-aging—first, reducing it to a generalized discourse on inner and outer beauty and then displacing and replacing it on the face and in the voice of her bitter, jealous, “once beautiful,” and “much older” mother (played by the still spectacular Lauren Bacall). Barbra’s attitude, then, hadn’t adjusted at all.²²

Susan Bordo ponders “the glossy world” of media imagery that “feeds our eyes and focuses our desires on creamy skin, perfect hair, bodies that refuse awkwardness and age. It delights us like visual candy, but it also makes us sick with who we are and offers remedies that promise to close the gap—at a price.”²³ I finally did get to see my rejuvenated friend in the flesh. She looked pretty much the same to me. And, at the 1996 Academy Awards (for which the song in *The Mirror Has Two Faces* received the film’s only nomination), Barbra was still being characterized by the press as “peevish” and “petty.” And that wasn’t all, poor woman (money and voice aside). Two years after linking Barbra with her SF-horror film counterparts and ironically figuring her as marauding the countryside as a middle-aged monster in designer clothes, I

22. For a particularly devastating but accurate (and funny) send-up of *The Mirror Has Two Faces* see the pseudonymous Libby Gelman-Waxner’s “Pretty Is as Pretty Does,” *Premiere* 10, no. 6 (Feb. 1997). Reading the film’s central thematic as asking and responding to Streisand’s increasingly desperate question “Is Barbra pretty?,” Gelman-Waxner also recognizes the displaced age issue—and, dealing with the confrontation scene between daughter and mother in which the latter reveals her jealousy and finally admits her daughter’s beauty, she writes: “Watching a 54-year-old movie star haranguing her mother onscreen is a very special moment; it’s like seeing the perfect therapy payoff, where your mom writes a formal note of apology for your childhood and has it printed as a full-page ad in the *Times*” (38).

23. Susan Bordo, “In an Empire of Images, the End of a Fairy Tale,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Sep. 19, 1997, B8.

found my imagination elaborately realized in a 1998 episode of the animated television series, *South Park*. Here was featured a huge “MechaStreisand” trashing the town like Godzilla. Tellingly, one of the South Park kids asks: “Who is Barbra Streisand?” and is answered thus: “She’s a really old lady who wants everybody to think she’s forty-five.” This coincidence may seem uncanny but, indeed, suggests just how pervasively middle-aged women, particularly those with power like Streisand, are demonized and made monstrous in our present culture.

I, in the meantime, have become more comfortable in my ever-aging skin. I’m old enough now to feel distant from the omnipresent appeals around me to “look younger” and to “do” something about it. Indeed, after my friend’s surgery I vowed to be kinder to my mirror image. In the glass (or on the screen), that image is, after all, thin and chimerical, whereas I, on my side of it, am grounded in the fleshy thickness and productivity of a life, in the substance—not the reproduced surface—of endless transformation. Thus, now each time I start to fixate on a new line or wrinkle or graying hair in the mirror, now each time I envy a youthful face on the screen, I am quick to remember that on my side of the image I am not so much ever aging as always becoming.

What My Fingers Knew

The Cinesthetic Subject, or Vision in the Flesh

[M]y body is not only an object among all objects, . . . but an object which is sensitive to all the rest, which reverberates to all sounds, vibrates to all colours, and provides words with their primordial significance through the way in which it receives them.

—MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY, *Phenomenology of Perception*

What is significance? It is meaning, insofar as it is sensually produced.

—ROLAND BARTHES, *The Pleasure of the Text*

Nearly every time I read a movie review in a newspaper or popular magazine, I am struck by the gap that exists between our actual *experience* of the cinema and the *theory* that we academic film scholars construct to explain it—or perhaps, more aptly, to explain it away. Take, for example, several descriptions in the popular press of Jane Campion’s *The Piano* (1993): “What impresses most is the tactile force of the images. The salt air can almost be tasted, the wind’s furious bite felt.”¹ The film is “[a]n unremittingly sensuous experience of music and fabric, of mud and flesh.”² “Poems will be written about the curves of the performers’ buttocks as they’re outlined by candlelight; about the atmosphere that surrounds the dropping away of each item of clothing; about the immediate tactile shock when flesh first touches flesh in close-up.”³ A completely different kind of film, Jan de Bont’s *Speed* (1994), elicits the following: “Viscerally, it’s a breath-taking trip.”⁴ It’s “[a] classic summertime adrenaline rush.”⁵ “This white knuckle, edge-of-your-seat

1. Godfrey Cheshire, “Film: Auteurist Elan,” review of *The Piano*, dir. Jane Campion, *Raleigh (North Carolina) Spectator Magazine*, Nov. 18, 1993.

2. Bob Straus, “*The Piano* Strikes Emotional Chords,” review of *The Piano*, *Los Angeles Daily News*, Nov. 19, 1993.

3. Stuart Klawans, “Films,” review of *The Piano*, *Nation*, Dec. 6, 1993, 704.

4. Daniel Heman, “It’s a Bumpy Ride, but This Film’s Built for Speed,” review of *Speed*, dir. Jan de Bont, *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, June 10, 1994.

5. Henry Sheehan, “*Speed* Thrills,” review of *Speed*, *Orange Country Register*, June 10, 1994.

action opus is the real thing,”⁶ “[a] preposterously exciting thrill ride that takes itself seriously enough to produce gasps of tension and lightly enough so you giggle while grabbing the armrest.”⁷ “We feel wiped out with delirium and relief. The movie comes home in triumph and we go home in shreds.”⁸ Reviewers of Paul Anderson’s film adaptation of the kung-fu video game *Mortal Kombat* (1995) emphasize “a soundtrack of . . . primitive, head-bonking urgency”⁹ and endless scenes of “kick, sock, pow . . . to-the-death battles,”¹⁰ in which “backs, wrists and necks are shattered with sickening cracking sounds.”¹¹ And, of John Lasseter’s full-length computergraphically animated feature *Toy Story* (1995), another says:

A Tyrannosaurus rex doll is so glossy and tactile you feel as if you could reach out and stroke its hard, shiny head. . . . When some toy soldiers spring to life, the waxy sheen of their green fatigues will strike Proustian chords of recognition in anyone who ever presided over a basement game of army. . . . [T]his movie . . . invites you to gaze upon the textures of the physical world with new eyes. What *Bambi* and *Snow White* did for nature, *Toy Story*, amazingly, does for plastic.¹²

What have we, as contemporary media theorists, to do with such tactile, kinetic, redolent, resonant, and sometimes even taste-full descriptions of the film experience?

I

During earlier periods in the history of film theory there were various attempts to understand the meaningful relation between cinema and our sensate bodies. Peter Wollen notes that the great Soviet filmmaker and theorist Sergei Eisenstein, fascinated by the Symbolist movement, spent the latter part of his career investigating the “synchronization of the senses” and that his “writings on synaesthesia are of great erudition and considerable interest, despite their fundamentally unscientific nature.”¹³ Gilles Deleuze

6. Joe Leydon, “Breakneck *Speed*,” review of *Speed*, *Houston Post*, June 10, 1994.

7. David Ansen, “Popcorn Deluxe,” review of *Speed*, *Newsweek*, June 13, 1994, 53.

8. Anthony Lane, “Faster, Faster,” review of *Speed*, *New Yorker*, June 13, 1994, 103.

9. Stephen Hunter, “As Cosmic Battles Go, *Kombat* Is Merely Mortal,” review of *Mortal Kombat*, dir. Paul Anderson, *Baltimore Sun*, Aug. 19, 1995.

10. Janet Weeks, “Is Faux Violence Less Violent?” review of *Mortal Kombat*, *Los Angeles Daily News*, Aug. 19, 1995.

11. Stephanie Griest, “*Mortal Kombat*’s Bloodless Coup,” review of *Mortal Kombat*, *Washington Post*, Aug. 28, 1995.

12. Owen Gleiberman, “Plastic Fantastic,” review of *Toy Story*, dir. John Lasseter, *Entertainment Weekly*, Nov. 14, 1995, 74.

13. Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), 57, 59.

writes that Eisenstein “continually reminds us that ‘intellectual cinema’ has as correlate ‘sensory thought’ or ‘emotional intelligence,’ and is worthless without it.”¹⁴ And, in a wonderful essay using the trope of the somersault to address the relation between cinema and the body, Lesley Stern describes how, for Eisenstein, the moving body was “conceived and configured cinematically . . . not just [as] a matter of representation, but [as] a question of the circuit of sensory vibrations that links viewer and screen.”¹⁵ This early interest in the somatic effects of the cinema culminated, perhaps, on the one side, in the 1930s, with the empirical work done in the United States by the Payne Studies—several of which quantitatively measured the “galvanic responses” and blood pressure of film viewers.¹⁶ On the other, qualitative side, there was the phenomenologically inflected materialist work done in the 1930s and 1940s by Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer. Benjamin, in his famous “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” speaks of cinematic intelligibility in terms of “tactile appropriation,” and elsewhere he speaks to the viewer’s “mimetic faculty,” a sensuous and bodily form of perception.¹⁷ And Kracauer located the uniqueness of cinema in the medium’s essential ability to stimulate us physiologically and sensually; thus he understands the spectator as a “corporeal-material being,” a “human being with skin and hair,” and he tells us: “The material elements that present themselves in films directly stimulate the *material layers* of the human being: his nerves, his senses, his entire *physiological substance*.”¹⁸

Until quite recently, however, contemporary film theory has generally ignored or elided both cinema’s sensual address and the viewer’s “corporeal-

14. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 159.

15. Lesley Stern, “I Think, Sebastian, Therefore . . . I Somersault: Film and the Uncanny,” *Para?doxa* 3, nos. 3–4 (1997): 361.

16. For relevant research by the Payne Studies see W. W. Charters, *Motion Pictures and Youth: A Summary* (New York: Macmillan, 1933). In a related context Alison Landsberg, “Prosthetic Memory: *Total Recall* and *Blade Runner*,” in *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk: Cultures of Technological Embodiment*, ed. Mike Featherstone and Roger Burrows (London: Sage, 1995), writes that the Payne Studies “presumed that the body might give evidence of physiological symptoms caused by a kind of technological intervention into subjectivity—an intervention which is part and parcel of the cinematic experience” (180).

17. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1968), 240; and Walter Benjamin, “On the Mimetic Faculty,” in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 1978), 333–36.

18. Quoted in Miriam Hansen, “‘With Skin and Hair’: Kracauer’s Theory of Film, Marseilles 1940,” *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 3 (1993): 458 (the translation is Hansen’s). Hansen also goes on to note: “Pointing to the example of ‘archaic pornographic flicks,’ Kracauer comes close to describing the physical, tactile dimension of film spectatorship in sexual terms (though not in terms of gender); in striving for sensual, physiological stimulation, he notes, such ‘flicks’ realize film’s potential in general” (458).

material being.”¹⁹ Thus, if we read across the field, there is very little sustained work in English to be found on the carnal sensuality of the film experience and what—and how—it constitutes meaning. The few exceptions include Linda Williams’s ongoing investigation of what she calls “body genres”;²⁰ Jonathan Crary’s recognition, in *Techniques of the Observer*, of the “carnal density” of spectatorship that emerges with the new visual technologies of the nineteenth century;²¹ Steven Shaviro’s Deleuzian emphasis, in *The Cinematic Body*, on the visceral event of film viewing;²² Laura Marks’s works on “the skin of the film” and “touch” that focus on what she describes as “haptic visuality” in relation to bodies and images;²³ several essays by Elena del Río that, from a phenomenological perspective, attempt to undo “the rigid binary demarcations of externality and internality”;²⁴ and forthcoming work from Jennifer Barker that develops a phenomenology of cinematic tactility.²⁵ In general, however, most film theorists still seem either embarrassed or bemused by bodies that often act wantonly and crudely at the movies, involuntarily countering the fine-grained sensibilities, intellectual discrimi-

19. Contemporary film theory as an academic designation usually refers to the period beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s when semiotics, structuralism, and psychoanalysis were regarded as methodological antidotes to a “soft” and unscientific humanist film criticism, and Marxist cultural critique and feminist theory were regarded as ideological antidotes to bourgeois and patriarchal aestheticism. An extended critique of the contemporary theoretical oversight (if not repression) of the spectator’s lived body, as well as a discussion of the historical and theoretical reasons for it, can be found in my own *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

20. See Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” *Film Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (summer 1991): 2–13; “Corporealized Observers: Visual Pornographies and the Carnal Density of Vision,” in *Fugitive Images: From Photography to Video*, ed. Patrice Petro (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 3–41; and “The Visual and Carnal Pleasures of Moving-Image Pornography: A Brief History” (unpublished manuscript); this latter essay was eventually incorporated into the epilogue of the 1999 edition of Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the Frenzy of the Visible* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

21. Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).

22. Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

23. Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); and *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

24. Elena del Río, “The Body as Foundation of the Screen: Allegories of Technology in Atom Egoyan’s *Speaking Parts*,” *Camera Obscura* 37–38 (summer 1996): 94–115; and “The Body of Voyeurism: Mapping a Discourse of the Senses in Michael Powell’s *Peeping Tom*,” *Camera Obscura* 15, no. 3 (2000): 115–49.

25. Jennifer Barker’s dissertation, “The Tactile Eye,” (UCLA) is in progress; however, she has delivered two conference papers that draw from her research: “Fascinating Rhythms: The Visceral Pleasures of the Cinema” (“Come to Your Senses,” Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis, Theory, and Interpretation, Amsterdam, May 1998); and “Affecting Cinema” (annual meeting of the Society for Cinema Studies, Chicago, IL, Mar. 2000).

nations, and vocabulary of critical reflection. Indeed, as Williams suggests in relation to the “low” body genres of pornography, horror, and melodrama she privileges, a certain discomfort emerges when we experience an “apparent lack of proper esthetic distance, a sense of over-involvement in sensation and emotion.” She tells us: “We feel manipulated by these texts—an impression that the very colloquialisms of ‘tear jerker’ and ‘fear jerker’ express—and to which we could add pornography’s even cruder sense as texts to which some people might be inclined to ‘jerk off.’” Bodily responses to such films are taken as an involuntary and self-evident reflexology, marking, as Williams notes, sexual arousal on “peter meters”; horror in screams, fainting, and even heart attacks; and sentiment in “one-, two-, or three handkerchiefs.”²⁶

For the most part, then, carnal responses to the cinema have been regarded as too crude to invite extensive elaboration beyond aligning them—for their easy thrills, commercial impact, and cultural associations—with other more “kinetic” forms of amusement such as theme park rides or with Tom Gunning’s once historically grounded but now catch-all designation, “cinema of attractions.”²⁷ Thus, scholarly interest has been focused less on the capacity of films to physically arouse us to meaning than on what such sensory cinematic appeal reveals about the rise and fall of classical narrative, or the contemporary transmedia structure of the entertainment industry, or the desires of our culture for the distractions of immediate sensory immersion in an age of pervasive mediation.

Nonetheless, critical discussions often also suggest that films that appeal to our sensorium are the *quintessence* of cinema. For example, writing about *Speed*, Richard Dyer relates the Lumière audiences’ recoiling in terror from an approaching onscreen train to IMAX and Showscan, proposing that *all* cinema is, at base, a “cinema of sensation.”²⁸ Indeed, he argues that the cinema’s essence is to represent and fulfill our desire “for an underlying pattern of feeling, to do with freedom of movement, confidence in the body, engagement with the material world, that is coded as male (and straight and white,

26. Williams, “Film Bodies,” 5.

27. Tom Gunning, “The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde,” in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser with Adam Barker (London: BFI, 1990), 56–62. Gunning comments: “Clearly in some sense recent spectacle cinema has reaffirmed its roots in stimulus and carnival rides, in what might be called the Spielberg-Lucas-Coppola cinema and effects” (61). It is worth noting that this move from use of the phrase “cinema of attractions” to designate a historically specific mode—and moment—of film production to its use as a more generic and transhistorical designation is seen as problematic. A thoughtful critique was offered by Ben Brewster in “Periodization of the Early Cinema: Some Problems” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Cinema Studies, Dallas, TX, Mar. 1996).

28. Richard Dyer, “Action!” *Sight and Sound* 4, no. 10 (Oct. 1994): 7–10.

too) but to which all humans need access.”²⁹ However, although Dyer acknowledges the importance of the spectator’s direct bodily experience of cinema, he is at a loss to explain its very existence. He tells us: “The celebration of sensational movement, that we respond to in *some still unclear sense* ‘as if real,’ for many people *is* the movies.”³⁰ The dynamic structure that grounds our bodily response to cinema’s visual (and aural) representations is not only articulated as a continuing mystery, but its eidetic “givenness” to experience is also destabilized by the phrase “as if real”—the phrase itself surrounded by a set of scare quotes that, questioning this questioning of givenness, further plunges us into a *mise en abyme* of experiential undecidability.

This “still unclear sense” of the sensational movement that, “as if real,” provokes a bodily response marks the confusion and discomfort we scholars have not only in confronting our sensual experience of the cinema but also in confronting our lack of ability to explain its somatism as anything more than “mere” physiological reflex or to admit its meaning as anything more than metaphorical description.³¹ Thus, the language used in the press to describe the sensuous and affective dimensions of the film experience has been written off as a popular version of that imprecise humanist criticism drummed out of film studies in the early 1970s with the advent of more “rigorous” and “objective” modes of description. Thus, sensual reference in descriptions of cinema has been generally regarded as rhetorical or poetic excess—sensuality located, then, always less on the side of the body than on the side of language. This view is tautological. As Shaviro points out, it subsumes sensation “within universal (linguistic or conceptual) forms only because it has deployed those forms in order to describe sensation in the first place.” This elision of the body “making sense” in its own right is grounded in “the idealist assumption that human experience is originally and fundamentally cognitive.” To hold such an idealist assumption, Shaviro goes on,

is to reduce the question of perception to a question of knowledge, and to equate sensation with the reflective consciousness of sensation. The Hegelian and structuralist equation suppresses the body. It ignores or abstracts away

29. *Ibid.*, 9.

30. *Ibid.*, 8 (emphasis added).

31. Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny, Kathleen McLaughlin, and John Costello (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), discusses the status of the “as if” in relation to metaphor and reference; see esp. 248–56. He finds inadequate both “an interpretation that gives in to ontological *naïveté* in the evaluation of metaphorical truth because it ignores the implicit ‘is not’” and its “inverse interpretation that, *under the critical pressure of the ‘is not,’ loses the ‘is’ by reducing it to the ‘as if’ of a reflective judgment.*” As he says, the “legitimation of the concept of metaphorical truth, which preserves the ‘is not’ with the ‘is,’ will proceed from the convergence of these two critiques” (249; emphasis added). Subsequent references will be cited in the text.

from the primordial forms of raw sensation: affect, excitation, stimulation and repression, pleasure and pain, shock and habit. It posits instead a disincarnate eye and ear whose data are immediately objectified in the form of self-conscious awareness or positive knowledge.³²

In sum, even though there has been increasing interest in doing so, we have not yet come to grips with the carnal foundations of cinematic intelligibility, with the fact that *to understand movies figurally, we first must make literal sense of them*. This is not a tautology—particularly in a discipline that has worked long and hard to separate the sense and meaning of vision and specularly from a body that, *in experience*, lives vision always in cooperation and significant exchange with other sensorial means of access to the world, a body that makes meaning before it makes conscious, reflective thought. Thus, despite current academic fetishization of “the body,” most theorists still don’t quite know what to do with their unruly responsive flesh and sensorium. Our sensations and responses pose an intolerable question to prevalent linguistic and psychoanalytic understandings of the cinema as grounded in conventional codes and cognitive patterning and grounded on absence, lack, and illusion. They also pose an intolerable challenge to the prevalent cultural assumption that the film image is constituted by a merely two-dimensional geometry.³³ Positing cinematic vision as merely a mode of objective symbolic representation, and reductively abstracting—“disincarnating”—the spectator’s subjective and full-bodied vision to posit it only as a “distance sense,” contemporary film theory has had major difficulties in comprehending how it is possible for human bodies to be, in fact, really “touched” and “moved” by the movies.

At worst, then, contemporary film theory has not taken bodily being at the movies very seriously—and, at best, it has generally not known how to respond to and describe how it is that movies “move” and “touch” us bodily. Instead, with some noted exceptions, film theory has attempted (somewhat defensively, I think) to put the ambiguous and unruly, *subjectively* sensuous, embodied experience of going to the movies back where it “properly”—that is, *objectively*—belongs: it locates the sensuous *on* the screen as the semiotic

32. Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body*, 26–27.

33. As Linda Williams, in “Visual and Carnal Pleasures,” summarizes: “In psychoanalytic film theory this opposition between an excessive and inarticulate body and sensation on the one hand and a mastering spirit or thought on the other has been fundamental, giving rise to the concept of an abstract ‘visual pleasure’ grounded in a voyeuristic gaze whose pleasure presumes a distanced, decorporealized, monocular eye mastering all it surveils but not physically implicated in the objects of its vision” (n.p.). This “mastering” gaze has meant the privileging of Renaissance perspective and its Cartesian “carpentering” of the world as the explanatory model for describing cinematic space. For more discussion of this issue and alternative descriptive models see “Breadcrumbs in the Forest: Three Meditations on Being Lost in Space” in this volume.

effects of cinematic representation and the semantic property of cinematic objects or *off* the screen in the spectator's phantasmatic psychic formations, cognitive processes, and basic physiological reflexes that do not pose major questions of meaning. Yet as film theorists we are not exempt from sensual being at the movies—nor, let us admit it, would we wish to be. As “lived bodies” (to use a phenomenological term that insists on “the” objective body as always also lived subjectively as “my” body, diacritically invested and active in making sense and meaning in and of the world), our vision is always already “fleshed out.” Even at the movies our vision and hearing are informed and given meaning by our other modes of sensory access to the world: our capacity not only to see and to hear but also to touch, to smell, to taste, and always to proprioceptively feel our weight, dimension, gravity, and movement in the world. In sum, the film experience is meaningful *not to the side of our bodies but because of our bodies*. Which is to say that movies provoke in us the “carnal thoughts” that ground and inform more conscious analysis.

Thus, we need to alter the binary and bifurcated structures of the film experience suggested by previous formulations and, instead, posit the film viewer's lived body as a carnal “third term” that grounds and mediates experience and language, subjective vision and objective image—both differentiating and unifying them in reversible (or chiasmatic) processes of perception and expression.³⁴ Indeed, it is the lived body that provides both the site and genesis of the “third” or “obtuse” meaning that Roland Barthes suggests escapes language yet resides within it.³⁵ Thrown into a meaningful lifeworld, the lived body is always already engaged in a commutation and transubstan-

34. *Chiasm* (sometimes *chiasmus*) is the term used by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in “Eye and Mind,” trans. Carleton Dallery, in *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James Edie (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), to indicate a “unique space which separates and reunites, which sustains every cohesion” (187). In general, *chiasm* is used to name the ground of all presence against which discrete figures of being emerge; as such, it is the ground from which oppositions both emerge and fall away, on which they become reversible. Here I am suggesting that the enworlded lived body functions as our own chiasmatic site in the matter of meaning and the meaning of matter: that is, it sustains discrete and oppositional figures (such as language and being) but also provides the synoptic ground for the suspension of both their discretion and their opposition. See also Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The Intertwining—The Chiasm,” in *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 130–55.

35. Roland Barthes, “The Third Meaning,” in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 52–68. Miriam Hansen, “Benjamin, Cinema, and Experience: ‘The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology,’” *New German Critique* 40 (winter 1987), writes of this connection between “third meaning” and the lived body in relation to Walter Benjamin's reflections on the “mimetic faculty”: “For Benjamin, the semiotic aspect of language encompasses both Barthes's ‘informational’ and ‘symbolic’ levels of meaning . . . while the mimetic aspect would correspond to the level of physiognomic excess” (198).

tiation of the cooperative meaning-making capacity of its senses (which are always acculturated and never lived as either discrete or raw)—a process that commutes the meaning of one sense to the meaning of another, translates the literal into the figural and back again, and prereflectively grounds the more particular and reflective discriminations of a “higher order” semiology. Put another way, we could say that the lived body both provides and enacts a *commutative reversibility* between subjective feeling and objective knowledge, between the senses and their sense or conscious meaning. In this regard Shaviro is most eloquent:

There is no structuring lack, no primordial division, but a continuity between the physiological and affective responses of my own body and the appearances and disappearances, the mutations and perdurances, of the bodies and images on screen. The important distinction is not the hierarchical, binary one between bodies and images, or between the real and its representations. It is rather a question of discerning multiple and continually varying interactions among what can be defined indifferently as bodies and as images: degrees of stillness and motion, of action and passion, of clutter and emptiness, of light and lack. . . . The image cannot be opposed to the body, as representation is opposed to its unattainable referent. For a fugitive, supplemental materiality haunts the (allegedly) idealizing processes of mechanical reproduction. . . . The flesh is intrinsic to the cinematic apparatus, at once its subject, its substance, and its limit.³⁶

II

At this point, given my rather lengthy critique of theoretical abstraction and its oversight of our bodily experience at the movies, I want to ground my previous discussion “in the flesh.” In *my* flesh, in fact—and its meaningful responsiveness to and comprehension of an actual film, *The Piano*. However intellectually problematic in terms of its sexual and colonial politics,³⁷ Campion’s film moved me deeply, stirring my bodily senses and my sense of my body. The film not only “filled me up” and often “suffocated” me with feelings that resonated in and constricted my chest and stomach, but it also “sensitized” the very surfaces of my skin—as well as its own—to *touch*. Through-

36. Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body*, 255–56.

37. For discussion of these politics see, e.g., Cynthia Kaufman, “Colonialism, Purity, and Resistance in *The Piano*,” *Socialist Review* 24, nos. 1–2 (1994): 251–55; Leonie Pihama, “Are Films Dangerous? A Maori Woman’s Perspective on *The Piano*,” *Hecate* 20, no. 2 (Oct. 1994): 239–42; Lynda Dyson, “The Return of the Repressed? Whiteness, Femininity, and Colonialism in *The Piano*,” *Screen* 36, no. 3 (autumn 1995): 267–76; and Dana Polan, *Jane Campion* (London: BFI, 2002).

out the film my whole being was intensely concentrated and, rapt as I was in the world onscreen, I was wrapped also in a body that was achingly aware of itself as a sensuous, sensitized, sensible material capacity.³⁸ (In this context we might remember the reviewers who spoke of the “unremittingly sensuous experience of music and fabric, of mud and flesh” and “immediate tactile shock.”) In particular, I want to focus on my sensual and sense-making experience of *The Piano*’s first two shots—for they, in fact, generated this essay. Although my body’s attention was mobilized and concentrated throughout a film that never ceased to move or touch me carnally, emotionally, and consciously in the most complex ways, these first two shots significantly foregrounded for me the issue at hand (so to speak) of our sensual engagement not only with this film but, to varying degrees, with all others.³⁹ Most particularly, these inaugural shots also foregrounded the ambiguity and ambivalence of vision’s relation to touch as the latter has been evoked here in both its literal and figurative sense.

In visual and figural terms the very first shot we see in *The Piano* seems an unidentifiable image. Carol Jacobs gives us a precise description and gloss of both this shot and the one that follows it:

Long, uneven shafts of reddish-pink light fan out across the screen, unfocused like a failed and developed color negative of translucent vessels of blood. . . . Yet it is nearly no view at all—an almost blindness, with distance so minimal between eye and object that what we see is an unrecognizable blur. . . . The image we first see is from the other side, from Ada’s perspective, her fingers, liquid fingers. . . . We see Ada’s fingers pierced through with sunlight, apparently from her perspective, as we hear the voice of her mind, but then, imme-

38. I am certainly not alone in responding this way. See, e.g., Sue Gillett’s “Lips and Fingers: Jane Campion’s *The Piano*,” *Screen* 36, no. 3 (autumn 1995): 277–87. Not only does Gillett open and conclude her unusual essay using first-person voice to “inhabit” protagonist Ada’s consciousness, but, as the critic, she also tells us outright, in a description I find resonant with my own experience, “*The Piano* affected me very deeply. I was entranced, moved, dazed. I held my breath. I was reluctant to re-enter the everyday world after the film had finished. *The Piano* shook, disturbed and inhabited me. I felt that my own dreams had taken form, been revealed. . . . These were thick, heavy and exhilarating feelings” (286).

39. Certainly some individual films like *The Piano* and those films grouped by Williams as “body genres” foreground sensual engagement in explicit image and sound content and narrative focus, as well as in a more backgrounded manner—that is, through the kinetic activity and sensory experience of what I have, in *The Address of the Eye*, called the “film’s body” (see note 48 below). Other films may show us bodies in sensual engagement but do so in a non-sensual manner, thus distancing us rather than soliciting a similar experience through the “attitude” of their mediating vision. Nonetheless, I would maintain that *all* films engage the sense-making capacity of our bodies, as well as of our minds—albeit according to different ratios (or rationalities).

diately thereafter, we see them from the clear perspective of the onlookers that we are, as they become matter-of-fact-objects to the lens of the camera.⁴⁰

As I watched *The Piano's* opening moments—in that first shot, before I even knew there was an Ada and before I saw her from *my* side of *her* vision (that is, before I watched *her* rather than her *vision*)—something seemingly extraordinary happened. Despite my “almost blindness,” the “unrecognizable blur,” and resistance of the image to my eyes, *my fingers knew what I was looking at*—and this *before* the objective reverse shot that followed to put those fingers in their proper place (that is, to put them where they could be seen objectively rather than subjectively “looked through”). What I was seeing was, in fact, from the beginning, *not* an unrecognizable image, however blurred and indeterminate in my vision, however much my eyes could not “make it out.” From the first (although I didn’t consciously know it until the second shot), my fingers *comprehended* that image, *grasped* it with a nearly imperceptible tingle of attention and anticipation and, offscreen, “felt themselves” as a potentiality in the subjective and fleshy situation figured onscreen. And this *before* I refigured my carnal comprehension into the conscious thought, “Ah, those are fingers I am looking at.” Indeed, at first, prior to this conscious recognition, I did not understand those fingers as “those” fingers—that is, at a distance from my own fingers and objective in their “thereness.” Rather, those fingers were first known sensually and sensibly as “these” fingers and were located ambiguously both offscreen and on—subjectively “here” as well as objectively “there,” “mine” as well as the image’s. Thus, although it should have been a surprising revelation given my “almost blindness” to the first shot, the second and objective reverse shot of a woman peering at the world through her outspread fingers really came as no surprise at all. Instead, it seemed a pleasurable culmination and confirmation of what my fingers—and I, reflexively if not yet reflectively—already knew.

Although this experience of my body’s prereflective but reflexive comprehension of the seen (and, hence, the scene) is in some respects extraordinary, it is also in most respects hardly exceptional. Indeed, I would argue that this prereflective bodily responsiveness to films is a commonplace. That is, we do not experience any movie only through our eyes. We see and comprehend and feel films with our entire bodily being, informed by the full history and carnal knowledge of our acculturated sensorium. Normatively, however, the easy givenness of things for us to see at the movies and vision’s overarching mastery and comprehension of its objects and its historically hierarchical sway over our other senses tend to occlude our aware-

40. Carol Jacobs, “Playing Jane Campion’s *Piano*: Politically,” *Modern Language Notes* 109, no. 5 (Dec. 1994): 769–70.

ness of our body's other ways of taking up and making meaning of the world—and its representation. Thus, what is extraordinary about the opening shot of *The Piano* is that it offers (at least on first viewing) a relatively rare instance of narrative cinema in which the cultural hegemony of vision is overthrown,⁴¹ an instance in which my eyes did not “see” anything meaningful and experienced an almost blindness at the same time that my tactile sense of being in the world *through my fingers* grasped the image's sense in a way that my forestalled or baffled vision could not.⁴²

Jacobs tells us that the initial image is “like a failed and developed color negative of translucent vessels of blood.” Nonetheless, one senses that her bodily reference is derived less from *tactile foresight* than from *visual hindsight*. For, in an otherwise admirable essay that focuses on the film's narrative and visual emphasis on touch, Jacobs objectifies the site of touch far too quickly—rushing to reduce vision to *point of view*, hurrying to consider tactility and fingers and hands in terms of their *narrative symbolism*.⁴³ Thus, she tells us that Ada's fingers in that first shot (as well as throughout) are used symbolically to “render us illiterate” and “unable to read them.”⁴⁴ Now, if vision were an *isolated* sense and not merely a *discrete* sense possessing its own structure, capacities, and limits, I suppose this might be true. But vision is not isolated from our other senses. Whatever its specific structure, capacities, and sensual discriminations, vision is only one modality of my lived body's access to the world and only one means of making the world of objects and others sensible—that is, meaningful—to me.⁴⁵ Vision may be the sense most

41. The normative dominance of vision and its mastery over the world as objective is most frequently overthrown in what is called experimental or avant-garde cinema. In this regard see also Marks's discussion of intercultural cinema in *The Skin of the Film* (see note 23).

42. The phrase “baffled vision” comes from Laura Marks, “Haptic Visuality” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Cinema Studies, Dallas, TX, Mar. 1996).

43. Here I cannot resist citing a rather derisive comment about Campion's next (and less critically successful) film, *The Portrait of a Lady* (1996), that is explicit about the filmmaker's own symbolic “fixation” on what was once a dynamic representation of touch. *Entertainment Weekly*, Feb. 7, 1997, has a sidebar called “Fixation of the Week” with the subtitle “Jane Campion's Hands-On Approach.” The text reads: “Starting with the title sequence, in which ‘*The Portrait of a Lady*’ is emblazoned on a middle finger, the director gives us 60-odd shots of fingers. There's fly flicking, ivory tickling, skin stroking, nose scratching, cigarette holding, and that all-too-*Piano* moment when Nicole Kidman's Isabel Archer says, ‘I would have given my little finger.’ Oh, Jane, please, not again!” (53).

44. Jacobs, “Playing Jane Campion's *Piano*,” 770.

45. This issue of the discretion of each of the senses and their nonisolated relation to each other is discussed in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), esp. 223–25. The philosopher writes: “[E]ach organ of sense explores the object in its own way, [and] is the agent of a certain type of synthesis” (223). And he elaborates: “The senses are distinct from each other and distinct from intellection in so far as each one of them brings with it a structure of being which can never be exactly transposed. . . . And we can recognize it without any threat to the unity of the

privileged in the culture and the cinema, with hearing a close second; nonetheless, I do not leave my capacity to touch or to smell or to taste at the door, nor, once in the theater, do I devote these senses only to my popcorn.

Thus I would argue that my experience of *The Piano* was a heightened instance of our common sensuous experience of the movies: the way we are in some carnal modality able to touch and be touched by the substance and texture of images; to feel a visual atmosphere envelop us; to experience weight, suffocation, and the need for air; to take flight in kinetic exhilaration and freedom even as we are relatively bound to our theater seats; to be knocked backward by a sound; to sometimes even smell and taste the world we see on the screen. Although, perhaps, smell and taste are less called on than touch to inform our comprehension of the images we see, I still remember the “visual aroma” of my experience of *Black Narcissus* (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressberger, 1946), the film itself named after a perfume, or the pork-noodle taste of portions of *Tampopo* (Juzo Itami, 1986). (And why should we be surprised at this when the very power of advertising cologne and food rests heavily on transmodal cooperation and translation within and across the sensorium?) Furthermore, as I engaged these films, I did not “think” a translation of my sense of sight into smell or taste; rather I experienced it *without a thought*. Elena del Río describes the phenomenological structure of this experience: “As the image becomes translated into a bodily response, body and image no longer function as discrete units, but as surfaces in contact, engaged in a constant activity of reciprocal re-alignment and inflection.”⁴⁶

In this regard we might wish to think again about processes of identification in the film experience, relating them not to our secondary engagement with and recognition of either “subject positions” or characters but rather to our primary engagement (and the film’s) with the sense and sensibility of materiality itself. We, ourselves, are subjective matter: our lived bodies sensually relate to “things” that “matter” on the screen and find them sensible in a primary, prepersonal, and global way that grounds those later secondary identifications that are more discrete and localized. Certainly, my experience of the opening subjective shot of *The Piano* provides evidence of this prepersonal and globally located bodily comprehension, but such ambient and carnal identification with material subjectivity also occurs when, for example, I “objectively” watch Baines—under the piano and Ada’s skirts—reach out and touch Ada’s flesh through a hole in her black woolen stock-

senses. For the senses communicate with each other. . . . [T]he experience of the separate ‘senses’ is gained only when one assumes a highly particularized attitude, and this cannot be of any assistance to the analysis of direct consciousness” (225). Subsequent references will be cited in the text.

46. del Río, “Body as Foundation,” 101.

ing.⁴⁷ Looking at this objective image, like the reviewer cited earlier, I also felt an “immediate tactile shock when flesh first touches flesh in close-up.” Yet precisely *whose* flesh I felt was ambiguous and vague—and emergent from a phenomenological experience structured on ambivalence and diffusion. That is, I had a carnal interest and investment in being *both* “here” and “there,” in being able *both* to sense *and* to be sensible, to be *both* the subject *and* the object of tactile desire. At the moment when Baines touches Ada’s skin through her stocking, suddenly my skin is both mine and not my own: that is, the “immediate tactile shock” opens me to the general erotic mattering and diffusion of my flesh, and I feel not only my “own” body but also Baines’s body, Ada’s body, and what I have elsewhere called the “film’s body.”⁴⁸ Thus, even confronted with an “objective” shot, my fingers know and understand the subjective meanings of this “seen” and this viewing situation, and they grasp textural and textual meaning everywhere—not only in the touching but also in the touched. Objectivity and subjectivity lose their presumed clarity. Which is to say, in this viewing situation (and to varying degrees in every viewing situation), “to situate subjectivity in the lived body jeopardizes dualistic metaphysics altogether. There remains no basis for preserving the mutual exclusivity of the categories subject and object, inner and outer, I and world.”⁴⁹

Again, I want to emphasize that I am not speaking metaphorically of touching and being touched at and by the movies but “in some sense” quite literally of our capacity to feel the world we see and hear onscreen and of the cinema’s capacity to “touch” and “move” us offscreen. As philosopher Elizabeth Grosz puts it: “Things solicit the flesh just as the flesh beckons to and as an object for things. Perception is the flesh’s reversibility, the flesh touching, seeing, perceiving itself, one fold (provisionally) catching the other in its own self-embrace.”⁵⁰ Experiencing a movie, not ever merely “seeing” it,

47. Although only discussed generally rather than elaborated as a specific phenomenological structure of cinematic engagement, Marks uses the phrase “ambient identification” in her “Haptic Visuality” to suggest an identification with the image that is not located in a single subject position or self-displacements in narrative characters.

48. I use the phrase the “film’s body” very precisely in *The Address of the Eye* to designate the material existence of the film as functionally embodied (and thus differentiated in existence from the filmmaker and spectator). The “film’s body” is not visible in the film except for its intentional agency and diacritical motion. It is not anthropomorphic, but it is also not reducible to the cinematic apparatus (in the same way that we are not reducible to our material physiology); it is discovered and located only reflexively as a quasi-subjective and embodied “eye” that has a discrete—if ordinarily prepersonal and anonymous—existence.

49. Iris Marion Young, “Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation,” in *Throwing like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 161.

50. Elizabeth Grosz, “Merleau-Ponty and Irigaray in the Flesh,” in “Sense and Sensuousness: Merleau-Ponty,” special issue, *Thesis Eleven* 36 (1993): 46.

my lived body enacts this reversibility in perception and subverts the very notion of *onscreen* and *offscreen* as mutually exclusive sites or subject positions. Indeed, much of the “pleasure of the text” emerges from this carnal subversion of fixed subject positions, from the body as a “third” term that both exceeds and yet is within discrete representation; thus, as Barthes has shown us, “it would be wrong . . . to imagine a rigid distinction between the body inside and the body outside the text, because the subversive force of the body is partly in its capacity to function both figuratively and literally.”⁵¹ All the bodies in the film experience—those onscreen and offscreen (and possibly the screen itself)—are potentially subversive bodies. They have the capacity to function both figuratively and literally. They are pervasive and diffusely situated in the film experience. Yet these bodies are also materially circumscribed and can be specifically located, each arguably becoming the “grounding body” of sense and meaning since each exists in a dynamic figure-ground relation of reversibility with the others. Furthermore, these bodies also subvert their own fixity from within, commingling flesh and consciousness, reversing the human and technological sensorium, so that meaning, and where it is made, does not have a discrete origin in either spectators’ bodies or cinematic representation but emerges in their conjunction.

We might name this subversive body in the film experience the *cinesthetic subject*—a neologism that derives not only from *cinema* but also from two scientific terms that designate particular structures and conditions of the human sensorium: *synaesthesia* and *coenaesthesia*. Both of these structures and conditions foreground the complexity and richness of the more general bodily experience that grounds our particular experience of cinema, and both also point to ways in which the cinema uses our dominant senses of vision and hearing to speak comprehensibly to our other senses.

In strict medical discourse, psychoneurologist Richard Cytowic notes that synaesthesia is defined as an “*involuntary experience* in which the stimulation of one sense cause[s] a perception in another.”⁵² Synaesthetes regularly, vividly, and automatically perceive sound as color or shapes as tastes. One woman explains, “I most often see sound as colors, with a certain sense of pressure on my skin. . . . I am seeing, but not with my eyes, if that makes sense,” and, as an example, she says that she experiences her husband’s voice

51. Michael Moriarty, *Roland Barthes* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 190.

52. Richard E. Cytowic, M.D., *The Man Who Tasted Shapes: A Bizarre Medical Mystery Offers Revolutionary Insights into Emotions, Reasoning, and Consciousness* (New York: Warner, 1993), 52. Subsequent references will be cited in the text. For more recent works on synaesthesia see John E. Harrison and Simon Baron-Cohen, eds., *Synaesthesia: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996); and Kevin T. Dann, *Bright Colors Falsely Seen: Synaesthesia and the Search for Transcendental Knowledge* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

and laughter not metaphorically but literally as “a wonderful golden brown, with a flavor of crisp, buttery toast” (118). “Synaesthesia,” says Cytowic, “is the most immediate and direct kind of experience. . . . It is sensual and concrete, not some intellectualized concept pregnant with meaning. It emphasizes limbic processes [over higher cortical functions of the brain] which break through to consciousness. It’s about feeling and being, something more immediate than analyzing what is happening and talking about it” (176). Nonetheless, this does not mean that synaesthetic experience as “more immediate than analysis” escapes culture—as evident in laughter perceived as the taste of “crisp, buttery toast.”

Clinical synaesthesia is uncommon in the general population although, to some degree, a less extreme experience of “cross-modal transfer” among our senses is common enough to have warranted the term’s use and the condition’s description in ordinary language. Artists have long been interested in synaesthesia (as were the Symbolists and Eisenstein); indeed, quite a number of them also have been synaesthetes (novelist Vladimir Nabokov is but one example). Furthermore, in common usage synaesthesia refers not only to an *involuntary* transfer of feeling among the senses but also to the *volitional* use of metaphors in which terms relating to one kind of sense impression are used to describe a sense impression of other kinds. This move from an involuntary and immediate exchange *within* the sensorium to a conscious and mediated exchange *between* the sensorium and language not only reminds us of the aforementioned “synaesthesia-loving Symbolist movement”⁵³ but also points to a sensual economy of language dependent on the lived body as simultaneously the fundamental *source* of language, its primary *sign producer*, and its primary *sign*. Thus, in *Metaphors We Live By* linguist George Lakoff and philosopher Mark Johnson argue that figural language emerges and takes its meaning from our physical experience (however disciplined by culture),⁵⁴ and Cytowic, working with synaesthetes, concludes that “the coherence of metaphors . . . [is] rooted in concrete experience, which is what gives metaphors their meaning. . . . [M]etaphor is experiential and visceral” (206). This relation between the *literal sensible body* and metaphor as *sensible figure* is central to both our understanding of cinematic intelligibility and of the cinesthetic subject who is moved and touched by going to the movies—and it is an issue to which I will return.

The neologism of the film viewer as a “cinesthetic subject” also draws on another scientific term used to designate a bodily condition: *coenaesthesia*. Neither pathological nor rare, coenaesthesia names the potential and perception of one’s whole sensorial being. Thus, the term is used to describe the

53. Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 291.

54. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

general and open sensual condition of the child at birth. The term also refers to a certain prelogical and nonhierarchical unity of the sensorium that exists as the carnal foundation for the later hierarchical arrangement of the senses achieved through cultural immersion and practice. In this regard, Cytowic notes, it has been demonstrated that young children—not yet fully acculturated to a particularly disciplined organization of the sensorium—experience a greater “horizontalization” of the senses and consequently a greater capacity for cross-modal sensorial exchange than do adults (95–96).⁵⁵ In sum, whereas synaesthesia refers to the exchange and translation between and among the senses, coenaesthesia refers to the way in which equally available senses become variously heightened and diminished, the power of history and culture regulating their boundaries as it arranges them into a normative hierarchy.

There are those instances, however, when we do not have to be clinically diagnosed synaesthetes or very young children to challenge those boundaries and transform those hierarchies. The undoing of regulatory borders and orders among the senses can occur in a variety of situations. For example, Elaine Scarry, pointing to our encounters with something extraordinarily beautiful, writes:

A visual event may reproduce itself in the realm of touch (as when the seen face incites an ache of longing in the hand). . . . This crisscrossing of the senses may happen in any direction. Wittgenstein speaks not only about beautiful visual events prompting motions in the hand but . . . about heard music that later prompts a ghostly sub-anatomical event in his teeth and gums. So, too, an act of touch may reproduce itself as an acoustical event or even an abstract idea, the way whenever Augustine touches something smooth, he begins to think of music and God.⁵⁶

In other instances involuntary cross-modal sensory exchange often becomes foregrounded in conscious experience through perception-altering substances such as drugs. As Merleau-Ponty notes in *Phenomenology of Perception*, “A subject under mescaline finds a piece of iron, strikes the window-sill with it and exclaims: ‘This is magic’: the trees are growing greener. The barking of a dog is found to attract light in an indescribable way, and is re-echoed in the right foot” (229).

In a critique of objectivist science that well might be applied to objectivist reductions of the film experience, the philosopher goes on to say: “Synaesthetic perception is the rule, and we are unaware of it only because scientific knowledge shifts the centre of gravity of experience, so that we have

55. See also Ackerman, *Natural History*, 289.

56. Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 4.

unlearned how to see, hear, and generally speaking, feel, in order to deduce, from our bodily organization and the world as the physicist conceives it, what are to see, hear and feel" (229). We could add that we are also unaware of synaesthetic perception because it *is* the rule, and we have become so habituated to the constant cross-modal translations of our sensory experience that they are transparent to us except in their most extreme instances. Exemplary here for its ordinary quality is the common experience of those of us who like to cook—and eat—of *tasting* a recipe as we *read* it. This commutative act between the visual comprehension of abstract language and its carnal meaning not only attests to a grounding synaesthesia that enables such translation but also again demonstrates "the subversive force of the body . . . in its capacity to function *both* figuratively *and* literally." My eyes read and comprehend the recipe cognitively, but they are not abstracted from my body, which can—albeit in a transformed and somewhat diffused act of gustatory sense-making—taste the meal. Why, then, is it not possible that we might partake even more intensely of *Babette's Feast* (Gabriel Axel, 1987)? And to what extent are we being quite literal as well as figurative when we describe the meals in *Like Water for Chocolate* (Alfonso Arau, 1994) as "a feast for the eyes"? Here, in a popular review of *Big Night* (Stanley Tucci and Campbell Scott, 1996), Lisa Schwarzbaum makes some apposite discriminations: "The difference between a movie that makes you admire food and one that makes you love food is the difference between a dinner table posed like a still life in Martin Scorsese's *The Age of Innocence* [1993] and a clove of garlic sliced so intently you can practically inhale its ornery perfume in Scorsese's *Goodfellas* [1990]. One engages the eye and the other arouses all five senses."⁵⁷

This is not mere rhetoric. Philosophy aside, recent developments in neuroscience have indicated that "the boundaries between the senses are blurred."⁵⁸ Furthermore, a series of experiments has shown not only that the brain's visual cortex is activated when subjects—who are blindfolded—touch objects with their fingers but also that when researchers blocked the subjects' visual cortex, their tactile perception was impaired. Apparently, research has also shown that "the olfactory area of the brain also involves vision," particularly in relation to the perception of color.⁵⁹ We are, in fact, all synaesthetes—and thus seeing a movie can also be an experience of touching, tasting, and smelling it.

In sum, the cinesthetic subject names the film viewer (and, for that matter, the filmmaker) who, through an embodied vision in-formed by the

57. Lisa Schwarzbaum, "Four-Star Feast," review of *Big Night*, dir. Campbell Scott and Stanley Tucci, *Entertainment Weekly*, Sep. 20, 1996, 49–50.

58. Lila Guterman, "Do You Smell What I Hear? Neuroscientists Discover Crosstalk among the Senses," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Dec. 14, 2001, A17.

59. *Ibid.*

knowledge of the other senses, “makes sense” of what it is to “see” a movie—both “in the flesh” and as it “matters.” Merleau-Ponty tells us that the sensible-sentient lived body “is a ready-made system of equivalents and transpositions from one sense to another. The senses translate each other without any need of an interpreter, and they are mutually comprehensible without the intervention of any idea” (235). Thus, the cinesthetic subject both touches and is touched by the screen—able to commute seeing to touching and back again *without a thought* and, through sensual and cross-modal activity, able to experience the movie as both here and there rather than clearly locating the site of cinematic experience as onscreen or offscreen. As a lived body and a film viewer, the cinesthetic subject subverts the prevalent objectification of vision that would reduce sensorial experience at the movies to an impoverished “cinematic sight” or posit anorexic theories of identification that have no flesh on them, that cannot stomach “a feast for the eyes.”

In a particularly relevant—and resonant—passage Merleau-Ponty elaborates on the intercommunication of the senses, not only as they provide us access to the rich structure of perceived things but also as they reveal the simultaneity of sensory cooperation and the carnal knowledge it provides us:

The form of objects is not their geometrical shape: it stands in a certain relation to their specific nature, and appeals to our other senses as well as sight. The form of a fold in linen or cotton shows us the resilience or dryness of the fibre, the coldness or warmth of the material. . . . In the jerk of the twig from which a bird has just flown, we read its flexibility or elasticity. . . . One sees the weight of a block of cast iron which sinks in the sand, the fluidity of water and the viscosity of syrup. (229–30)

(Here, citing this passage, I recall *The Piano* and my own bodily response to the humid heaviness generated by Ada’s skirt hem and boots as they are sucked into the viscous mud of the forest, or, later, the drag on my proprioception caused by the weight and volume of her layers of wet skirts and petticoats as she tries to drown herself.)⁶⁰

Continuing this discussion of the cross-modality of the senses, Merleau-Ponty writes: “If, then, taken as incomparable qualities, the ‘data of the different senses’ belong to so many separate worlds, each one in its particular essence being a manner of modulating the thing, they all communicate through their significant core” (230). That significant core is, of course, the lived body: that field of conscious and sensible material being on which experience is gathered, synopsised, and diffused in a form of prelogical meaning that, even as it is diffused, nonetheless “co-heres.” This is because,

60. For discussion of the way clothing (and touch) functions textually and symbolically in *The Piano* see Stella Bruzzi, “Tempestuous Petticoats: Costume and Desire in *The Piano*,” *Screen* 36, no. 3 (autumn 1995): 257–66.

the philosopher says, “My body is the fabric into which all objects are woven, and it is, at least in relation to the perceived world, the general instrument of my ‘comprehension’” (235). Thus, while the senses each provide discretely structured modes of access to the world, they are always already interactive and “transposable, at least within certain limits, onto each other’s domains”—and this because “they are the senses of *one and the same subject, operating simultaneously in a single world.*”⁶¹ We could say, then, that it is the lived body (as both conscious subject and material object) that provides the (pre)logical premises, the foundational grounds, for the cinesthetic subject, who is constituted at the movies as ambiguously located both “here” off-screen and “there” onscreen. Indeed, it is to its grounding in the corporeality of the spectator’s consciousness that any theory of cinematic intelligibility must return.

III

Thus we are led back to the question of the specific nature of the relation between the body and cinematic representation, between the literal and the figural. For all my argument about the cross-modal communication of our senses and the synthetic quality of the lived body that comprehends both our sensorium and our capacity for language, it is phenomenologically—and logically—evident that I do not touch the cinema, nor does it touch me in precisely the same way in which I touch or am touched by others and things unmediated by cinema (or other perceptual technologies). However hard I may hold my breath or grasp my theater seat, I don’t have precisely the same wild ride watching *Speed* that I would were I actually on that runaway bus. I also don’t taste or smell or digest those luscious dishes in *Like Water for Chocolate* (or, for that matter, in my cookbook) in the same way I would if, unmediated by cinema, they were set on the table before me. Where, then, does this leave us at the movies? Or as theorists of the cinema? Are we condemned to speak of our sensual engagement of the cinema as confounding—our material responsiveness to films understood only, as Dyer puts it, “in some still unclear sense ‘as if real’”? And Dyer is not alone here: if we return to those popular reviews with which I began, his uncertainty and ambivalence are duplicated, albeit less reflectively. *The Piano*’s “salt air can *almost* be tasted” one reviewer tells us—at the same time he speaks of “*immediate* tactile shock.” The reviewer of *Toy Story* says the plastic Tyrannosaurus rex “is so glossy and tactile you feel *as if* you could reach out and stroke its hard, shiny head”—at the same time he says that “the waxy sheen” of toy soldiers “strike[s] *Proustian* chords of recognition,” suggesting a sense memory less reflectively thought

61. Grosz, “Merleau-Ponty and Irigaray,” 56n14 (emphasis added).

than reexperienced. This complex ambivalence and confusion about the literal and figural nature of our sensuous engagement with the cinema is wonderfully condensed in a review of *Eat Drink Man Woman* (Ang Lee, 1994), which tells us, “The presentation of food on-screen is, in all senses of the word, delectable.”⁶² Here, not only is onscreen food “presented” rather than “represented,” but it is also experienced as “delectable” both literally in “all senses” and figurally in all senses of “the word.”

In *The Rule of Metaphor* philosopher Paul Ricoeur writes: “If there is a point in our experience where living expression states living existence, it is where our movement up the entropic slope of language encounters the movement by which we come back this side of the distinctions between actuality, action, production, motion” (309). Clearly, these ambivalent articulations of the sensual experience of the lived body in relation to cinematic representation mark just such a point. I want, therefore, to consider the ambivalence and confusion of our sense at the movies of having both a “real” (or literal) sensual experience and an “as-if-real” (or figural) sensual experience. I also want to argue that this ambivalence has a precise phenomenological structure that is grounded in the nonhierarchical *reciprocity* and figure-ground *reversibility* of “having sense” and “making sense”—meaning thus constituted as both a *carnal matter* and a *conscious meaning* that emerge *simultaneously* (if in various ratios) from *the single system of flesh and consciousness that is the lived body*. This is another way of saying that the body and language (whether film language or “natural” language) do not simply oppose or reflect each other. Rather, they more radically *in-form* each other in a fundamentally nonhierarchical and reversible relationship that, in certain circumstances, manifests itself as a vacillating, ambivalent, often ambiguously undifferentiated, and thus “unnameable” or “undecidable” experience.⁶³

What, then, might it mean to understand what is meant by “all senses of the word”? Or to describe our sensual engagement in the cinema as “real” and “as if real” *in the same breath*—and, more often than not, *in the same sentence*? Or for me to use such “wordplay” in describing our literal bodies as “matter that means” and our figural representations as “meaning that mat-

62. Leonard Maltin, review of *Eat Drink Man Woman*, dir. Ang Lee, *Cinemania 96*, CD-ROM (Microsoft, 1992–95).

63. I use the term *vacillate* rather than *oscillate* purposefully to distinguish between a rigid sense of alternation and one less binary and regular. On this see James Elkins, *On Pictures and the Words That Fail Them* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Quoting the work of Rosalind Krauss on what she calls the *informe*, Elkins writes of this schema: “The *informe* . . . is a ‘disturbance . . . in the modality of *alteration*, of ambivalence,’ so that there can no longer be a stable distinction between figure and ground, or any pair of ‘alternating’ opposites. Nothing is secure, and forms and figures vacillate or shimmer rather than oscillate in a regular motion. The *informe* is a principle that works against the concepts of antimony, binarism, opposition, structure, and ultimately, figure itself” (106).

ters”? Highlighted in these articulations—accomplished in and through language—is the very chiasmatic structure of *reversibility* that exists between but also subtends the body and consciousness and the body and representation. Whether perceived as an *ambivalent vacillation between* or an *ambiguous conflation* of the real and the as-if real or the lived body (matter that means) and representation (meaning as matter), this experience of the fundamental reversibility of body and language is deeply felt—and often articulated—in these unnameable and undecidable descriptions that nonetheless express quite clearly the ambiguous and ambivalent point at which “our movement up the entropic slope of language encounters the movement by which we come back this side of the distinctions between actuality, action, production, motion.” Thus, the wordplay at work in popular reviews, in Dyer’s comments, and in my own phenomenological descriptions is quite precise and empirically based in the structure and sense of embodied experience itself. Indeed, it helps us not only to understand the enormous capacity of language to say what we mean but also to reveal the very structure of our meaningful experience.

The chiasmatic relation in which the subjective sense of embodied experience and the objective sense of representation are perceived as reversibly figure and ground and thus both commensurable and incommensurable may, in fact, be especially heightened and privileged by the medium of cinema. This is because the cinema uses “lived modes” of perceptual and sensory experience (seeing, movement, and hearing the most dominant) as “sign-vehicles” of representation.⁶⁴ Using such lived modes, the cinema exists as an ambivalent and ambiguous sensual and perceptual structure. That is, the cinema simultaneously represents experience through dynamic *presentation* (the always verb-driven and ongoing present tense of sensory perception that, through technology, constitutes and enables the film for us and for itself)—and it also presents experience as *representation* (the post hoc fixity of already-perceived and now expressed images that stand as equivalent to noun forms). In this regard, although I have in this chapter emphasized the commensurability of body and representation because dominant theory has so long insisted on their incommensurability, I certainly do not deny the possibility of the latter—particularly in the film experience. Indeed, coming from an alternative perspective, Lesley Stern deals with this incommensurability by privileging the uncanny in—and of—cinema as an experience of disjuncture between the spectator’s lived body and cinematic representation:

64. Umberto Eco uses the term *sign-vehicle* as distinguished from sign-content or meaning. This term seems to me more useful than the term *signifier* in reminding us of the active and various material nature of the “stuff” through which content and meaning are actively conveyed. See Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 52–54.

The cinema, while encouraging a certain bodily knowing, also, and in that very process, opens up the recognition of a peculiar kind of non-knowing, a sort of bodily aphasia, a gap which sometimes may register as a sense of dread in the pit of the stomach, or in a soaring, euphoric sensation. . . . Out of these tensions are generated a series of differences, gaps or discontinuities between knowing and feeling that sometimes sharpen into a sense of the uncanny.⁶⁵

Nonetheless, this sense of the uncanny is sufficiently occasional to be marked as a figure against the more necessary and continuous ground of our existence in which knowing and feeling are generally undifferentiated and generally lived as commensurable—this because we are incorporated *systemically* as embodied and conscious subjects who both “have” and “make” sense *simultaneously*. Indeed, it is an undifferentiated experience of sense that grounds and conjoins body and language, feeling and knowledge—their coincidence so ordinary in our experience that their sudden divergence is marked as frustrating or uncanny or, in the extreme, pathological. Emphasizing this intimate conjunction of the lived body and representation, Alphonso Lingis tells us: “My body as the inner sphere where representations are perceptible . . . and my body as an image seen by rebound from the world, are inscribed the one in [the] other. . . . The density of the body is that of ‘pre-things,’ not yet differentiated into reality and illusion. . . . [The body] is a precinct of signifiers.”⁶⁶ And Ricoeur, emphasizing the intimate conjunction of representation and the lived body, tells us that language not only designates “its other” but also “itself”—and in so doing, it is not only referential but also radically reflective, bearing within itself “*the knowledge of its being related to being*.” Ricoeur continues: “This reflective language allows language to know that it is installed in being. The usual relationship between language and its referent is reversed: language becomes aware of itself in the self-articulation of the being which it is about. Far from locking language up inside itself, this reflective consciousness is the very consciousness of its openness” (304). In that we are both embodied and conscious, in that we both have and make sense, the literal and the figural inform each other—as they inform us. The “matter that means” and the “meaning that matters” emerge in a reciprocal and reversible figure-ground relation that is the lived body *having a sense of the world* and *making sense in the word*. Thus the (figural) phrase “in all senses of the word” resonates with ambiguity and, in its “knowledge of its being related to being,” it reflexively suggests its own reversal to the (literal) phrase “in all words of the senses”—and this without a loss of

65. Stern, “I Think, Sebastian,” 356–57.

66. Alphonso Lingis, “Bodies That Touch Us,” in “Sense and Sensuousness: Merleau-Ponty,” special issue, *Thesis Eleven* 36 (1993): 162.

either reference or reflection, even as the focus and direction of the emphasis changes.

Our embodied experience of the movies, then, is an experience of seeing, hearing, touching, moving, tasting, smelling in which our sense of the literal and the figural may sometimes vacillate, may sometimes be perceived in uncanny discontinuity, but most usually configures to make undifferentiated sense and meaning together—albeit in a quite specific way. Although watching *The Piano*, I cannot *fully* touch Ada's leg through her stocking, although the *precise* smells of fresh laundry and the warmth of the linens that I see in *Pretty Baby* (Louis Malle, 1978) remain in some way vague to me, although I cannot taste the *exact* flavors of the pork noodles I see in loving close-up in *Tampopo*, I still do have a partially fulfilled sensory experience of these things that make them both intelligible to and meaningful for me. Thus, even if the intentional objects of my experience at the movies are not wholly realized by me and are grasped in a sensual distribution that would be differently structured were I outside the theater, I nonetheless do have a *real* sensual experience that is not reducible either to the satisfaction of merely two of my senses or to sensual analogies and metaphors constructed only “after the fact” through the cognitive operations of conscious thought. The pressing question is, of course, what kind of “different” sensual fulfillment do we experience at the movies? That is, what is the structure of such fulfillment, and how does it occur so that, in fact, we experience films not merely as a *reduction* of our sensual being but also as an *enhancement* of it?

First of all, in the theater (as elsewhere) my lived body sits in readiness as both a sensual and sense-making potentiality. Focused on the screen, my “postural schema” or intentional comportment takes its shape in mimetic sympathy with (or shrinking recoil from) what I see and hear.⁶⁷ If I am engaged by what I see, my intentionality streams toward the world onscreen, marking itself not merely in my conscious attention but always also in my bodily tension: the sometimes flagrant, sometimes subtle, but always dynamic investment, inclination, and arrangement of my material being. However, insofar as I cannot literally touch, smell, or taste the particular figure on the screen that solicits my sensual desire, my body's intentional trajectory, seeking a sensible object to fulfill this sensual solicitation, will *reverse its direction* to locate its partially frustrated sensual grasp on something more literally accessible. That more literally accessible sensual object is *my own subjectively felt lived body*. Thus, “on the rebound” from the screen—and without

67. On relevant issues of mimesis see Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body*, 52–53; and Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1992). Taussig, in particular, understands mimesis as a corporeal activity that does not require the translation of conscious thought to be enacted or understood. On this carnal empathy in relation to bodies and objects onscreen see also Williams, “Film Bodies.”

a reflective thought—I will reflexively turn toward my own carnal, sensual, and sensible being to touch myself touching, smell myself smelling, taste myself tasting, and, in sum, sense my own sensuality.⁶⁸

Certainly, this feeling and the sense I have of sensing at the movies is in some ways *reduced* in comparison with direct sensual experience—this because of my only partially fulfilled sensual grasp of my cinematic object of desire. But just as certainly, in other ways, the sense I have of sensing when I watch a film is also *enhanced* in comparison with much direct sensual experience—this because my only partially fulfilled sensual grasp of the original cinematic object is completed not in the realization of that object but through my own body, where my sensual grasp is reflexively doubled since, in this rebound from the screen, I have become not only the toucher but also the touched. (This sensual enhancement in which the body reflexively reflects—without a thought—on its own sensuality emerges in the most intense of direct engagements in which we “feel ourselves feeling”: a fantastic dish or incredible glass of wine in which we reflectively taste ourselves tasting, great sex in which we lose ourselves in feeling ourselves feel.)

In the film experience, because our consciousness is not directed toward our own bodies but toward the film’s world, we are caught up without a thought (because our thoughts are “elsewhere”) in this vacillating and reversible sensual structure that *both* differentiates *and* connects the sense of my literal body to the sense of the figurative bodies and objects I see on the screen. Within this structure my experience of my sensorium becomes *heightened* and *intensified* at the same time that it is perceived as *general* and *diffuse*. That is, insofar as my lived body senses *itself* in the film experience, the particular sensible properties of the onscreen figural objects that sensually provoke me (the weight and slightly scratchy feel of a wool dress, the smoothness of a stone, the texture and resilience of another’s skin) will be perceived

68. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The Philosopher and His Shadow,” in *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 166. Although he is discussing a more consciously reflexive experience of our lived body’s capacity to sensually sense itself than our experience at the movies, the philosopher is still helpful to our understanding of the way in which our sensual engagement can be “turned back” on itself to both intensify sensual awareness and diffuse its specific content (a point related to our sense of the film experience to which I will shortly return):

There is a relation of my body to itself which makes it the *vinculum* of the self and things. When my right hand touches my left, I am aware of it as a “physical thing.” But at the same moment, if I wish, an extraordinary event takes place: here is my left hand as well starting to perceive my right. . . . Thus I touch myself touching; my body accomplishes “a sort of reflection.” In it, through it, there is not just the unidirectional relationship of the one who perceives to what he perceives. The relationship is reversed, the touched hand becomes the touching hand, and I am obliged to say that *the sense of touch is here diffused into the body*—that body is a “perceiving thing,” a “subject-object.”

in a somewhat vague and diffuse way. This diffusion of the film object's particular sensual properties, however, does not diminish the sensual intensity of my engagement with them since they are what solicit me and are where my intentional interest invests itself. That is, insofar as I am sensually solicited, provoked by, and consciously located in figural objects that are *elsewhere* (on the screen where my senses partially grasp them), I am *not* focused on my own body's sensual particularity either. On the rebound from my unfulfilled bodily intentions to feel fully the figures onscreen but still consciously intending toward them and sensing them partially, my sense of my own literal and particular incorporation will also be general and diffuse—even as it may be quite intense. (The form of “self-touching” I’m discussing here—a form that is consciously “other” directed—is thus different in structure from forms of conscious self-touching in which both one’s body and one’s consciousness are self-directed; in this latter kind of reflexivity the doubled intention and attention toward oneself often become so highly reflective that despite one’s autoerotic goals, it can undo carnal pleasure.)⁶⁹ In sum, my gesture of specifically intending toward the screen to rebound diffusely on myself ultimately “opens up” my body to a sensuality that is both literal and figural.

Watching *The Piano*, for example, my skin's desire to touch streams toward the screen to rebound back on itself and then forward to the screen again and again. In the process my skin becomes literally and intensely sensitized to the texture and tactility I see figured on the screen, but it is neither the particularity of Ada's taffetas and woollens nor the particularity of the silk blouse I'm actually wearing that I feel on its surface. On the one hand (so much for figures of speech!), I cannot fully touch taffeta and wool in this scenario although I can cross-modally grasp their texture and weight diffusely. On the other hand, although I do have the capacity to fully—and literally—feel the specific texture and weight of the silk blouse I am wearing, my tactile desire is located elsewhere in the onscreen taffeta and wool, and so, intending elsewhere, I feel the specificity of the silk on my skin only partially and diffusely. What is more, in this unthought carnal movement of an ongoing streaming toward and turning back of tactile desire, my sense of touch—“rebounding” from its only partial fulfillment on and by the screen to its only partial fulfillment in and by my own body—is *intensified*. My skin becomes extremely, if generally, sensitized. Indeed, this reflexive and reflective exchange between and diffusion of my “sense” of touch in both the lit-

69. Here we might think of states in which reflexively sensing ourselves cry, we stop; how it is nearly impossible to tickle oneself; how self-consciousness about our laughing results in it becoming forced. It also helps us understand how sexual desire is other-directed during masturbation and needs an object that is not only oneself so as to avoid a reflexivity that is so doubled as to cause conscious reflection on sexual desire itself.

eral and the figural has opened me to *all* these fabrics and their textures—indeed, has made the literal touch of even a specific fabric on my skin an overwhelmingly *general* and intensely *extensive* mode of being.

It bears emphasizing again that the bodily reflexivity I am foregrounding here is not consciously reflective. Indeed, in most sensual experiences at the movies the cinesthetic subject does not *think* his or her own literal body (or clothing) and is not, as a result, rudely thrust offscreen back into his or her seat in response to a perceived discontinuity with the figural bodies and textures onscreen. Rather, the cinesthetic subject feels his or her literal body as only one side of an *irreducible and dynamic relational structure of reversibility and reciprocity* that has as its other side the figural objects of bodily provocation on the screen. This relational structure can, of course, be refused or broken—and, indeed, it often is when the sensual experience becomes too intense or unpleasurable. However, leaving the theater because one has become literally sickened or covering one's eyes is hardly ever the outcome of a thought. It is a reflexive, protective action that attests to the literal body's reciprocal and reversible relation to the figures on the screen, to its sense of actual investment in a dense, albeit also diffuse, experience that is carnally as well as consciously meaningful—an experience, as Lingis notes, that is “not yet differentiated into reality and illusion.” Watching *The Piano*, for example, because I might feel it too intensely on both my body and hers (both bodies, to a degree, “mine”), I could not literally bear to see Stewart figurally chop off Ada's finger with an ax. I therefore not only cringed in my seat but also covered my eyes with fingers that again foresaw—in urgency rather than thought—the impending violation.

IV

Let us recall Lingis's formulation: “My body as the inner sphere where representations are perceptible, . . . and my body as an image seen by rebound from the world, are inscribed the one in the other.” Both body and language or figure pervade and inform each other in a reversible and reflexive intentional structure. Thus, having considered the literal and carnal aspects of the figural phrase “in all senses of the word” (figural because we “know” words don't really have senses), we need also to consider the figural and representational aspects of the phrase in the literality of its reversal to “in all words of the senses” (literal because we “know” words do, indeed, describe the senses).

Indeed, my argument here has emphasized that the sensual language most people (and even a few film theorists) use to describe their cinematic experience is not necessarily or solely metaphoric—hence my earlier mention of Lakoff and Johnson and Cytowic on the corporeal bases of meta-

phor.⁷⁰ Here, however, I want to go further and suggest that “all words of the senses” used so often to describe the film experience are *not* metaphoric. First of all, traditional rhetoric describes metaphors as emerging from a *hierarchical relation* between a primary and secondary context of language use: a word is understood as literal insofar as it is used in a normatively habituated context. The same word becomes understood as figural or metaphoric only when it is used in an unusually extended sense and transferred beyond its normal context (indeed, the word *metaphor* means “carried beyond”).⁷¹ If, however, we acknowledge that it is the lived body that provides a normative ground and context for experience and that it operates, from the first, as a synaesthetic system in which the senses cooperate and one sense is commutable to and understood as reciprocal and reversible with the others, then we cannot argue that—in the undifferentiated sensuality of the film experience—there exists the clear contextual hierarchy necessary to the structure and function of metaphor. That is, once we understand that vision is informed by and informs our other senses in a dynamic structure that is not necessarily or always sensually hierarchical, it is no longer metaphorical to say that we “touch” a film or that we are “touched” by it. Touch is no longer a metaphorical stretch in the film experience, no longer carried beyond its normal context and its literal meaning. Indeed, we could say that it is only in afterthought that our sensual descriptions of the movies seem metaphorical. Our received knowledge tells us that film is primarily a visual and aural medium; it thus “naturally” follows that its appeal to those senses other than sight and hearing are understood as figural rather than literal. By now, however, I hope to have shown that such habituated knowledge is reductive and does not accurately describe our actual sensory experience at the movies. When we watch a film, all our senses are mobilized, and often, depending on the particular solicitations of a given film or filmic moment, our naturalized sensory hierarchy and habitual sensual economy are altered and rearranged. In that experience the literal and figural reciprocate and reverse themselves as “sense”—primary and secondary contexts confused, hierarchy and thus the grounds of metaphor undermined if not completely undone.

Writing about the relationship between vision and touch in painting, art historian Richard Shiff tells us: “To speak of reciprocity is to eliminate the possibility of setting subjective (or deviant) metaphorical elements against objective (or normative) literal ones. *Within the flux of reciprocity either every-*

70. See also sociologist Jack Katz, *How Emotions Work* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), who points out in relation to metaphorical description: “It is the subject’s experience and not the analysis that introduces the element of metaphor in the first place” (299).

71. Hubert G. Alexander, *The Language and Logic of Philosophy* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1967), 92.

thing becomes metaphorically figured or everything has the reality effect of the literal.”⁷² Evoking previous discussion here of the nature of the “as if real,” particularly as its “not realness” is challenged by the scare quotes that always surround it, Shiff suggests that within this flux of reciprocity “[o]ne could refer . . . to a figurative literalness”—a usage that “would eliminate the need for quotation marks, which do no more or less than counter the normalizing of literality by adding a level of distance or figuration.” Shiff then asks, “What kind of representation or linguistic construction conflates the literal and figurative in such a manner?” (158). The answer is not metaphor but *catachresis*, “sometimes called *false and improper metaphor*.” Catachresis, Shiff tells us, “mediates and conflates the metaphoric and the literal” and is used “when no proper, or literal, term is available” (150). Thus, borrowing a term from one context to name something in another, we speak of the “arm” of a chair or the “head” of a pin for want of anything else we might appropriately call it.⁷³ Catachresis is differentiated from proper metaphor insofar as it forces us to confront and name a *gap* in language or, as Ricoeur puts it, the “failure of proper words, and the need, the necessity to supplement their deficiency and failure” (63). Thus, when we avail ourselves of catachresis, we are on Ricoeur’s “entropic slope of language”—seeking some adequate linguistic expression of a real experience. Furthermore, insofar as the catachretic term substitutes a *body part* (the “head” of a pin, the “arm” of a chair), we are emphatically at the point where our movement up the “entropic slope of language encounters the movement by which we come back this side of the distinction between actuality, action, production, motion,” that point “where living

72. Richard Shiff, “Cézanne’s Physicality: The Politics of Touch,” in *The Language of Art History*, ed. Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 150 (emphasis added). Subsequent references will be cited in the text.

73. J. David Sapir, “The Anatomy of Metaphor,” in *The Social Use of Metaphor: Essays on the Anthropology of Rhetoric*, ed. J. David Sapir and J. Christopher Crocker (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977), elaborates:

There is a great variety of expressions often used as examples of metaphor that are nevertheless hardly ever felt as tropes. One common set uses body parts to represent the parts of material objects: “leg of a table,” “head of a pin,” “eye of a needle,” “foot of a mountain,” etc. Their representation is that of a replacement metaphor; thus for the “head of a pin” we have *pin* as the topic and *head* as the discontinuous term. Unlike a true metaphor, however, it lacks the continuous term, although one might be provided by circumlocution: “spherical or blunt circular and protruding end of a pin,” where the supplied phrase is simply an enumeration of the common features linking X with *head*. In most discourses the lack of a continuous term impedes us from sensing the juxtaposition of separate domains essential to a metaphor. We cannot easily answer the question “if it is not the head (of a pin), then what is it?” With a true metaphor we can. . . . William Empson prefers to call these expressions “transfers” and Max Black, along with most rhetoricians, considers them as types of *catachresis* which Black defines as “the use of a word in some new sense in order to remedy a gap in the vocabulary” (8).

expression states living existence.” This kind of (dare I say) “throwing up one’s hands” and naming something inadequately for want of a sufficient word involves “the *forced* extension of the meaning of words” rather than the linguistic play that is metaphor. In linguistic play we *voluntarily* use one term to substitute for another to create a variety of figural meanings. Thus, for Ricoeur, because its use is not voluntary, catachresis is not only a false metaphor but also should be excluded “from the field of figures” (53). Indeed, Ricoeur sees catachresis as “ultimately an *extension of denomination*” and thus “a phenomenon of language” rather than—as is metaphor—a phenomenon of “discourse” (180). Catachresis, then, functions neither as metaphor nor as figure. Rather, as Shiff writes, “Catachresis accomplishes precisely this: it applies a figurative sense as a literal one, while yet retaining the look or feel of figurality” (158). This is also precisely what cinema accomplishes through its modes of representation—and it is also precisely how the spectator’s lived body reciprocates so as to make matter meaningful and meaning matter. Thus, as Shiff tells us, “The reciprocity or shifting produced by catachresis undermines any polarization of subject and object, self and other, deviation and norm, touch and vision” (150). Indeed, “touch and vision are caught in reciprocal figuration: it is touch that is figuring vision, and vision that is figuring touch” (158).

Reciprocating the figurally literal representations of bodies and worldly things in the cinema, the spectator’s lived body in the film experience engages in a form of *sensual catachresis*. That is, it fills in the gap in its sensual grasp of the figural world onscreen by turning back on itself to reciprocally (albeit not sufficiently) “flesh it out” into literal physicalized sense. It is this same reciprocal relationship between the figural and literal that emerges also in our linguistic descriptions of the film experience. That is, trying to describe this complex reciprocity of body and representation, our phrases turn back on themselves to convey the figural sense of that experience as literally physicalized. For want of any more appropriate or sufficient way to name and convey the structure and meaning of the sensual experience of watching a film, reviewers reflexively turn back on language and apply its sensual figurations *literally*—both as a way to “flesh out” the image and as a way to adequate reflective description with the sense of actual cinematic experience. It is not particularly strange, then, that in both our film experience and our linguistic attempts to describe it, some ambivalent sense of metaphor and figurality remains—and we are caught up in a catachretic structure of sense-making that, because of its only partial sensual fulfillments but enhanced and intensified reciprocities in filling its own insufficiency, is experienced and described as *both real and “as if” real*.

Ricoeur discusses this tension between metaphorical and literal meaning

in relation to Wittgenstein's distinction between "seeing" and "seeing as," a formulation that parallels Dyer's "real" and "as if real":

The "seeing as" is . . . half thought and half experience. . . . "[S]eeing as" proffers the missing link in the chain of explanation. "Seeing as" is the sensible aspect of poetic language. . . . Now, a theory of fusion of sense and the sensible . . . appears to be incompatible with the . . . tension between metaphorical and literal meaning. On the other hand, once it is re-interpreted on the basis of "seeing as," the theory of fusion is perfectly compatible with interaction and tension theory. "Seeing X as Y" encompasses "X is *not* Y." . . . The borders of meaning are transgressed but not abolished. . . . "[S]eeing as" designates the *non-verbal* mediation of the metaphorical statement. With this acknowledgment, semantics finds its frontier; and, in so doing, it accomplishes its task. . . . If semantics meets its limit here, a phenomenology of imagination . . . could perhaps take over. (212–14)

A phenomenology of the cinesthetic subject having and making sense of the movies reveals to us the chiasmatic function of the lived body as both carnal and conscious, sensible and sentient—and how it is we can apprehend the sense of the screen both figurally and literally. That is, the lived body transparently provides the primary chiasmatic premises that connect and unite the senses as both carnally and consciously meaningful and also allow for their secondary differentiated meanings, one carnal and the other conscious. Correlatively, a phenomenology of the expression of this lived "fusion" and differentiation in the film experience reveals to us—through the catachretic articulations of language—the reversible and vacillating structure of the lived body's both unified and differentiated experience of cinematic sense. Ambivalently subtending fusion and difference, ambivalent in its structure and seemingly ambiguous in meaning, catachresis not only points to the "gap" between the figures of language and literal lived-body experience but also reversibly, chiasmatically, "bridges" and "fills" it. As Ricoeur writes above, catachresis "designates the *non-verbal mediation* of the metaphorical statement." In the film experience the nonverbal mediation of catachresis is achieved literally by the spectator's lived body in *sensual* relation to the film's *sensible* figuration. Indeed, as Ricoeur concludes: "Half thought, half experience, 'seeing as' is the intuitive relationship that holds sense and image together."⁷⁴

In the film experience, on the side of the cinesthetic subject experiencing a given film sensually, this reciprocity and chiasmatic (con)fusion of the literal and figural occurs in the lived body both having sense and making sense; and, on the side of reflective sensual description, this reciprocity and

74. Ricoeur, *Rule of Metaphor*, 213.

catachretic (con)fusion of the literal and figural occurs in language—whether cinematic or linguistic. Thus, the film experience—on both sides of the screen—mobilizes, confuses, reflectively differentiates, yet experientially unites lived bodies and language, and foregrounds the reciprocity and reversibility of sensible matter and sensual meaning. Our fingers, our skin and nose and lips and tongue and stomach and all the other parts of us understand what we see in the film experience. As cinesthetic subjects, then, we possess an embodied intelligence that opens our eyes far beyond their discrete capacity for vision, opens the film far beyond its visible containment by the screen, and opens language to a reflective knowledge of its carnal origins and limits. This is what, without a thought, my fingers know at the movies.

The Expanded Gaze in Contracted Space

Happenstance, Hazard, and the Flesh of the World

We . . . need a cosmic psychoanalysis, one that would abandon for a second human considerations and concern itself with the contradictions of the Cosmos. We . . . also need a psychoanalysis of matter which, at the same time that it accepted the human accompaniment of the imagination of matter, would pay closer attention to the profound play of the images of matter. —GASTON BACHELARD, *The Poetics of Space*

This chapter is about the existential possibilities and contradictions that mark our “gaze” at the world and others—and, more particularly, about these possibilities and contradictions as they have been materially embodied and dramatized in the cinematic vision of the great Polish director, Krzysztof Kieslowski. But this chapter is also about something more—namely, the ambiguous nature of the empirically concrete happenstance to which we, as objective and sensible beings, are always subject. As we—and our gazes—are materially embodied in the space-time of the world with other objective beings and things, we are engaged in incalculable encounters whose scope and consequences exceed not only our vision but also our agency. It is in this regard that Kieslowski’s cinema is exemplary. The ambiguity and paradoxical nature of happenstance as it both provides open possibilities and countless “chances” for subjective being to “become” and yet closes in on and fixes us with every objective move we make to determine our “fate” preoccupies Kieslowski. Indeed, it often structures his cinematic

A shorter version of this essay was first presented at “The Laws, Love, and Luck of Krzysztof Kieslowski,” a conference at UCLA, Apr. 21–22, 2001, under the title “The Expanded Gaze in Contracted Space: Krzysztof Kieslowski and the Matter of Transcendence.” I wish to thank its organizer, Kenneth Reinhard, without whose kind invitation I would not have been provoked to write about a filmmaker whose work has always deeply moved me.

vision and philosophical gaze at the world in what Gaston Bachelard calls a “harsh dialectics.”¹

This harsh dialectics is a condition of human existence. Embodied as sensing and sensible objects, we are thrown into the material world and are a part of it—and, however much, as subjects who transcend our objective status through our consciousness and agency, we would like to forget this fact of existence, we are always caught up short by it. That is, we are surprised again and again by the radical contingency and vulnerability of our flesh in its very “here-ness” and “now-ness,” and by the always consequential ways in which it really “matters.” Despite the transcendent capacities of our subjective consciousness to will, dream, imagine, think, and project itself where and when it is not, our objective flesh is always also immanent—thrown “here” and “now” into a space-time occupied by other immanent things and beings in dynamically material combinations and consequences that we may often think but cannot begin to imagine. Indeed, in the reflexivity of what we might call (after Bachelard) our “material imagination,” this “thrown-ness” is often not only registered as startling or uncanny but also as frighteningly arbitrary or irrational. Thus, as Bachelard puts it: “Man and the world are in a community of dangers. They are dangerous for each other” (176).²

If, however, our material immanence and “thrown-ness” in the world expose us to the inherent dangers of existence and set necessary and sufficient *limits* on our agency and rationality, our material immanence and thrown-ness also set the necessary and sufficient conditions of our inherent *possibilities* for existential freedom. Indeed, the facticity of our matter—and of our mattering—is precisely in this objective thrown-ness: in the utterly unique and constantly self-displacing specificity of “being just here” and “being just now” that each of us subjectively enjoys and suffers as we encounter the world and others in endless combinations of engagement. Thus, if we indulge in (or, as is more often the case, are caught short by) the reflexivity of our material imagination, we are led, as Bachelard suggests and Kieslowski’s cinema dramatizes, “to the ill-defined, vaguely located areas of being where we are seized with astonishment at being”—and our substantial thrown-ness in existence emerges as a “concrete metaphysics” (58).

We are, of course, always trying to make conscious and rational sense of this “astonishment at being”—particularly when this astonishment emerges in a less than sanguine manner to threaten our quotidian sense of agency

1. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon, 1958), 184. The epigraph from Bachelard that begins this essay can be found on 115. Subsequent references will be cited in the text.

2. Although Bachelard focuses on “felicitous images” in this work, here he is referring to the less than sanguine “poetics of space” found in Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher.”

and fixed identity and to shock us into recognition of our vulnerability, contingency, and ontological inability to control our lives. In this regard Claude Lévi-Strauss is illuminating. Writing of the “savage mind” and its quite sophisticated modes of making embodied sense of the material world and our existential vulnerability to the hazards of a “happencance” beyond rational thought or control, he tells us (in a somewhat droll construction): “It must be acknowledged that so-called primitive people have managed to evolve not unreasonable methods for inserting *irrationality*, in its dual aspect of *logical contingency* and *emotional turbulence*, into rationality.”³

In what follows, then, I want to focus on these dual aspects of irrationality, particularly as they are dramatized by Krzysztof Kieslowski’s “harsh dialectics” and “concrete metaphysics”—that is, by the cinematic visibility of his philosophical gaze at the world and at the hazardous thrown-ness that informs human existence in both its objectivity and subjectivity. On the one side, this gaze is focused on the irrational *effects* of “logical contingency,” on the risky and accidental nature and function of being materially concrete and immanent. On the other side, this gaze is focused on the irrational *affects* of “emotional turbulence,” on the unstable nature and function of the immaterial and transcendent subject thrown by the material consequences of existence. As two sides of the same existential coin, however, both sides of Kieslowski’s gaze converge in their imbricated and mutual rupture of the surface cohesion of the quotidian world, yet both are also in dialectical relation—radically different in their substance and meaning. Indeed, throughout his films Kieslowski exercises a form of doubled vision that articulates and dramatizes the uncanny way in which the dual and contrary aspects of the irrational arise together and are confused and synthesized in the specificity of human experience. That is, in Kieslowski’s world, although logical contingency and emotional turbulence constitute entirely different “methods” of subverting the rational and making us aware of its (and our) “other,” they are nonetheless systemically related. We are able to see—quite literally—how their actual convergence in concrete situations undermines the abstract distinctions we make between them—as well as between their oppositional corollaries, “chance” and “fate.” What emerges, then, in this existential conjunction of logical contingency and emotional turbulence is a specific confusion of and reversibility between the physical and metaphysical, the immanent and the transcendent, the objective and subjective. What also emerges is that empirical uncanny we call, depending on our inflection or its consequence, either accident or coincidence.

Let me begin, then, with an illustrative sequence from what will serve as

3. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, trans. George Weidenfeld (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 243 (emphasis added). Subsequent references will be cited in the text.

my tutor-text here, the first episode of Kieslowski's masterwork, *The Decalogue* (1988). The sequence begins with Krzysztof—the filmmaker's namesake, a professor of linguistics, and the loving father of an extraordinary young boy—working at his desk on some papers. Suddenly, he stops writing to watch, with an interest bordering on dread, a pale and uncanny stain that inexplicably and slowly emerges through layers of paper to darken and spread in an inchoate and ominous obscuration of his work. Later, we learn that it is likely that—at just this moment—his beloved son, Pawel, gone skating after the cancellation of his English lesson, has fallen through the ice of a frozen pond and drowned. Indeed, shortly after we see Krzysztof pick up the inexplicably cracked ink bottle that caused the stain, and shortly after we watch him answer an insistent doorbell and then go to wash the ink off his hands, we hear the ominous singsong wail of sirens and, with him, rush to the window to watch an emergency truck pass off-frame in the street below his apartment block.

Here the convergence and confusion of “logical contingence” and “emotional turbulence” are palpable. Here, as Bachelard notes, the “coexistence of things in a space to which we add consciousness of our own existence is a very concrete thing” (203). Foreboding connections are achieved in the most *material* and “savagely” *analogical* way through the associative editing of isolated sounds and images: the sound of an offscreen airplane as the sequence begins; close-ups of the spreading stain; Krzysztof's fascinated but perturbed gaze at this inexplicable irruption of disorder; the discovery of the previously unseen ink bottle, which, although rationally explaining the source of the eerie stain, when picked up, only drips more ink over his words; the doorbell suddenly ringing far too harshly and loudly and a little girl asking, “Is Pawel home?”; the messy process and small (but presenced) desperation involved in Krzysztof's scrubbing the ink off his hands; and the wail of the siren that calls him to the window, followed by the portentous and insistent ringing of the telephone. With the emergence of the ink stain every empirical object and sound becomes sensed (both by Krzysztof and us) as an ominous sign of something more than it empirically is, a portent of something awful, something “other” that ruptures the fixed rationality and order of things. In the highly particularized—and scrutinized—here and now of this sequence, events seem random, yet nothing seems extraneous; that is, every “chance” occurrence—the stain, the little girl ringing the doorbell, the siren, and finally the phone ringing—becomes cumulatively informed by dread and cumulatively weighted as “fateful.” Indeed, in a later call to his sister Irena, the worried Krzysztof explicitly—and irrationally—marks the ink stain as the inaugural, mimetic, and therefore portentous sign of a chaotic “co-here-nce” in which seemingly discrete and contingent events are dreadfully connected in an implicitly causal material relationship. “Has something happened?” Irena asks, and the usually rational Krzysztof responds: “The bot-

tle cracked and it spilled. And Pawel . . . I don't know. It seems the ice broke on the lake." In the entirety of this sequence we literally see—and hear—the convergence of logical contingency and emotional turbulence, of chance and fate, in a particular set of spatiotemporal “co-incidences” that constitutes accident as doomed and tragic.

Speaking to this kind of mimetic (and supposedly “primitive”) ana-logic, Lévi-Strauss points out that the “analysis of the practico-inert . . . revives the language of animism” (249). And, certainly, at some deep foundational level there is something of this mimetic ana-logic and animism operative in *all* cinema—which may well be, then, merely a modernist form of the savage thought that Lévi-Strauss describes as “a system of concepts embedded in images” (264). In this regard Jennifer Bean notes the way in which the ana-logic of mimesis systemically incorporates and confuses categorical bifurcations:

Mimesis stresses the reflexive, rather than reflection; it brings the subject into intimate contact with the object, or other, in a tactile, performative, and sensuous form of perception, the result of which is an experience that transcends the traditional subject-object dichotomy. Through mimesis the subject is not stabilized or rigidified by means of its identifications. Indeed, mimesis *redefines* identification as process, a *contagious* movement that renders indeterminate, fluid, or porous the boundaries between inside and outside.⁴

Like the spreading ink stain, this indeterminate fluidity, this destabilizing contagion, is visible to us as operating both literally and figuratively in *Decalogue 1*.

Here we might ask if it is only a coincidence, or has it accumulated as the fate of my present discussion that Bachelard tells us: “A philosopher often describes his ‘entry into the world,’ his ‘being in the world,’ using a familiar object as symbol. He will describe his *ink-bottle* phenomenologically, and a paltry thing becomes the janitor of the wide world” (155). If, indeed, it can be argued that a mimetic ana-logic grounds all cinema, Kieslowski’s films are particularly distinguished in that this ana-logic, and its dual perturbations of “rationality” are *foregrounded* to become—simultaneously—the basis of a cool philosophical conundrum and an intense phenomenological drama. Furthermore, this mimetic ana-logic is hardly figured in the empathetic or sympathetic terms and techniques of cinematic expressionism or melodrama—both of which greatly privilege emotional turbulence over logical contingency rather than confusing or synthesizing them.⁵

4. Jennifer M. Bean, “Technologies of Early Stardom and the Extraordinary Body,” *Camera Obscura* 48, vol. 16, no. 3 (2001): 46 (second emphasis added).

5. In contrast to Kieslowski we might think of Alfred Hitchcock, a filmmaker who also draws on and foregrounds the mimetic and analogical qualities of the cinematic image. Hitchcock,

Indeed, what makes the sequence described above (and countless others in Kieslowski's films) so uncanny and unsettling is that here logical contingency and emotional turbulence bear *equal weight*. That is, they are empirically—and epistemologically—“horizontalized” in value so that cause and effect, ontic and ontological existence, chance and fate, accident and tragedy, synchronously *coincide* in nonhierarchical, if humanly consequential, relations that are reducible neither to solely human and personalized dimensions nor to solely material ones. For Kieslowski there is no hierarchy in “co-occurrence.” Caused and causal but highly complex and nonlinear, the material coincidence of people and people and people and things is far beyond the human powers of calculation—although we are, nonetheless, quite literally responsible for their sum, this merely by virtue of being or not being here or there in a particular network of consequential convergences. In this regard Kieslowski is particularly attuned to the moment in which, as philosopher Alphonso Lingis suggests, “the passage of facts begins also to project ahead like an exigency; what congeals as a form constitutes a matrix for variation. The nascent meaning is pregnant in the facts, it begins in a conjuncture of contingencies.”⁶ Both chance (“the passage of facts”) and fate (the projection of an “exigency”) emerge and are confused in the concrete space-time of material coincidence, which, in nature and effect, is at once both chaotic and ordered. As in the portentous sequence in *Decalogue 1*, the logical coincidence of contingent (and “little”) things “adds up” and accrues existential weight—but with such complexity that the physical and emotional turbulence they cause can be neither accurately calculated nor predicted.⁷

however, does so within the terms of expressionism and melodrama in which various foregrounded objects that speak to us sensually (a ringing telephone, a cigarette extinguished in a fried egg, a particularly “disgusting” bowl of food, etc.) are always in primary service to the human expression of emotional turbulence rather than to the physics or chaos of logical contingency; thus these objects are not perceived as quasi-autonomous in their alterity.

6. Alphonso F. Lingis, “Sense and Non-Sense in the Sexed Body,” *Cultural Hermeneutics* 4 (1977): 348.

7. In this regard Kieslowski's vision has much in common with contemporary chaos theory, which understands chaos as, in fact, ordered. There are, for example, relations among random events that create sufficient force fields to make some of them “strange attractors.” In another formulation the smallest changes in “initial conditions” (such as a butterfly flapping its wings on one side of the world) can cause enormous turbulence as its consequences reverberate across time and space (a fierce hurricane results on the other side of the world). This makes “turbulent systems” such as the weather so complex as to be pretty much completely unpredictable. It is thus particularly amusing to note that in Kieslowski's *Red* (1994), there is much made of a false weather prediction; the filmmaker himself considers the weather from this perspective in a significant conversation in *Krzysztof Kieslowski: I'm So-So*, a 1995 documentary made by his longtime assistant Krzysztof Wierzbicki. Someone offscreen comments: “Lucky it rained yesterday,” and Kieslowski's onscreen response is, first, that it wasn't luck; next, that an old peas-

In this regard James Winchell appositely describes Kieslowski's mise-en-scène as constructing an "unexpectedly rational metaphysics: the *affective materiality*, not the dialectical materialism, of history." And, he continues, "This process of visual association and allegorization occurs in Kieslowski's frame almost in spite of the viewer's probable notions of the 'real' or 'everyday world.' By means of a network of symbols, which emerges as the viewer connects select apparitions of seemingly objective chance, he sets in circulation a *metaphysical economy at the level of reference*."⁸ Indeed, in *Krzysztof Kieslowski: I'm So-So* (Krzysztof Wierzbicki, 1995), the film that stands as the filmmaker's "authorized" biography, Kieslowski himself speaks of "a kind of secret metaphysics" in existence that can't be reduced or "censored"—this statement followed and underscored by a shot of neat row houses whose initial order and complacency are undone by the incompatible, unmotivated, and coincidental appearance of an elephant walking down the street in front of them. In sum, Kieslowski's cinematic vision—and, in key moments of reflexive awareness, the gaze of his characters—*expands* to admit something *within* existence that is always potentially both awful and awesome in its obdurate materiality, its nonanthropocentric presence, and its assertion of the *existential equality* of all things, human and animate or otherwise. This vision of existential equality nullifies the primacy and privilege of human existence, meaning, and order yet simultaneously affirms human existence as always also transcendent and meaningful. Within this gaze "man" is reduced as a privileged "being," but existence is amplified as an expansive field of "becoming." Thus, whether filmmaker, character, or spectator, depending on one's perspective and depending on how willing one is to concede the seemingly secure fixity of human identity and privilege, experiencing oneself as the subject—or object—of such an expansive and nonanthropocentric gaze can be threatening or liberating.

In response to this expanded, nonhierarchical, and decentered gaze, the nonhuman and inanimate things in Kieslowski's worldview seem to "look back" at both the characters and us. Here, the "practico-inert," claiming its own material—and precisely nonhuman—premises and presence in the world, indeed, "revives the language of animism." In this regard a great many of Kieslowski's cinematic objects assert a signifying power and mysterious autonomy that emerge through the hyperbolic excess of ontic presence created by both the camera's close-up framing of them and its hyperempirical

ant woman might say it was "God's will"; and, last, that the fact that it rained depended not on chance but on "many things happening"—and he goes on to enumerate a litany of empirical phenomena. See *Krzysztof Kieslowski: I'm So-So*, dir. Krzysztof Wierzbicki (Kulturmode/Statens Filmcentral, 1995).

8. James Winchell, "Metaphysics of Post-Nationalism: La Double Vie de Krzysztof Kieslowski," *Contemporary French Civilization* 22, no. 2 (summer-fall 1998): 248 (emphasis added).

detailing of their material presentness. As Bachelard puts it in *The Poetics of Space*, looking through a magnifying glass or in detail “increases an object’s stature” and points to how such magnified scrutiny transforms something so “familiar” and “paltry” as an “ink-bottle” into a site of access to a wider world. In *Decalogue 1* there are many such objects and things that “look back” and break the frame—and continuity—of the characters’ (and our) quotidian and mastering vision, their increased stature and imperiousness opening our own eyes to the broadened scope of existence. These include not only Krzysztof’s cracked ink bottle but also a pigeon with a spot of blood on its feathers perched on a window sill; a dead dog lying in the snow; milk tracing its diffusion in a glass cup of morning coffee; a bottle of milk frozen into opaque and opalescent translucence; Pawel’s new ice skates gleaming at him from the darkness above his bed; the ink stain spreading across Krzysztof’s papers; the insistent round doorbell ringing on the apartment wall; and the waiting green computer screen and blinking cursor that call for a response to the computer’s graphic pronouncement: “I am ready.” At the insistence of these objects both we and the characters often feel “a tremor of intimidation—the emotional signature of otherness that doesn’t deign to ingratiate itself.”⁹

It is hardly surprising, then, that these objects and their uncanny and oddly autonomous and intimidating claim on our attention bring to mind Jacques Lacan’s anecdotal account of his epiphanic visual encounter with a gleaming sardine can—a piece of flotsam floating in the ocean off Brittany. (And here it is worth noting that Lacan spends some time on the “otherness” and alterity of mimesis in relation to the gaze in his *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*.)¹⁰ Inanimate, the sardine can, he notes, certainly does not possess the sensory capacity—and privilege—to see him looking at it, yet, in some sense, he is intensely aware that it nonetheless seems to “look back” at—and displace—him.¹¹ Here, indeed, for Lacan, the “practico-enert” sardine can quite literally “revives the language of animism.” However, given Lacan’s subsequent and literal abstraction of the matter of this mimetically structured gaze (both his and the sardine can’s), one could also argue that the reverse is true, that, indeed, the animism of the practico-enert revives—“revivifies”—analytic language. That is, for Lacan, “the source of the sardine can’s strangely empowered *look back*” is not the irruption and dispossession of our visual field by another *human* gaze (as it is for Jean-Paul Sartre) nor

9. Peter Schjeldahl, “Folks,” *New Yorker*, Jan. 14, 2002, 88 (emphasis added). Schjeldahl is speaking about the juxtaposition of objects in a folk-art museum, but his description resonates here.

10. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1978), 97–100.

11. *Ibid.*, 95–97.

by a mimetic identification marked by reversible subjective-objective relations. Rather, as art historian Norman Bryson puts it, for Lacan the object's look back inaugurates "the irruption, in the visual field, of the *Signifier*"¹²—the network of past, present, and future social meaning that exists always in the deferrals of *différance* and always in excess of the specific and local interrogation of our gaze. Thus, when we visually engage an object that seems to "look back" at us and that momentarily startles, intimidates, and fixes us with its "irrational" autonomy, it seems obdurate and opaque, decentering us and undoing the mastery and privilege of our vision—and this because its full significance and presence not only eludes but also refuses human comprehension and reduction.

Looking *back* at us, the significant object also looks *beyond* us to an *expanded*—if deferred—*field* of visibility and meaning that subsumes and absorbs the reductive, if invested and consequential, questions asked of it by our contingent, local, and personal gaze. Throughout *The Decalogue* we see heightened instances of the irruptive, autonomous, and impersonal presence of things that look back and beyond the human subjectivities that engage them. This heightening is realized not only by the aforementioned use of isolating (and thus hyperbolizing) close-ups of objects and characters but also by the filmmaker's pattern of tightly framing human characters—both composition and editing severely limiting eyeline matches and moments in which the characters gaze at each other (whether in acts of Sartrean objectification and mastery or mutually subjectifying care and love).¹³ Thus, even in *Decalogue 1*, singular among the ten episodes in that its three main characters (Krzysztof, Pawel, and his aunt Irena) all deeply love and respect each other and demonstrate it in word and action, there is a formal isolation and depersonalization of their respective gazes (and Kieslowski's at them). That is, alone in the frame, without eyeline matches that link their gaze from shot to shot to the gaze of another who picks up and returns their look, the characters seem always to be looking past and beyond the space they occupy to a deferred elsewhere, to an unseen and deperson-

12. Norman Bryson, "The Gaze in the Expanded Field," in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1988), 91. Bryson refers here to chaps 6–9 of Lacan's *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, 67–119. Subsequent references to Bryson will be cited in the text.

13. Eyeline matches are one of the principal methods of linking shots in character-based narrative; the direction and angle at which a character looks in one shot is matched to the direction and angle of another character's look in the following shot. If the direction and angle are similar for both characters, the sense conveyed is that the two are looking at the same "other" thing; if the direction of their gazes are opposed but the angle aligned, the sense conveyed by the two shots is that the characters are looking at each other. Whichever the case, the use of eyeline matches tends to stitch (or "suture") character gazes to the world and each other in a comprehensible coherence.

alized presence. This isolation and depersonalization of the gaze thus *expands* the film's field of visibility and signification well beyond both its empirical constriction in space and its epistemological circumscription of a purely—or even primarily—anthropocentric form of sight.

I will return to the broader implications of this expanded gaze, but for the moment I want to stay focused on Lacan's decentering "look back" and, in the context of *Decalogue 1*, on the portentous emergence of the darkening ink stain read by Krzysztof as a dreadful and elusive signifier of something beyond his control and interpretation—in this instance, and known only after the fact, the "co-incident" of Pawel's accidental death. Indeed, here, I must point to another, after-the-fact, coincidence that allegorically parallels the film's. Given the specific spatiotemporal and material conjuncture of Kieslowski, camera, and narrative prop that is the ink bottle and its later implication in the conjuncture of *Decalogue 1* and a film scholar reading (for other purposes) Bachelard and a particular essay on the gaze by art historian Norman Bryson, is it merely chance or a portentous accumulation of convergences so weighted as to seem inevitable and "fated" that Lacan speaks of the empowered, if inanimate, "look back" at us, as a *stain*? Lacan argues that, irrupting into the visual field as the "Signifier," like the spreading ink in *Decalogue 1*, such a "stain" or "scotoma" casts a dark and dreadful shadow that not only obscures our vision and makes us suddenly aware of our depersonalization in a field of visibility and meaning that immediately and infinitely exceeds us, but also makes us, through its sudden and dark excess, acutely aware of human *finitude* and *death*.¹⁴

Lacan visually illustrates this obscuration and "mortification" of the visual field by a stain with Hans Holbein's famous painting *The Ambassadors* (1533). Much in the manner of the ink stain in *Decalogue 1* that casts its irrational foreshadow of darkness and death across the rational mastery and local signification represented by Krzysztof's scholarly papers, *The Ambassadors* shows us the irrational image of a death's head irrupting obliquely into the paint-

14. In this regard it is worth noting that the visualization of an ink stain as both uncanny and linked to the death of a child also appears in Nicholas Roeg's *Don't Look Now* (1973). I would point also to the long shot in Atom Egoyan's *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997), in which a school bus full of children slowly sinking through the white ice of a lake appears as the uncanny and slow spread of a gray stain. Annette Insdorf, in *Double Lives, Second Chances: The Cinema of Krzysztof Kieslowski* (New York: Hyperion, 1999), writes that "one of life's most unfathomable and inconsolable occurrences—the death of a child" not only marks the first episode of *The Decalogue* but also runs throughout the series and appears in other of Kieslowski's films (73). This is not mere coincidence. From a phenomenological perspective, I would suggest that the "uncanniness" of this association of a spreading stain with the death of a child emerges from the reversible (yet differently valued) visualization of the spreading stain as the "becoming of a nihility" that figures the "nihility of a becoming" that is the death of a child.

ing's rational, "straight-on," and anthropocentric vision of human mastery.¹⁵ Although the painting's subjects, as Bryson puts it, are "masters of learning, in possession of all the codes of knowledge . . . fashioned in their social milieu," their visual field is nonetheless subverted and undone—"cut across by something they cannot master, the skull which casts itself sideways across their space, through *anamorphosis*." And he continues: "The effect of this insertion of the screen, skull, or scotoma, is that the subject who sees is no more the center of visual experience than the subject of language is at the center of speech" (92–93).

It is unlikely that Kieslowski had read Lacan, and it is certain that the two men shared worldly space and time even more tenuously than the filmmaker's two Véroniques, whose parallel lives intersect only once and by chance. Nonetheless, given this conjunction of visibility, language, speech, anamorphosis, and death, we might again wonder if it is chance or fate—or a "mere" coincidence to be "written off" (or "on" as it is here)—that *Decalogue 1* not only figures the irruptive signifier of an ink stain spreading excess and extinction over the local signifiers of Krzysztof's papers but also marks its protagonist, Krzysztof, as a confident *linguistics* professor who will soon be put in his place—or, more precisely, out of it—by the irrational obliquity of a death's head. Earlier in the film, with Pawel, his ill-fated young son, in attendance, Krzysztof delivers a class lecture that acknowledges the excessive unruliness of speech over the linguistic rules that would master it. Nonetheless (and with the hubris of *The Ambassadors*), he also celebrates the future containment of that excess through its rational "enframing" by the computer.¹⁶ We might wonder, too, if it is chance, fate, or mere coincidence (all "after the fact"), that the first and last images we see of Pawel appear on a television screen where his blue and irresolute image—like Holbein's death's head—obliquely casts both a fore- and final shadow on *Decalogue 1*'s visual field: the young boy seen running toward us "sideways" until his movement is arrested in a final, frozen—and anamorphic—moment.¹⁷

15. Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 85–90

16. As will be apparent later in this essay, it is *not* coincidental that I evoke here Heidegger's notion of enframing, as well as his critique of the instrumentalist hubris that—through technology—would reduce the world and existence to a mere "world picture" or "standing reserve" exclusively for us (or *The Ambassadors*). See Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," trans. William Lovitt, in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 287–317.

17. Insdorf refers to an essay by Joel Magny, "*Decalogue, 1: Fire and Ice*," in which Magny points out that the bookending of the entire episode by these oblique, blue, and anamorphic screen images of Pawel renders the whole of *Decalogue 1* "an immense flashback. What we witness has already taken place, ineluctably." Insdorf adds: "Kieslowski thus creates the illusion of fatality" (*Double Lives*, 73). Interestingly, in the opening credit sequence of *The Double Life of*

Again and again in Kieslowski's cinema we see something that suddenly, obliquely, and momentarily cuts across and into our (and often his characters') narrowed and comprehensible visual field—expanding it beyond comprehension into the apprehension (and often apprehensiveness) of something more, something beyond, something other. As a child, Pawel seems intensely aware of its presence. As he watches his father's lecture and grows slightly bored, his vision partially blocked by the slide projector behind which he sits, we watch him experiment with the framing and fragmenting possibilities of his own gaze at his father while Kieslowski simultaneously does the same in relation to Pawel—both not only putting Krzysztof's confident and fulsome mastery in question but also foregrounding constricted fields and modes of vision. Indeed, as Ruth Perlmutter suggests, pointing to the parallax view Pawel has of Krzysztof as he peers at him through the lens of the slide projector, it is as if the boy is particularly "sensitized"—able to see, through his own and the projector's partial field of vision, the limited frame and scope not only of human reason but also of human existence.¹⁸ Throughout *The Decalogue* such awareness of the limited scope and ontic finitude of human existence is often provoked—whether by a dead dog lying in the snow that looks back at Pawel (and us), or by a wasp struggling to escape a cup of tea, or by a heavy wet rag that, suddenly flung out the window of an anonymous apartment, seems somehow a slap across the face of the very quotidian world it seemingly represents. Like Pawel, we become "sensitized" to the existence of an alterior and nonanthropocentric frame of visibility and meaning. Thus, what Bryson says in relation to the apprehension and dread generated by Lacan's "stain" of spreading and uncontainable signification could also be said of Kieslowski's stain: "Everything I see is orchestrated with a . . . production of seeing that exists independently of my life and outside it: my individual discoveries, the findings of my eye as it probes . . . the world, come to unfold in terms not of my making, and indifferent to my mortality" (92). In *Decalogue 1* this is something that Pawel confronts in his encounter with the dead dog—and it is something that Krzysztof has no choice but to bear by the episode's end.

Indeed, this sense of an anonymity of vision and material existence that is indifferent to the privilege of human being and mortality and that, apprehended, undoes the complacent fixity of the subject is figured quite explicitly (if obliquely) at the end of *Decalogue 1*. Thrown and undone by the irra-

Véronique Kieslowski also uses anamorphosis to distort and diffuse a close-up of Polish Veronika walking and then, in a slightly wider shot, dropping her music case; this is a flash-forward (the future anterior "will have been") and thus functions (if only in retrospect) as a premonition of her death, which will follow a "real-time" repetition of this scene somewhat later in the film.

18. Ruth Perlmutter, "Testament of the Father: Kieslowski's *The Decalogue*," *Film Criticism* 22, no. 2 (winter 1997): 58.

tional and accidental death of his son, by both logical contingency (the particular patch of ice on which Pawel happened to skate was thin and gave way) and emotional turbulence (the loss of his son impossible to either understand or bear), the irreligious Krzysztof goes into the neighborhood church. We watch him, in anger, overturn an altar table, which in turn knocks to the floor a painting of the Madonna. Wax from an overturned candle then drips onto the Madonna's eyes to take on the form and function of tears. This is no miracle, however, and there is no anthropocentric message: in Kieslowski's gaze (and Krzysztof's) this event is, rather, an uncanny and cruel coincidence, borne out of happenstance and the convergence of concrete material occurrences and their consequences.

This scene reminds us that, anterior to Lacan's description of the intimidating and decentering look back at us by inanimate objects, Sartre wrote not only about the negative aggressivity of the human gaze as it fixed others as its object but also about the annihilating negativity of *accident*. The irrationality of logical contingency, or happenstance inflected as accident, is, for Sartre, "the negative principle par excellence: it is accident that sentences man and declares him impossible." Accident dehumanizes and dissolves the subject "since his ends have been both stolen and restored him at the last minute by things. He can survive for a time as an object of the world but it has been demonstrated that the idea of praxis and interiority are the dream of a dream and that the human object, an accidental assemblage that one accident conserves but another undoes, is exterior to itself."¹⁹ Thus, it is not insignificant that we last see Krzysztof at the front of the church near a font of holy water, its surface frozen into the shape of a large, opaque, and cloudy convex lens. Aware, perhaps, of the limits of human vision and his own impossible exteriority, he lifts the icy lens to vaguely look at it, through it, and beyond it into nothingness.

Nonetheless, in *Decalogue 1* (as elsewhere in Kieslowski's films), there is also a different world—and a world of difference—existentially revealed and experienced through the nonanthropocentric gaze. This worldview is not menacing but expansive. It is focused on the plenitude of being and existence even as it does not privilege human being and existence. That is, this look back from otherness does not generate Krzysztof's (or Lacan's) rather limited—and negative—sense of subjective displacement and annihilation, nor within this view does human being's recognition of its ultimate exteriority and objectivity lead to its reduction. Rather, this nonanthropocentric gaze is exorbitant: open rather than annihilating, amplifying rather than reductive. Indeed, it articulates astonishment at the endless field of possibil-

19. Jean Paul Sartre, *L'idiote de la famille: Gustave Flaubert de 1821 à 1857*, vol. 2 (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 1439. (I thank Jennifer Bean for this invaluable reference.)

ities offered by being's ultimate exteriority, by its materialized thrown-ness into a world that it cannot fully comprehend.

In an extraordinary—and, for me, generative—essay entitled “The Gaze in the Expanded Field,” Bryson (whom I have quoted extensively above) explores an alternative to the kind of negativity connected to the gaze in Western philosophy. Glossing the concept of the gaze as articulated by Sartre and Lacan, he then turns to the radical critique of their formulations by Japanese philosopher Keiji Nishitani (who studied first with Kitarō Nishida and then with Martin Heidegger). For Nishitani, Bryson explains, “the line of thinking that passes from Sartre to Lacan in crucial respects remains held within a conceptual enclosure, where vision is still theorized from the standpoint of a subject placed at the center of a world” (87). This centering of the subject remains a constant even as both philosophers progressively attempted to radically decenter the subject: Sartre through admission into the visual field of the objectifying gaze of the other person, Lacan through the inanimate object whose nonanthropocentric “look back” displaces and decenters the gazing subject from its usual position of visual mastery of the world. In both these instances, however, the gaze of the other threatens to undo the subject and is, as a result, perceived as persecuting, menacing, or dreadful. Nishitani's critique, however, points out that, in these formulations, the very threat and persecution of the other's gaze serve not to annihilate the subject but, in fact, to strengthen it. As Bryson writes: “The subject's sense of being a subject is heightened, not undone: and this, following Nishitani's argument, is because the entire scenario is restricted to its twin poles of subject and object. What is not thought through is the question of vision's *wider frame*” (96).

Certainly, as I've already shown in *Decalogue 1*, Kieslowski dramatizes the sense of threat, undoing, and emotional turbulence that the look back generates in his characters (and often in us). But my discussion has also suggested that the filmmaker is equally interested in the more liberating aspects of logical contingency—that is, as it ruptures rationality and the order of things to expand the narrow fearfulness and cautious “comprehension” of the anthropocentric gaze and allow the revelation not only of something other but also of something “more.” Indeed, Kieslowski's own expanded vision often provokes in us and his characters glimpses of a wider frame of vision, of another way of looking that is not inherently menacing. In its breadth, contingency, and openness to the *différance* or *deferral* of the fixed form and meaning that is the “subject,” this “look back” and “look beyond” *expands* the subject—*dissolving* and *diffusing* it rather than resolving or annihilating it.

This kind of expanded—and expansive—gaze is foregrounded, for example, in the very opening shots of Kieslowski's *The Double Life of Véronique* (1991), which emphasize and announce vision as an advent of sorts. Here we

watch the coming into being of the existential adventure of embodied vision as it provides expansive access to an open world. First we see, from the Polish toddler Veronika's perspective, an upside-down image of street and starry sky—the latter “looking back” in the subsequent countershot. This is followed by a close-up image of French toddler Véronique's eye seen through a magnifying glass as she inspects a leaf, the latter “looking back” in a highly detailed countershot.²⁰ Here Bachelard is apposite; in *The Poetics of Space* he writes, “The man with the magnifying glass—quite simply—bars the everyday world. He is a fresh eye before a new object.” And, referring us to Kieslowski's two toddlers, he adds, “The botanist's magnifying glass is youth recaptured” (155). In both instances of expanded vision the curious little girls are prompted, paradoxically perhaps, to look closely at the world's natural wonders—its material imagination—by the voices of their offscreen mothers, who, acting as surrogates for Kieslowski, direct the toddlers' vision to specific details that expand and deepen our own visual attention and evoke a phenomenological sense of wonder at the bewildering (if ordered) complexity and infinite (hence transcendent) meaning of the materiality of embodied existence and the physical world with which our gaze connects us.

Here—in the openness of youthful astonishment at the world—the fixity of the subject is diffused and dissolved by means of an expansive and non-anthropocentric gaze that is not negative in consequence. Rather, the toddlers' vision is dynamically reversible with the world that looks back. Here, the subject is unfixed, is expansive and exorbitant, its diffusion and dissolution premised on the *radical materialism* that constitutes our—and our vision's—embodiment in the world with which we share in what philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty calls “flesh.” As beautifully glossed by Amelia Jones, flesh

is definitely *not* a determinable, impermeable border between the self and the world (or the self and the other) that fixes this self in a final way. As a physical membrane that sheds and reconstitutes itself continually, the flesh is never always the same material but always a contour in process; the flesh exists provisionally both as a permeable, shifting physical perimeter, a limbic surround of virtual containment, and as the visible trace of the human body (whose contours are never stable in one's own or an other's visual field). Metaphorically as well as materially, the flesh is an envelope, a “limit” inscribing the juncture between inside and outside but also the *site of their joining*.²¹

In this formulation our gaze and the gaze that looks back and beyond is not structured according to the “harsh dialectics” of an opposition between

20. For further discussion of Kieslowski's “questioning of sight itself” in this sequence see Insdorf, *Double Lives*, 128–29.

21. Amelia Jones, *Body Art / Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 206–7.

self and other or subject and object. Rather, embodied and enworlded in the manner—and matter—of that at which it looks, our gaze serves as a synthesizing “transfer point” of the commerce between and commingling of matter and meaning. As Merleau-Ponty suggests in *The Visible and the Invisible*, our own vision and flesh are enfolded in the flesh and vision of the world and others; thus, the embodied gaze is the “doubled and crossed situating of the visible in the tangible and of the tangible in the visible.”²² In this formulation the gaze is neither anthropocentric nor nonanthropocentric; rather, it is *reversibly mimetic* in its shifting address, constant mobility, and fluid identifications. It is, above all, inclusive of alterity. What this expansive gaze reveals is the very *poiēsis* of being: here, as Bachelard puts it, the “duality of subject and object is iridescent, shimmering, unceasingly active in its inversions” (xv). This is the vision offered to us by the two toddlers.

In the earlier *Decalogue 1* this nonmenacing alterity of vision is also explored through the open and mimetic vision of a child. Although older than Veronika and Véronique, Pawel is still young enough to enjoy the polymorphous possibilities of a gaze not yet fully differentiated into the hierarchical relations of subject and object, and we first see him through his apartment window not merely *looking* at a pigeon perched on the sill but—in an act of mimetic identification—also *assuming* a visual and bodily comportment in concert with its own. In a seemingly traditional shot-countershot structure of edited close-ups (which, in the egalitarian detail of Kieslowski’s nonhierarchical attention undoes the hierarchical terms of shot-countershot), we see Pawel cock his head to “try out” the pigeon’s anterior vision and, in turn, we see the pigeon responsively cock its head to look back interrogatively at—and yet beyond—Pawel into an unseen visual field emergent from the bird’s alterity. What is dramatized here quite literally is the “at once originary and imitative force” of mimesis. As Jennifer Bean puts it:

Mimesis turns the relation between identification and desire on its head: identification emerges not as the result of the subject’s unconscious desire for a loved object, but rather as an imitation by one “self” of an “other” that to all intents and purposes is indistinguishable from a primordial identification in which the organism first *acts* like, and only later, desires the outside or other. The mimetic paradigm imagines the suspension of the self or, more accurately, the vertiginous openness of an entity that does not properly constitute a self.²³

Although still open to such mimetic identification, Pawel is also old enough to have begun to anthropocentrically narrow the compass of his

22. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The Chiasm—The Intertwining,” in *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, ed. Claude Lefort (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 134–35.

23. Bean, “Technologies of Stardom,” 45–46.

gaze—its expansiveness, as Bachelard suggests, something “that life curbs and caution arrests” (184). Indeed, Pawel’s subjectivity is firmed up sufficiently so as to begin to feel the vertiginous and potentially annihilating power of a look back that announces something beyond its mastery and comprehension, something that fills Pawel with intimations not only of his own existential discretion but also of his own mortality. After seeing the dead dog lying in the snow, he anxiously asks about death—and gets differing responses from his rational father and religious aunt. In a moment of emotional turbulence he articulates not only his initial joy at a world open to the pleasures and possibilities of the alterity and logical contingency that make up existence but also his despairing sense of being threatened as a subject. He tells his father: “I was so happy when I got the right answer [to a time/distance problem he solved on the computer] and the pigeon came for the crumbs too. But then I saw the dead dog and I thought ‘so what’? What does it matter if I worked out when Miss Piggy would catch Kermit?”

We are thus returned to the Lacanian gaze that seemingly decenters the subject but is critiqued by Nishitani as having the opposite effect of shoring up and affirming the subject as a discrete entity. In response Nishitani (and, I would argue, Kieslowski as well) radically expands the gaze as conceived by either Sartre or Lacan. Although couched in quite different terms, Nishitani, like Merleau-Ponty, locates the gaze within the premises of a radical materialism. That is, instead of centering vision and containing alterity within the narrow field of anthropocentric subject-subject and subject-object relations, Nishitani borrows from Merleau-Ponty’s insistence on vision as *embodied* and therefore constituted as *part of*, rather than *against*, the flesh and field of visuality that is the world.²⁴ According to Bryson, Nishitani expands the scope of the gaze and visuality through a recognition (and reconceptualization) of subject and object in terms of what he calls “radical impermanence”—also “emptiness,” “blankness,” and “nihility.” The visual field and the seeming permanence and/or discretion of its particular entities and forms (whether subjects or objects, persons or things) emerge within a “universal field of transformations”—“a continuous exfoliation and perturbation of matter.” Thus, the particular entities and forms we see are, indeed, “part-icular.” That is, they are constituted and maintained “only by an optic that casts around each entity a perceptual frame that makes a cut from the field and immobi-

24. The relation between Nishitani’s “expanded gaze” and Merleau-Ponty’s formulation of “flesh” is discussed briefly but cogently in the “Discussion” following Bryson’s essay, “The Gaze in the Expanded Field,” among Bryson, Rosalind Krauss, Martin Jay, and Jonathan Crary. See esp. 109–11. For Merleau-Ponty “flesh” is the negative positivity of “everything” that is “no-thing” in its continual “be-coming,” whereas for Nishitani, “radical impermanence” is the positive negativity of “no-thing” in its continual “be-coming.” “Being” as “fixity” is undone in both formulations.

lizes the cut within the static framework.” In existence, however, and as part of the “universal surround” from which perception makes its immobilizing cut, “at no point does the object come under an arrest that would immobilize it as a Form or *eidos*” (97). Understood and “seen” as merely a part of the general field of radical impermanence, “the entity comes apart” and “cannot be said to occupy a *single* location” or to “acquire any kind of bounded outline” (97–98). No “one” or no “thing” can be said to “enjoy independent self-existence, since the ground of its being is the existence of everything else.” Insofar as “the object field is a continuous mobility,” individual entities (subjects and objects) can be constituted only as a *nihilicity* (98)—that is, in the *negative* terms of diacritical difference and temporal *différance* that defer the arrested “being” of what is always a continual “becoming.”

Vision and the visual field, too, are radically impermanent. Thus, Bryson tells us, “Nishitani’s move is to dissolve the apparatus of framing” that, by narrowing the openness of the visual field, “always *produces* an object for a subject and a subject for an object.” This undoing of the frame and opening up of the visual field to reveal its radical impermanence also displaces the viewer, but this is not annihilating. As Bryson puts it: “The viewer still has his or her eyes open: the universe does not disappear. But the viewer is now a being that exists through the existence of everything else in the universal field, and not just as the subject-effect of the object that appears at the end of the viewing tunnel” (100). Furthermore, insofar as a frame is imposed on what is, in fact, not a tunnel but a universal surround, the viewer’s present view and vision are constituted (and here we are reminded of Merleau-Ponty’s *The Visible and Invisible*) as part of and “*within* the invisible”: “What can be seen is supported and interpenetrated by what is *outside* sight, a Gaze of the other enveloping sight on all sides” (101). Thus both meaning and being are never fixed; they never arrive but exist in a continuous “motion of postponement” (99).

In relation to the present discussion I would suggest that Kieslowski’s frequent use of isolating close-ups so foregrounds objects as cut out of and cut off from a larger visual field that their hermetic and portentous presence also insists on “what is *outside* sight” and makes us aware of “a Gaze of the other enveloping sight on all sides.” Indeed, Kieslowski does the same with sound—constituting an offscreen presence that is less likely to affirm for us (as do most films) the ambient and taken-for-granted noise of an unseen quotidian world than it is to irrupt in acoustic isolation and detailed acoustic close-up against a field of suspended—and quietly suspenseful—silence. Given this sense of offscreen and invisible presence that reminds us of what is outside sight (and beyond the heard), it is hardly surprising that an interviewer says to Kieslowski: “The more concrete and tangible your films are, the more metaphysical they seem to become. You take more and more close-ups, you’re ever nearer to the characters and objects: you seem to be search-

ing for something beyond the concrete or physical.”²⁵ Yet Kieslowski’s metaphysics has little to do with the transcendental; rather its concern is the enveloping transcendence of the world and our limited view and situated comprehension of the “secret metaphysics” of its immanence.²⁶

Furthermore (and aligned with Nishitani’s notion of existence as a continuous mobility), by pointing to and foregrounding concretely immanent entities as both transcendent of our purpose and yet consequential to our lives, Kieslowski constructs the meaning and being of the concrete and immanent as never fixed, as never “cut down” to our size—even as they are “cut out” and temporarily arrested by his frame. In his films things are pregnant with possibility; they swell in existential stature. Indeed, neither are they merely the practico-inert, nor are they safely secured as poetic symbols; rather, they exist and take on weight and value in a continuous motion of postponement. And this motion of postponement confers on Kieslowski’s *mise-en-scène* a grave form of *suspense*. Both animate and inanimate “being” and meaning are always ineffable in their constitutive negativity, their lack of resolution, their ongoing “becoming.” Thus, what we do see in the frame seems always potentially portentous of a “being” that eludes us and that is always also other and elsewhere than in our sight.

In this way Kieslowski’s cinema can be seen to allow, following Bryson, “an entry into the visual field of something totally dark and opaque that stands for absolute alterity: the otherness of the rest of the universe, a surrounding field that decenters the subject and the subject’s vision completely” (104). It is thus apposite that the filmmaker, speaking of *The Decalogue*, tells us, “For me, this is a film on the conflict between the wish to understand the world and the impossibility of doing just that.”²⁷ And of his work in general, he says, “Knowing is not my business. *Not* knowing is.”²⁸ The kind of nihilism and refusal of ambassadorial mastery expressed here and dramatized in his films emerges as akin to the gaze of Nishitani’s radically decentered subject who,

25. Anonymous interview (n.d.) published online at <http://www.petey.com/kk/docs/interview.txt>

26. In this regard, although a few critics have made such an argument, it is extremely difficult, except in the most general terms, to read Kieslowski as a “Catholic” filmmaker or, for that matter, as particularly interested in the transcendentalism of religion. In his writings and interviews he overtly rejects religious—and nonempirical—interpretation of his work. His “secret metaphysics” thus seems intimately entailed with the mysteries of matter and its co-occurrence in both subjective and objective terms and consequences; indeed, as I’ve suggested in an earlier note, much of his discussion of epistemology, of chance and fate, and of the nature of narrative event aligns itself more with the discoveries of quantum indeterminacy and chaos theory than with the mysteries of the religiously miraculous or the uncannily supernatural.

27. Kieslowski, quoted in Michael Tarantino, “The Cave: Michael Tarantino on Krzysztof Kieslowski,” *Artforum International* 30, no. 4 (Dec. 1990): 23.

28. Kieslowski, in *Krzysztof Kieslowski: I’m So-So*.

Bryson says, “comes to know itself in non-centered terms, as inhabiting and inhabited by a constitutive emptiness” (104). This gaze is neither annihilating nor affirming; it exists only as the constitutive emptiness and potentiality of an opening.

This notion of a decentered gaze that opens on the universal surround as a constitutive emptiness is, indeed, best dramatized in the very first shots of *Decalogue 1*. These place us on the inaugural nihility of a frozen lake and introduce us to an anonymous young man who serves as *The Decalogue*'s recurrent—and silent—“witness.” He is the seer, whom Annette Insdorf calls “pure ‘gaze’” but whom Kieslowski describes as “just a guy who comes and watches us, our lives,”²⁹ adding elsewhere that he gives the films “an element of mystery, something elusive and inexplicable.”³⁰ But before we meet the young man's eyes, there are several shots that begin the film—and the entire *Decalogue*—in the “constitutive emptiness” of both the world and the camera's gaze: first, a slow forward-tracking shot across the empty blankness of an almost completely frozen lake that ends in a long shot of a small figure crouched before a lakeside fire; next, a closer shot of the back of the figure hunched over the fire; and only then a head-on close-up of the young man's face, his gaze shifting slightly but markedly to finally look *directly* at the camera. While this direct gaze is an unexpected—and hence uncanny—look back *at* us, it is also a look that extends *beyond* us. Speaking in another context of such a direct gaze at the camera, Marc Vernet notes the way in which its directness not only breaks the integrity of the film frame but also is directed not “to a specific individual, but rather to . . . the entire universe taken as a witness for the look.”³¹ The young man's direct gaze, then, quite literally “dissolve[s] the apparatus of framing” and expands outward into an invisible but presenced universal surround, calling forth Nishitani's “Gaze of the other enveloping sight on all sides.”

Throughout *The Decalogue* the anonymity of both the young man and his gaze serves as “a positive, even *positing*, structure.”³² That is, as Alphonso Lingis suggests, “[t]he conversion . . . of a particular aim into an anonymous schema does not just represent a degeneration and dissipation of a significant pulse of existence; it is the way a significant relationship with the world is instituted or acquired.”³³ For both Kieslowski and the viewer of *Decalogue 1* the blankness and nihility of the frozen lake and the directness of the young

29. Insdorf, *Double Lives*, 73.

30. Phil Cavendish, “Kieslowski's *Decalogue*,” *Sight and Sound* 50, no. 3 (summer 1990): 164. It is worth noting that the young man has been referred to by many critics as an angel, but Kieslowski has refused to directly acknowledge this reading.

31. Marc Vernet, “The Look at the Camera,” *Cinema Journal* 18, no. 2 (winter 1989): 52.

32. Lingis, “Sense and Non-Sense,” 352 (emphasis added).

33. *Ibid.*

man's look open up (shades of Heidegger, with whom Nishitani studied) a "clearing"—or, as Martin Jay suggests, "a place in which truth is revealed—but not necessarily to any one eye or two eyes in any one body. The truth is revealed, and the eye is simply there to bear witness to it."³⁴ This truth is not fixed, however; it is the dynamic facticity of radical impermanence, flux, and foundational anonymity—the facticity of a universal vision which in its anonymous exercise, as Lingis puts it, sees "as one sees, as eyes of flesh see."³⁵

Traces of this anonymous vision and the expansive universal surround, as well as the blankness and nihility that undo and open up the limits of the frame and subject, abound in *Decalogue 1*—and this not in spite of but because of the contracted and constricted field in which Kieslowski's characters materially exist. Indeed, Kieslowski has commented on how *The Decalogue's* apartment block "laid out limits to the field of vision," and we see the frame broken up again and again by darkness and by the edges of walls and doors so that space is both cramped and fragmented.³⁶ Nonetheless, contrasted with this contracted space are the blank, empty, and open spaces that frame it—not only the aforementioned frozen lake, which, as Insdorf writes, is an "elemental image, void of human habitation, depicting a desolate universe,"³⁷ but also the white snow fields adjacent to the gray apartment blocks in which, in long shot, Pawel happily runs and plays with his aunt and against which we see Krzysztof and his neighbors as small figures set in isolated and distanced motion. As Bachelard suggests, "the winter cosmos is a simplified cosmos. . . . As a result of this universal whiteness, we feel a form of cosmic negation in action" (40–41). And then there is the more ambiguous "constitutive emptiness" and nihility of Krzysztof's glowing green computer screen—which, although framed and constricted in the apartment's space, itself frames a limitless space suggesting at once everything and nothing.

Nishitani's "radical impermanence" is also visibly represented and emphasized in *Decalogue 1*—not only in the ominously spreading ink stain but also in a variety of images and inflections of transformation that remind us (and often the characters) of the "continuous exfoliation and perturbation of matter." Primary, of course, is the questionable condition of the lake and whether it is sufficiently frozen to bear human weight and confidence so that Pawel can try out his new skates. When we first see the lake in the film's opening tracking shot, there is a small flow of water running down the side of the frame that challenges its frozen fixity. Later, all sorts of "tests"—theoretical and practical—contradictorily affirm its solidity. Nonetheless, meteorological statis-

34. Martin Jay in conversation with Bryson, in notes to Bryson, "Gaze in the Expanded Field," 110.

35. Lingis, "Sense and Non-Sense," 352.

36. Joseph Cunneen, "Kieslowski on the Mountaintop," *Commonweal*, Aug. 15, 1997, 12.

37. Insdorf, *Double Lives*, 73.

tics, computer calculations, and Krzysztof's personal inspection of the lake notwithstanding, Pawel (as do all of us) goes skating on thin ice—a surface whose stability is tenuous at best and always ready to suddenly give way and melt into something else. Indeed, throughout *Decalogue 1* there is visual and narrative emphasis on liquids and solids in transformation: milk dissolving into coffee, turning sour, or freezing; wax melting, dripping, and hardening again; holy water from a church font freezing into a translucent but clouded—and lenslike—disk of ice.

Yet again I want to return to the ink stain—its portentous spreading experienced phenomenologically by Krzysztof as Lacan's scotoma, as an intimation of death. As part of the unity of Nishitani's "universal surround," the ink stain, too, is subject to transformation. Perhaps, in Nishitani's "Gaze of the other enveloping sight on all sides," and in Kieslowski's gaze as well, this stain or scotoma can be seen to cut across and expand the visual field without menace. Again by chance, fate, or indeed what in the unity and movement of the universal surround is quite literally a co-incident that matters, Bryson uses Japanese "flung ink" landscape painting as a way to counter Lacan's use of Holbein's *The Ambassadors* and to illustrate the nonthreatening and frame-breaking expansiveness of the visual field articulated by Nishitani's gaze. Although Bryson tells us that these Ch'an landscapes have "no wish to transcend the facts of ordinary vision," which "involve looking at the object in the form of a section or profile of the object's being," he emphasizes that such flung-ink painting also does not represent or acknowledge this profile as identical with the object itself (101). As he puts it, what the flung-ink image seeks to represent is both "the *object's remainder*, the other views which pass out from [it] to all those uncountable places where the viewer is not," and, correlatively, "the *viewer's remainder*, the sum of other views that the viewer excludes," which exist, nonetheless, as a "surrounding envelope of invisibility" (103).

Furthermore, with the flung ink we not only reencounter the spreading "stain," but we also reencounter our own thrown-ness in the world and the logical contingency that informs and irrupts into our "rational" existence. Bryson tells us that Ch'an painting achieves its destabilization of the framed fixity of the image by disfiguring it with the contingency of the flung ink, which thus opens it "on to the field of material transformations that constitutes the universal surround" (103). Flung-ink painting, then, functions less as a menacing Lacanian stain or scotoma than what, in an eloquent passage, Bryson describes as an "opening on to the whole force of randomness": "The flinging of ink marks the surrender of the fixed form of the image to the global configuration of force that subtends it. *Eidos* is scattered to the winds. The image is made to float on the forces which lie outside the frame; it is thrown, as one throws dice. What breaks *into* the image is the rest of the universe, everything outside of the frame" (103). In sum, demonstrating Nishi-

tani's revision of Sartre's and Lacan's gaze, Ch'an, Bryson tells us, strives for "a regime of visibility in which the decentering of the subject may be thought in terms that are not essentially catastrophic" (104).

This gaze at an immeasurably expanded field in which, as Bryson says, "visibility is traversed by something wholly ungovernable by the subject" (104) seems to me the mark of Kieslowski's cinema and most certainly of *Decalogue 1*. Although highly sympathetic to the existential dread engendered in his characters by their more narrow and consequently turbulent view of the frame-breaking irrationality of logical contingency, Kieslowski's vision is far less anthropocentric than theirs. Indeed, he has said, with an irony that marks his recognition of the harsh dialectics operative in a humanistic gaze that is almost but not quite yet dcentered: "We're in a period of total crisis, but it's not the end of the world."³⁸

Ultimately one senses that Kieslowski understands that our lives would be far less dreadful (and certainly less emotionally turbulent) if we acceded to our contingent thrown-ness in the world but also, given the material weight and consequences of our existence, took a measure of care about where we land. For him the message of *The Decalogue* is, "Live carefully, with your eyes open, and try not to cause pain."³⁹ Perhaps, then, after making his grand trilogy—*Blue* (1993), *White* (1993), and *Red* (1994)—it is not so surprising that the filmmaker decided to retire and return to his house in the country to live a "peaceful" and "simple" life, to "chop wood and sit on a bench."⁴⁰ Again, Lévi-Strauss seems apt here. As if he were glossing Kieslowski's materialist cinema (and concrete metaphysics), as well as his desire for simplicity and peace, he writes:

All meaning is answerable to a lesser meaning, which gives it its highest meaning, and if this regression finally ends in recognizing "a contingent law of which one can only say: *It is thus*, and not otherwise," this prospect is not alarming to those whose thought is not tormented by transcendence even in a latent form. For man will have gained all he can reasonably hope for if, on the sole condi-

38. Kieslowski, *Krzysztof Kieslowski: I'm So-So*.

39. Insdorf, *Double Lives*, 74.

40. Quoted by Hiroshi Takashi, in "Eyelashes Quiver in a Propeller's Breeze," in *Krzysztof Kieslowski* (Lodz: Camerimage, 2000), 6. At the conference that prompted this essay I was given a gift of this commemorative volume and "discovered" the brief homage by Takashi, who had published the script of *The Decalogue* in Japan, with his own commentary. Takashi not only mentions Kieslowski's sojourn in Japan (*pace* Nishitani) but also cites Lévi-Strauss on the limited but different acculturated view each of us has of the world! And all of this long after I was inspired by Bryson to deal with Kieslowski's cinematic gaze in relation to Nishitani's critique of Sartre and Lacan or found my way to Lévi-Strauss's *The Savage Mind*. One can only wonder at the complexity of coincidence and believe there really are "strange attractors," and order in chaos, fate in chance.

tion of bowing to this contingent law, he succeeds in determining his form of conduct and in placing all else in the realm of the intelligible. (256–57)⁴¹

Indeed, one has the sense that, in retiring to the country to chop wood and sit on a bench, Kieslowski wanted to say, “*It is thus* and not otherwise,” and that he wanted to “bow to contingent law” without thoughts “tormented by transcendence.” But it is also clear from all his work that this was not possible. Certainly, his own vision appreciates and comprehends the positive, open, and “untormented” vision of existential plenitude experienced by his toddler Véroniques as they are “astonished” by the world and share thoughtlessly in its “flesh” that is “everything.” And certainly his own vision grasps the untormented vision and the positive values of the negativity that is radical impermanence, constitutive emptiness, and contingent law. But in the end Kieslowski remained (as most of us do) a humanist, ironically unable (and perhaps unwilling) to give up his “torment”—even as he was able to see beyond it. Nonetheless, even as he was still “tormented by transcendence” (he was working on a screenplay for a trilogy called *Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory* with his longtime collaborator Krzysztof Piesiewicz just before he died),⁴² bow to “contingent law” Kieslowski did—contingency seeming here not only mordantly ironic but also somehow fated given the heart attack that in 1996 ended his life so shortly after his retirement to peace and simplicity. After all, for Kieslowski, as for most of us, there can be no total retreat to peace and simplicity except in death—and insofar as we embrace the rational, it will always be perturbed and disrupted by its others: logical contingency and emotional turbulence. Against the desire for peace, simplicity, and “rest,” Lingis writes: “History can only be an inheritance of contingencies, a tradition of hazards, a necessity made out of risks and chances.”⁴³ This is what Kieslowski’s *Decalogue 1* and his other works both affirm and mourn.

41. Lévi-Strauss attributes interior quotations to Sartre.

42. See Insdorf, *Double Lives*, 184.

43. Lingis, “Sense and Non-Sense,” 356.

“Susie Scribbles”

On Technology, Technē, and Writing Incarnate

Il y a d’abord le moment où le désir s’investit dans la pulsion graphique, aboutissant à un objet calligraphique. —ROLAND BARTHES

Avoid haphazard writing materials. —WALTER BENJAMIN

The following phenomenological meditations on the carnal activity of writing were provoked by an electronic doll. A contemporary version of eighteenth-century anthropomorphic writing automata, “Susie Scribbles” appeared on the shelves of Toys R Us quite a number of Christmases ago and sold for \$119. Unable to resist, I bought her. Susie and the peculiarities of her existence raised significant questions about writing bodies and writing technologies—not only because her automaton’s instrumentalism interrogated what writing is and how it is accomplished but also because the form in which this instrumentalism was embodied interrogated what is—or is not—“human” about writing. Susie was a quite large female doll, about two feet high, meant to look (her brochure says) about five years old. She came with her own writing desk, a ballpoint pen (with four color ink cartridges for, one supposes, expressive purposes), a pad of paper, and a robotic arm—along with a tape cassette that fit in a player inserted in her back, which, under the overalls and pink polo shirt, gave her arm electronic instructions and enabled her to sing (albeit without moving her lips) about how much fun she and her consumer playmate were having. Aside from the very idea of her, as well as my curiosity about why—in this electronic moment—an anthropomorphic writing machine would still be fashioned to write with a pen rather than at a computer, what first really fascinated me about Susie was her comportment. A bit limp in body so that she could be positioned at her desk to appear as if she were really looking down at the paper, she had to be latched to her desk chair in back at her shoulders. Fair-skinned, blond, and blue-eyed, she had a facial expression that seemed to me somewhat anxious. Most disturbing, however, was her lack of neck muscle. Her five-year-old’s head hung down over the writing pad abjectly at best, at worst as if her neck were broken. In sum, as both a “writing technology” and a simulacrum of the lived

body, “Susie Scribbles” made substantial for me questions about the relations between technology and embodiment in the matter—and meaning—of writing. I will return to Susie and her accomplishments later, but first I want to explore the materiality of writing as it is more humanly experienced in its subjective and objective forms.

Within the context of phenomenological inquiry, Susie hyperbolizes—by hypostatizing—the material nature of both “writing bodies” and “bodies of writing” and thus reminds us that writing is never an abstraction. It is a concrete intentional *activity* as well as, in its various substantial forms, a concrete intentional *object*. Both activity and object, the phenomenon we call writing also sufficiently (if not necessarily) implicates an embodied and enworlded *subject*—the one who writes, and in writing, not only through labor brings some “thing” into material presence and social meaning that was not there before but also spatially and temporally lives the activity through her body in a specifically meaningful, because specifically material, way.¹ Which is to say that writing is as much about *matter*ing as it is about *mean*ing. Making things matter, however, requires both a *technology* and a *technique*. Although writing is itself a concrete as well as social mediation between subjective consciousness and the objective world of others, it is further mediated through the materiality of discrete instrumental forms. Although we may trace letters in the sand, chisel words into stone, or sign a childhood pact in the blood from our finger, today in our culture we usually write with pencils, pens, typewriters, and “word-processing” computers—technologies we differently (and to different degrees) *incorporate* into our bodies and our experience of writing.² These technologies not only demand different techniques to use them, but they also differently frame and transform the sense and matter of the activ-

1. In terms of material “things,” the “matter” of writing does not necessarily entail an intentional subject. (Hence, as will be discussed later, the fascination with writing produced by automata.) But for the matter of writing to mean, for writing not only to necessarily “be” but for it to be sufficiently “what” it is, it must entail an intentional subject. In this regard Margaret Morse, “Television Graphics and the Virtual Body: Words on the Move,” in her *Virtualities: Television, Media Art and Cyberspace* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), aptly points out that “much of the nomenclature of both writing and typographics—*hand, face, character*—are metonymies of the absent human body and of the subjectivity which we presume is responsible for them” (72).

2. I don’t mention here the experience or techniques of writing with a brush in other cultures. Such an activity, with its particular materials and techniques, would have its own spatial, temporal, and bodily phenomeno-logic. Indeed, in contemporary Western culture writing has often been viewed by theorists (most male) as a form of sadistic incision, as violently aggressive; considering the use of a brush, one could understand its action on a surface as quite different: additive, caressive, nonviolent. See Andrew Brown, *Roland Barthes: The Figures of Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), for discussion of this issue in relation to Barthes; Brown also mentions the felt-tipped pen as a writing instrument that does not aggressively scratch or impress the paper (170, 192–93).

ity, object, and subject of writing—and hence its experience and meaning. This is not to say that we all have the same experience of the use of a particular writing instrument, nor is it to say that our experience of a particular writing instrument is constant and may not vary with our task or our mood, nor is it to deny that our valuation of writing instruments and practices is always constituted in history and culture. It is to say, however, that our carnal use of particular and material writing instruments informs and contributes to the structure of our thought and its concrete expression.

EMBODIED TECHNOLOGIES

In “A Phenomenology of Writing by Hand” Daniel Chandler points out that a wide range of our experience of writing can be linked to five key features that inform the activity and product of writing but vary according to the substantial materiality of our writing implements: directness of inscription; uniformity of script; speed of transcription; linearity of composition; and boundedness of surface.³ Glossing these features, Chandler writes:

Directness refers to suspension in time and indirection in space. Clearly the pen and the pencil involve the most direct inscription; the typewriter involves spatial indirection and the word processor involves both this and temporally suspended inscription (making it the least direct). *Uniformity* refers to whether letters are shaped by hand (as with the pen and pencil) or pre-formed (as with the typewriter and the word processor). *Speed* refers to the potential speed of transcription relative to other tools. Clearly the typewriter and the word processor are potentially faster than the pen and the pencil, at least for longhand. *Linearity* refers to the extent to which the tool allows one to jump around in a text: here the word processor is far less linear than other media. By *boundedness* I refer to limits on the “frame-size” of a particular writing and reading surface. In the case of the typewriter, these bounds include the carriage width and the visibility of the text only above the typing line. In the case of the word processor this also includes the carriage width of the printer, but more importantly the number of lines and characters per line which can be displayed on the screen. Here the pen and the pencil are clearly less bounded. (72)

Although this may seem a dry reduction of what we already know (or think we know), Chandler points out that these five features all “relate to the handling of space and time both by the tool and by the writer, and, since, as phenomenologists argue, such relationships are fundamental to our structuring of experience, it is hardly surprising that they may be experienced as trans-

3. Daniel Chandler, “The Phenomenology of Writing by Hand,” *Intelligent Tutoring Media* 3, nos. 2/3 (May/Aug. 1992). Subsequent references will be cited in the text. See also Chandler’s *The Act of Writing: A Media Theory Approach* (Great Britain: University of Wales, Aberystwyth, 1995), esp. chap. 6, “Writing Tools,” 132–88.

forming influences" (72). Thus, in "The Writer's Technique in Thirteen Theses," Walter Benjamin's quite serious dictum to the writer, Benjamin prescribes that writers "[a]void haphazard writing materials. A pedantic adherence to certain papers, pens, inks is beneficial. No luxury, but an abundance of these utensils is necessary."⁴ And in an interview entitled "Un rapport presque maniaque avec les instruments graphique," Roland Barthes obsessed about his "problems in finding the right kind of pen."⁵

For example, now that I use the computer for writing anything more than notes or lists, contemplation of the "bumpy" callus on the third finger of my right hand fills me with a certain wonder. It brings back physical memories from childhood and adolescence: of tightly gripping a pencil or pen, of writer's cramp, of pressing into different textures of paper to meet various forms of reception and resistance. Even at the moment of composing these present thoughts on a computer (which demands only slight substantial bodily engagement, the light touch of my fingertips on the keys nearly overridden by the intense concentration of my gaze), that callus reminds me of my earlier and more physical connection with writing. Most particularly, I recall the specific feeling of a vague thought gaining force and focus and momentum to take shape and emerge through my arm and in the grip of my fingers in the material form of words—which occasionally surprised even me with their sudden substance and rare exactitude.⁶ The callus on my finger also reminds me that there is a reciprocity between our bodies and our various writing technologies that co-constitute different experiences of *spatiality*. Unlike my upright posture at the typewriter or computer, when I wrote with pencil or pen, I generally curled my body forward toward the protective half-circle of my left arm—whether I was sitting at a desk or table, sprawling on floor or bed, or propped up with a pad resting against my knees, whether I was dreamily writing a poem or anxiously taking a test at school. This bodily circumscription of a lived space made intimate not only points to my right-

4. Walter Benjamin, "One-Way Street," trans. Edmund Jephcott, in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 1, 1913–1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 458.

5. Brown, *Roland Barthes*, 192–93. Brown draws from an interview with Barthes—"Un rapport presque maniaque avec les instruments graphique" [An Almost Maniacal Rapport with Writing Instruments], which was collected in the French edition of *Le Grain de la voix: Entretiens, 1962–1980* (Paris: Seuil, 1981), 170–74—to quote the epigraph that begins this essay: "Il y a d'abord le moment où le désir s'investit dans la pulsion graphique, aboutissant à un objet calligraphique" [There is a moment when desire infuses the graphic impulse, ending up in a calligraphic object] (translation mine). Brown also criticizes what he sees as an unfair reduction of this sentence by others to "J'aime écrire à la main" (193).

6. On writing as the movement of a thought through the body (albeit from a distinctively male perspective) see Charles Grivel, "Travel Writing," in *Materialities of Communication*, ed. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and K. Ludwig Pfeiffer, trans. William Whobrey (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 254–55.

handedness in a way that my use of both hands at the typewriter and computer keyboard does not, but it also suggests a form of spatial privatization that my incorporation of pencil or pen inscribed along with my meanings.⁷ This is a space that Gaston Bachelard might have described as shell-like: that is, a space constituted and inhabited in a dialectical structure of intrusion and extrusion, a space that among other qualities allowed for what Bachelard calls, as a characteristic of the *poiësis* of the shell, “the mystery of slow, continuous formation.”⁸ Thus, paradoxically, even in school, under the monitoring eyes of others, writing by hand with pencil or pen was a private, enclosed, and intimate experience of material and social emergence—one that encompassed and protected a world from intrusion as it simultaneously extruded and expressed it.

This lived space expanded but lost a certain intimate intensity when I began to use a typewriter—although I was a good enough typist that, for the most part, my experience of the machine, like that of my pencil or pen, was sufficiently transparent for me to incorporate and write through it. Writing at the typewriter felt a less private experience; sitting at the machine somehow demanded a correspondent spatial accommodation of the concrete and artifactual quality of the room itself: the sheets of paper next to me, the furniture and books surrounding me. These “things” became gently unfocused toward the horizons of my vision as I gazed at the paper in my typewriter, but they remained a very physical presence nonetheless, a complement to all of the concrete and often pleasurably resistant materials I was engaging: the striking keys, the keyboard, the paper to be inserted and pulled out and crumpled or laid on a growing pile of achievement, a bottle of “white out” for mistakes, and so on.

In contrast, when I sit at my computer, the space of my writing seems at once more intimate yet more immense than the shell-like experience of writing with a pen, and it also feels less physically grounded in the breadth of a world than the experience of writing at a typewriter. My experience at the computer is more tunnel-like than shell-like, more blindered, occluded, and abstract than expansively material and physical. Its intimate space is less one of intrusion and extrusion than of exclusion, its physical sense less that of impression and expression than of nearly effortless and immaterial exchange in which my body seems more diffuse—my head and the screen vaguely if intensely conjoined, my hands and fingers and the keyboard and mouse lightly felt peripherals to a less than solidly felt core. Even if, as Chandler notes above of writing through the computer, physical inscription is

7. Lisa Jensen, “Confessions of a Computer Phobe,” *Santa Cruz (California) Good Times*, Dec. 13, 1990, writes: “Trying to coax inspiration from my own elusive muse is far too private a process to be scrutinized by the prying terminal eye” (23).

8. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (New York: Beacon, 1969), 106.

delayed and thus, as he puts it, “indirect,” my sense of intense direct engagement with my words is enhanced if almost decorporealized—this proportionate to my spatial existence while writing, which seems in many ways to deny the limitations and resistances of my quotidian material world. Michael Heim describes this spatial experience in *Electric Language: A Philosophical Study of Word Processing*: “Words dance on the screen. Sentences slide smoothly into place, make way for one another, while paragraphs ripple down the screen. Words become high-lighted, vanish at the push of a button, then reappear instantly at will” in this “frictionless electric element.”⁹ (In this regard the callus on my finger also—and indelibly—reminds me that my body and the writing materials it engages are marked by different degrees of friction and resistance in the making of the mark. This is an issue even with “Susie Scribbles,” who, although she will never get a callus, may “not work” since as her brochure notes, certain writing implements, “usually the markers with the broad cloth tips, . . . create too much friction for the hand.”)

That callus, in calling me back from the computer into a more physical world of writing and writing instruments, reminds me also that my incorporation of pencil and pen and their particular materiality gives rise not only to particular *spatial forms* but also to particular *temporal forms*—for me marked at their limits, on the one side, by an aesthetic languor that locates its pleasure as much in the manual forging and visual sight of the letters and words as in their semantic and communicative value, and, on the other side, by a physical fatigue felt in the hand. Writing by hand seems slow and languorous or slow and laborious. Indeed, as Heim observes of writing by hand: “A certain amount of drudgery has always attached to the task of putting words on paper” (192). Yet the labor involved in handwriting also physically imprints and invests the subject in its object to constitute a particular *material value*. Thus, Heim also tells us: “The graphic stamp, or personal character, of the writer is more than a merely subjective component of the element of handwriting. . . . The graphic stamp is the subjective side of a process which includes the physical resistance of the materials and a respect for materials arising from this resistance” (193). For example, fascinated by watching his children use old-fashioned “dip pens” when they were in elementary school in France and compelled to try it out himself, philosopher Don Ihde comments on his perceived sense of “the slowness of the writing process” and the painfulness of rewriting. But, as he points out, this slowness has its correlated compensations: “I also discovered that while one’s mental processes raced well ahead of the actual writing, (mental) editing could take shape while under way. One could formulate or reformulate a sentence several

9. Michael Heim, *Electric Language: A Philosophical Study of Word Processing* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), 152. Subsequent references will be cited in the text.

times before completion.” Furthermore, Ihde notes how his “fascination with the actual appearance of the script, whose lettering could be quite beautiful in that the curves and varying scribing could attain aesthetic quality,” led him to a rediscovery of the “art” of that style of writing we associate with *belles lettres*.¹⁰

Ihde describes and contrasts his own various experiences with different writing technologies (“the dip ink pen, a typewriter and the word processor”) within a broader consideration of the phenomeno-logic of our embodied relations with, as he puts it, “technologies-in-use.” Although he emphasizes that technologies (here, writing technologies) do not *determine* the subject’s intentional behavior, he also emphasizes that technologies are never neutral, and thus, to varying degrees, they inform our behavior: “Technologies, by providing a framework for action, do form intentionalities and inclinations within which use-patterns take dominant shape.” Thus, he tells us: “I could not claim that the use of the dip pen ‘determined’ that I write in the style of *belles lettres*, but the propensity or inclination was certainly there” (141). Certainly, the reason for writing is a cultural factor in qualifying any stylistic possibility or influence imposed by the specific materiality of writing. Nonetheless, inflected, of course, by their historical situation in various cultural contexts, different writing technologies, Ihde suggests, may “incline” us toward different compositional and stylistic possibilities “simply by virtue of which part of the writing experience is enhanced and which made difficult” (142). Heim notes this as well: “The manipulation of symbols, the arrangement of symbolic domains, has its own special time and motion” (138).

There are, then, even major differences between the material experience of writing with a pencil or pen, since each possesses its own discretion, its own spatial claims, temporal rhythms, and motions. I recall that, for me, writing with a pencil involved a temporal rhythm rather different from writing with a pen. It involved a freedom of scrawl nearly always informed by the possibility of erasure. Indeed, erasure, itself part of the process, brought to writing with a pencil a particular temporal punctuation wrought by a hand gesture remarkably isomorphic, in this culture, with nodding one’s head “no,” followed by a motion that brushed from the paper the rubbery remnants of words that no longer mattered—at least not as written expression. Writing with pen rather than pencil, I recall a different rhythm: somewhat slower at first, when the page was neat, so I wouldn’t make the first nonerasable mistake, then gaining a freer, if slightly hostile, momentum as the page became increasingly marked—and measured—by the messiness of error and self-repudiation. Thus, as Ihde remarks, “to actually rewrite was painful, and

10. Don Ihde, *Technology and the Lifeworld: From Garden to Earth* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 141. Subsequent references will be cited in the text.

were the object to be a composed letter, it would call for starting over, since there was no simple erasure" (141). At the beginning (whether of a letter, a singular composition, or a fresh, new school notebook whose blank white pages prompted my perfection and then paled at my slips of hand or mind), I was more *thoughtful* writing with a pen, more aware of the *permanent commitment* I was making—and marking. (This experience was heightened in the few instances when, like Ihde, I tried to write with a dip pen but was largely reduced with my use of a computer, where, until I print them out, I can command words to move elsewhere or to vanish and do not even have to brush or blow away their remains.) Using a pen, I had to *cross out* mistakes rather than *erase* them, the rubbery pleasure of materially removing them gone—replaced by (often angry) additive gestures that covered over their worldly matter with slashes and black and blue marks so that, as if dead and defaced bodies, later identification of the words would be impossible. When I moved to the typewriter, however, these assaults on my mistakes were transformed—on the one hand, by a careful and additive, brush-stroke coating of Wite-Out that Heim calls "the industrial chore of correcting errors by imposing one material substance over another" (132) but that I found rather pleasurable in its soothing and ritual antidote to my mistake; on the other hand, by the typewriter's striking keys "x-ing" over a repudiated expression in a satisfyingly brisk physical gesture and staccato rhythm: the rat-a-tat-tat (particularly of my electric typewriter) evoking less a slashing or black-and-blue battery than an efficient machine-gunning of the errant words into nonexistence.

As we incorporate writing technologies, we simultaneously excorporate and give material form to our thoughts and feelings; and, as there is spatial reciprocity between the subjective and objective poles of this process, so also is there *temporal* reciprocity. A journalist friend of mine who hates computers and almost always prefers to write with pencil or pen tells me that she feels not so much technologically challenged as *temporally challenged* by both electric and electronic writing technologies. "As it is," she says, "I can barely tolerate the impatient hum of the electric typewriter waiting for my fingers on the keys, a low insistent reminder that time is passing. How could I think at all with a hungry computer screen glaring at me all the time?"¹¹ The flashing or blinking computer cursor seems particularly insistent and demanding of a response. Thus, as Chandler notes, although "such a feeling of being pressured by the tool into behaviour with which one is uncomfortable is certainly not the experience of all writers . . . one must insist to those who dismiss it that it remains important for those who do experience it" (71). Furthermore, despite an occasionally broken pencil point or an empty ink cartridge, pencils and pens stay relatively unchanged and constant in their

11. Jensen, "Confessions of a Computer Phobe," 23.

material instrumentality compared to computer word-processing programs and the temporal demands, distractions, and interruptions they impose on the writing process even as they make certain aspects of it “easier” and “faster.”

“If our artifacts do not act on us,” Elaine Scarry observes, “there is no point in having made them. We make material artifacts in order to interiorize them: we make things so that they will in turn remake us, revising the interior of embodied consciousness.”¹² Thus, as writing technologies incorporated by my body, the pencil and pen in-formed not only the particular shape of my lived space and temporality but also the manner in which I approached my task of creating meaning and matter in the world. Here, as Ihde noted of his inclination to write belles lettres when he used the dip pen, the notion of *existential style* emerges—a style that “character-izes” the subject of writing as much as it does the written object. Writing’s relation to existential style is, of course, most materially figured in the eccentricity and “personality” of one’s handwriting. In this regard it is telling that the term *belles lettres* first emerged between 1630 and 1699, a period that marks the emergence of mechanical print culture. As Tamara Plakins Thornton notes: “Only at this point did script come to be defined as distinct from print. If print was the impersonal product of a machine, then script became the creation of the hand, physically—and conceptually—linked to the human being who produces it.”¹³

Yet even so personal and nontechnological a matter as one’s own handwriting may alter, along with one’s manner, in response to a particular writing technology. Thus, although it has been hardly admitted in the discourse on writing, it is telling that along with Benjamin and Barthes a great many people favor certain kinds of writing instruments over others—even when several would seem to accomplish the same objective task equally well. When it comes to pencils, for example, I have always had a preference for those with no. 2 lead. A no. 1 pencil marks the page too lightly but not gently enough for me: it seems too hard and stingy and unforgiving at its tip. With pens, my range of preference (and desire) is broader—although, generally, whether fountain pen, ballpoint, or felt-tip, and whatever the color, I prefer

12. Elaine Scarry, “The Merging of Bodies and Artifacts in the Social Contract,” in *Culture on the Brink: Ideologies of Technology*, ed. Gretchen Bender and Timothy Druckrey (Seattle: Bay Press, 1994), 97.

13. Tamara Plakins Thompson, “Handwriting as an Act of Self-Definition,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Aug. 15, 1997, B7. Although print has existed since the Gutenberg press, insofar as broad cultural understandings of writing by hand are concerned Thompson also points out: “As late as the 17th century, men and women hardly recognized an association between an individual and his or her script. Only in the early 18th century did the English legal authority Geoffrey Gilbert advance the new idea that ‘men are distinguished by their handwriting as well as by their faces’” (B7).

a fine point. Only occasionally do these choices have something to do with my *objective* task. There's no discernible reason that I should prefer to take notes at a lecture with a ballpoint rather than a felt-tip pen, prefer a felt-tip for writing lists, reserve a fountain pen for special and more formal writing. I have no accountant's justification for seeking out a fine point. Nor, barring specific instructions on certain standardized tests or evaluation forms, does there seem to be any objective rationale for my preference of a no. 2 rather than no. 1 pencil—particularly when my choice in lead pencils seems in direct contradiction to my choice in fine-tipped pens (the softer, more expansive lead of a no. 2 pencil making thicker marks than a no. 1).

This apparent contradiction makes *existential* as well as *cultural* sense and, from a phenomenological perspective, is not a contradiction at all. It has direct bearing on the manufacture of my writing, the manner and style of my activity, the project that I am going about, and that objective matter called "writing" that I bring into being. As a child of my culture, with its sanctioned hierarchy of formality that begins with the pencil and moves from pen to typewriter/word processor to published print, I have always found writing with a pencil a relatively casual and dashing affair, writing with a pen relatively more committed and often even stately and formal.¹⁴ Yet it is also materially and carnally true that the lighter imprint and stingy hardness of a no. 1 pencil does not coincide with the sloppy expansiveness and freeing allowance that, for me, is enabled by the softer lead and less resistant tip of a no. 2 pencil. (I have always tended to write theme outlines and impassioned poetry in pencil.) However, when I write more indelibly in ink, "committing" pen to paper (when do we ever use the term *commit* in relation to pencil, typewriter, or word processor?), I constitute the enabling possibility not only to physically *use* but also to materially *make* the "fine point." It is as though my thoughts go through an enhanced process of discrimination and refinement so that they are able to emerge physically through the precise and refined materiality of the pen nib. Indeed, before I switched to the typewriter and then to the computer, I preferred to write expository prose with a pen.

Now, of course, because of its ease, I write my essays and books on the computer—and, reminded by a certain quickening within my callus, I shudder at the thought of all the labor involved were I to have to use a pencil or pen or even my electric typewriter (which has been relegated for years now to somewhere in the back of my hall closet). Indeed, much has been made of this "ease" in writing on the computer—particularly by critics who note that facilitation of the physical process of writing and the ability to easily manipulate and alter text encourage not only the sloppy expansiveness I

14. Daniel Chandler, in an email to me (Aug. 7, 1997), mentions this notion of "the culturally-sanctioned hierarchy of formality" associated with these writing implements in Western culture.

associate with the casual impermanence of the pencil but also the endless qualifications that move toward the ever finer points that, for me, were first correlated to fine-point pens. Thus, there’s a tendency to write “long” on the computer, to lose sight (literally) of how many “pages” (material sheets of paper) there are—or should be—in relation to a given project. In relation to this expanded capacity to write, O. B. Hardison Jr. notes that “the thrust of computer writing is continuous movement (‘scrolling’) from one screen to the next,”¹⁵ and Heim points out that scrolling, however expansively open-ended, is also a mode of concealment that “hides the calculational capacity of computers which makes it possible to assign pages to the text in an infinite variety of formats, before or during the printout” (129).¹⁶ And in regard to the way in which this expansiveness leads also to an increase in ever “finer points” of qualification, Ihde notes the reappearance of what he calls the “‘Germanic tome,’ the highly footnoted and documented scholarly treatise now made easier by the various footnoting programs favored by scholars already so inclined” (142). Ihde goes on to note that publishers increasingly complain about the growth of manuscript length over the contracted length since the advent of word processing. Writing on a computer, I find myself including more citations and adding more qualifying or expansive content footnotes than I would have before this technology—and this not because I am suddenly reading or thinking more than ever but because both writing and footnoting are easier to accomplish. Indeed, these days, how many of us who write on a computer no longer have a material sense of “the page” and, often writing over our assigned limits, practice a computational sleight of hand by reducing not the length of the essay but the size of the font?

In sum, my “style” of writing has correspondingly changed with the technologies of writing I have adopted or abandoned. Moving from pencil and pen to typewriter as my primary technology, I wrote more prose than poetry, and my prose became somewhat more staccato. Moving from typewriter to computer, I, too, tended to form lengthier sentences and found myself using a larger range of emphases—underlining, italics, boldface, different fonts—that corresponded to the inflections of my *voice* and *mood* in a way that neither handwriting nor the typewriter could so variously accommodate. Nonetheless, whereas these more modern technologies have amplified certain aspects of writing for me, such as the speed of composition or editorial freedom and fluidity, they have reduced others—particularly the *physical sense* of writing. The typewriter and, even more so, the computer have diminished my experience of language coursing through my body to make both its—and my—mark on a resistant and resilient worldly surface.

15. O. B. Hardison Jr., *Disappearing through the Skylight: Culture and Technology in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Penguin, 1989), 259.

16. For a more “popular” discussion of scrolling see *ibid.*, 259–346.

Whatever particular aspects of experience are amplified or reduced through various writing technologies, the point to be made here is that my existential style and my writing style are correlated—and insofar as I incorporate different technologies of writing I am also incorporated by them. Chandler cites one writer who “goes so far as to suggest that he feels not simply that the pen is an extension of the hand, but that he himself becomes an extension of the pen: ‘Words flow from a pen, not from a mind. . . . I *become* my pen; my entire organism becomes an extension of this writing instrument. Consciousness is focused in the point of the pen’” (69). Certainly I am not merely subjected to the material demands of pencil, pen, typewriter, or computer, and I can struggle against and override the responses they most easily provoke from me. Nonetheless, in what phenomenologists call the “natural attitude” (natural because it is historically and culturally “naturalized” into transparency—and, barring reflection—lived at a “zero-degree” of awareness), insofar as I privilege in practice a given writing technology, I will tend to succumb to its material demands and most likely form an existential habit of living according to its spatial, temporal, bodily, and technical coordinates.

EMBODIED TECHNIQUES

As these observations indicate, a phenomenology of the material and technological experience of writing attempts to describe and bring to awareness the dynamic and essentially correlational structure of that experience as it entails the existential activity of writing, the intentional objects that emerge in material form as the means of writing and the written matter, and an embodied and enworlded subject who is the writer—activity, object, and subject all enabled and mediated through a particular writing technology that spatially and temporally qualifies the embodied manner and objective style in which we write. However, given that phenomenological description of an existential kind recognizes that it is always also qualified by history and culture, it should further describe the ways in which the meaning of writing and its material technologies are historically and culturally enworlded—in particular embodied techniques and the meanings that in-form them.

Here, it is particularly telling and warrants further elaboration that the electronic writing doll “Susie Scribbles” came in two other embodiments than a “five-year-old” Caucasian female: one an African American male child, the other a furry brown teddy bear. Insofar as we understand that writing by hand serves simultaneously as an indexical sign of subjectivity, a symbolic sign of class, and a pragmatic form of social empowerment, these selective embodiments of writing automata are uncanny not only for their mechanical aptitude. They are also uncanny for their material revelation of certain kinds of beliefs about what (and who) constitutes appropriate writ-

ing and, as well, about the “inappropriate appropriation of writing”—beliefs that hold that certain writers, deemed lacking in significant (and therefore signifying) intentionality and subjectivity, are merely automatons engaged in appropriating and “aping” the appropriate writing of their accomplished betters. In this regard and in relation to those automaton scribblers who appeared on the toy store shelf—a female child, a black male child, and a culturally declawed animal—it is worth noting the unmarked absence of a white male child automaton. Thus, we might suppose that for the enlightened men at Wonderama Toys in (of all places) Edison, New Jersey, who conceived these writing automata, embodying the human ability to write not only in agencyless machines but also in the forms of supposedly less rational, less powerful, and inferior “others” both materializes an “uncanny” oxymoron and amplifies the very “not-human” nature of automatic writing.¹⁷ It also functions, from the transparent perspective and legacy of Enlightenment (white male) humanism, as both self-aggrandizing and self-congratulatory. Indeed, as Annette Michelson writes of another and more “accomplished” female automaton “invented by Edison” in a fiction, the white girl, black boy, and furry teddy bear all sit at their writing desks as a “palimpsest of inscription”—each not only inscribing but also inscribed as both an “unreasoning and reasonable facsimile, generated by reason” itself.¹⁸

Thus far, I have scrupulously avoided discussion of writing as a discrete form of *symbolic* communication—nor have I yet discussed it as acculturated through an embodied *technique*. My emphasis has been instead on the radical physical activity and experience of the lived body in the act of writing and its entailment of material and technological means to make some “thing” that matters out of no “thing” at all. Indeed, closer phenomenological scrutiny reveals that the particular activity and thing we call writing and understand as a discrete order of symbolic communication is, in its very discretion, a secondary apprehension built on the primary ground of the mate-

17. Mary Ann Doane, in “Technology’s Body,” in *Feminist Anthology in Early Cinema*, ed. Jennifer M. Bean and Diane Negra (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), aptly summarizes the “theory of evolution that opposes the more advanced, civilized, and neurotic exemplar of the human species to a primitive—that is, racial other—defined in terms of an immediacy of the body and unrestricted sexuality”; and she continues: “In Freud, a metonymic chain is constructed that links infantile sexuality, female sexuality, and racial otherness” (542). Also illuminating in this regard is Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

18. See Annette Michelson, “On the Eve of the Future: The Reasonable Facsimile and the Philosophical Toy,” in *October: The First Decade, 1976–1986*, ed. Annette Michelson, Rosalind Krauss, Douglas Crimp, and Joan Copjec (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 432. (In this brilliant essay about philosophical toys, cinema, and the bodies of women, Michelson writes of the android female Hadaly, invented by Thomas Alva Edison, in Villier de l’Isle-Adam’s 1889 fiction, *L’*eve future**.)

rial lived body making its meaningful mark on the world as a necessary condition of its very existence. This primary kind of symbolic activity is an activity more general than discrete, and it can be best described as a radical and emergent semiosis of the lived body that has, makes, and marks meaning in the world and to others. That is, always marking its existential situation by its punctual material presence and always in intentional movement that is tropic and choice-making, the lived body in its material presence and social existence constitutes the “original” diacritical mark and “magic” marker: it concretely and visibly produces in its very being the first formation of what we term—both humanly and alphabetically—“character.”¹⁹

Some specific illustration might prove helpful here, and I will thus enlist Sean, a five-year-old neighbor just beginning school at the time I interviewed him. Accompanied by his younger brother, Sean stopped pedaling his tricycle when I asked him what writing was. Not at all surprised by the question, he told me that he knew—and then proceeded to arch and move his right arm in a set of limited but fluid and morphologically regular curves across the air. “Does your little brother write too?” I asked. “No,” Sean said. “He’s only three. He scribbles.” “Well, what’s the difference between writing and scribbling?” I asked. Sean then demonstrated scribbling—this time moving his arm back and forth across the air in a more mechanical, rigid, and jagged fashion than he had before.²⁰ I then asked Sean “what” he could write. He responded by telling me first his name followed by a discrete pronouncement of its letters, and then he announced a list of separate and disconnected words. After a brief moment of silence he companionably offered up the fact that he had written *spiderwebs* the other day. I am quite certain that he was not talking about the word as the sum of its letters but rather that he had not as yet made a clear distinction between writing and drawing.²¹ Indeed, both Sean’s sure distinction between writing and scribbling and his

19. For further elaboration of the origins of semiosis in the lived body and its diacritical activity see my “The Lived Body and the Emergence of Language,” in *Semiotics around the World: Synthesis in Diversity (Proceedings of the Fifth Congress of the International Association for Semiotic Studies, Berkeley, 1994)*, ed. Irmengard Rauch and Gerald F. Carr (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1997), 1051–54; and my *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 71–76.

20. On the possible meanings of scribbling at a much more sophisticated level than Sean’s see Brown, *Roland Barthes*, esp. chap. 4, “The Scribbler,” 152–209.

21. Régis Debray, in “The Three Ages of Looking,” trans. Eric Rauth, *Critical Inquiry* 21 (spring 1995), notes “the ambiguity of *graphisme* itself [the translator retaining the French word ‘because it signifies graphics or the graphic arts as well as handwriting or script’], which accounts for the double meaning of the Greek verb *graphein*, to draw and to write” (541). For extended discussion of the unclear distinction between writing and drawing see also James Elkins, *On Pictures and the Words That Fail Them* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Elkins asks: “How do we know when we are looking at writing, and not pictures? What criteria are brought into play, and how are they related to the more elaborate structures that

confident conflation of writing and drawing raise a major question about the general meaning and matter of writing: “Where does scribble end and writing as communication, or drawing as representation, begin?”²² Finally, at the end of a lengthier conversation than I can recount here, I asked Sean what writing was “good for,” and, although he understood my question as one about function and value, he groped for an answer he couldn’t quite find. Instead, he told me his little brother had a magic pencil that turned scribbling into writing. “All you have to do,” he told me, “is to scribble on this magic pad with this magic pencil, say ‘abracadabra,’ and real writing will be there instead of just squiggly lines.” Definitely aware of the nature of writing as a bodily activity and a material object requiring a technique for its production, vaguely aware of some kind of instant and magical material transformation accomplished by writing, this five-year-old’s concept of writing was founded—and, more significantly, focused—on its physical and material aspects.

Sean’s initiation into writing, then, is grounded in bodily action and the specific techniques involved in making material marks that matter—whatever their vaguely apprehended use value or “reason” for being. On the one hand, Sean illustrates the bodily *originality* of writing, of making one’s mark, simultaneously in and on the world. On the other, his cultural initiation into the activity of writing came (just as mine had) by way of institutionalized instruction and bodily imitation, an instruction and imitation focused on *technique*. That is, the act of writing was brought into focus for Sean through a *bodily tuition*: a discrete set of objective steps that were to be physically followed prior to any clear understanding he might have of what he was doing or why he was doing it (that is, why this particular mode of bringing matter into the world mattered). Thus, like all the writers who have come before him, Sean’s generalized physical activity and pleasure of making and leaving any kind of marks on the world as an existential assertion of presence have been historically and culturally regulated into specific and highly objectified forms. Indeed, only with time and practice will Sean’s larger inscriptional body movements become objectively contained by and regulated “in the hand.”²³ The movements and techniques of “penmanship” will become

preoccupy linguistics?” And he concludes: “Any picture can be understood as failed or incomplete writing, and the same is true of any writing” (130–31).

22. Brown, *Roland Barthes*, 178. Also of interest here is Barthes’s wide-ranging work on the connection between the body and signification. In relation to the specific issue of writing, scribbling, and drawing see his essay, “Cy Twombly: Works on Paper,” in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), esp. 158–62.

23. See Jonathan Goldberg, *Writing Matter: From the Hands of the English Renaissance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990). Goldberg traces a genealogy of the “relationship between the hand writing and handwriting” in the Renaissance as an increasing separation and

incorporated into Sean's bodily schema and, once habituated, will eventually seem less alien and laborious than "natural."

In "Handwriting as an Act of Self-Definition" Thornton comments on the history and literature of techniques for writing by hand, pointing not only to "the exquisitely engraved penmanship manuals of the eighteenth century or the copybooks of the Victorian era" but also, of course, to the "Palmer method" that dominated the teaching of handwriting well into the twentieth century, articulating a mechanical and repetitive standard consonant with the Taylorism and Fordism that marked assembly-line production in the machine age. Thornton writes:

Mr. Palmer promised to deliver a tireless arm that could compete with the typewriter, but what really attracted educators were his handwriting drills. . . . Sometimes they began with "preparatory calisthenics." Then, at the teacher's command, . . . students executed row after row of ovals and "push-pulls." School officials were blunt about the value of these drills. The lessons they conveyed—conformity to standard models, obedience to authority—would reform juvenile delinquents, assimilate foreigners, and acclimate working-class children to their futures in the typing pool or on the factory line.²⁴

In this regard the brochure for the more contemporary "Susie Scribbles" is illuminating. Sitting at her desk with her "magic" pen and pad and her electronically controlled writing arm, Susie is regarded by those who made her not only as a play toy but also as "a learning assistant." Thus, the brochure first tells us (in somewhat righteous tones): "Remember that Susie Scribbles is about five years old and will write at that level by design. We would not want a toy writing better than a child." And then it continues (shades of Palmer embedded in its Montessori patience): "Susie Scribbles can assist your child in learning, but repetition is the key to learning, and always remember that each child learns at their own speed."

Monique Wittig's autobiographical novel *The Opoponax* wonderfully, meticulously, and painfully describes not only the young child's original focus on writing in its materiality and concrete grounding in bodily action rather than in the symbolic meaning of what one is writing but also the culture's focus on the technology and techniques of writing as a form of social control rather than on writing as the matter of both personal and social expression. Wittig tells us of her young alter ego:

Catherine Legrand can't write. She presses on the paper with the black pencil. She makes letters that stick out on both sides beyond the two lines you are sup-

objectification of the hand from the whole—and subjective—body in relation to the instrumental production of script (236). I am grateful to Sarah Jain for directing me to this text.

24. Thornton, "Handwriting as an Act of Self-Definition," B7.

posed to write inside of, they stick out above and below, they touch the other lines, they are not straight. Mademoiselle says, Begin again. First you make d's and a's, then r's. The bellies of the s's are always too big, the r's fall forward on their canes.²⁵

This description of the concrete (let alone bodily) shape of letters, as well as a perceived sense of their objective recalcitrance, is extended in a later, and excruciating, passage that conjoins writing's concrete materiality with both technology and proscribed bodily technique:

You write in your notebook with a pen which you dip into purple ink. The point scrapes the paper, the two ends come apart, it is like writing on a blotter, afterward the nib is full of little hairs. You take them off with your fingers. You start writing again. There are more hairs. You rub the pen on your smock. You wipe it on the skin of your hand. You separate the two parts of the nib so you can get your finger between them and clean them. The pointed ends do not go back together again, so that now you write double. . . . Mademoiselle gets mad. That makes the third [time] today, you must pay attention and hold your pen like this. . . . Mademoiselle leans over her shoulder to guide her hand. . . . You hold the pen between your thumb and index finger. Your index finger is bent at a right angle and presses against the round end the point is stuck into. Your thumb is a little less bent. The index finger is always sliding onto the inky point. . . . You have to press the index finger against the end of the pen with all your might so it won't slide off. The thumb is also pressed to the end to keep the pen tight between the fingers, which then you can't use. Your whole arm even hurts. . . . Anyway Catherine Legrand is a pig. Mademoiselle tells her so waving her notebook. . . . There are ink stains and fingerprints on the notebook. This is because when you dip the pen into the inkwell it either comes out full of ink or else without enough ink. In the first case the ink immediately drips onto the notebook just as you are getting ready to write. In the second case you press the nib of the pen onto the paper too hard and it makes holes. After this there is no point even trying to make the letters as you know how to do with a pencil. Françoise Pommier writes slowly and carefully. At the top of her notebook she pushes a clean blotter along the line, holding it in place with the hand that is not writing. She raises her head when she has finished the page. . . . Pascale Delaroche makes a blot. She gives a little cry. . . . Reine Dieu's notebook . . . has a lot of blots and holes like Catherine Legrand's. It also has doodles around which Reine Dieu has written the letters as she was asked to do. She has tried to erase something here and there. This makes a funny mess with hills and valleys which you want to touch. Between the hills is dirty. Mademoiselle gets mad again and even throws Reine Dieu's notebook under the table.²⁶

25. Monique Wittig, *The Opoponax*, trans. Helen Weaver (Plainfield, VT: Daughters, 1966),

24.

26. Wittig, *The Opoponax*, 31–33.

Catherine Legrand's (and Monique Wittig's) writing lessons with her dip pen elaborately flesh out, yet also serve as ironic commentary on, Ihde's adult encounter with the same writing instrument when he is in France with his school-age children. Certainly, Catherine's writing lessons dramatize the materiality and technique that ultimately ground Ihde's adult understanding and valuation of the art and craft of belles lettres, but their extreme objectification (as well as hers by Mademoiselle) disallows her the pleasure of making her mark.²⁷ In *Electric Language* Heim writes: "The resistance of materials in handwriting enhances the sense of felt origination. . . . The stamp of characteristic ownership marks written thought as my own, acquired through the struggle with experience and with recalcitrant materials. Handwritten formulation thereby enhances a sense of personal experience or an integrity pertaining to the private, personal self" (186). Catherine Legrand's writing lessons would seem to counter this description—although Monique Wittig goes on to become "a writer" (albeit, in the context of her classroom experience, one who describes herself as an objectified third person).

Wittig's text also throws into relief the less restrictive penmanship lessons a five-year-old American boy more recently gave me out of the classroom and against the empty slate of a spring sky. I remember his sure bodily distinction between writing and scribbling, his untroubled confusion of writing and drawing, and his inability to tell me what writing "was good for." It is not only in French schools that writing is first taught as a technology and technique, as a means of mattering rather than as a matter of meaning. Indeed, it is in this fact that our Enlightenment heritage might be made to seem strange. Although I can't quite think of how else to teach a child to write concretely, I can think how fundamental Enlightenment dualisms separated spirit and mind from the material body (figured now by Susie's effectively "broken" neck). Is it any wonder that this separation led to the objectification and mechanization of human subjectivity and greatly influenced the notion and instruction of writing as an objective technique? Furthermore, given this historical and cultural separation of meaning and matter, of consciousness and the body, insofar as it always also inscribes and makes matter an "existential style," I can understand how writing by hand would always also *confound* this objectification and remain, in a problematic way, *auratic*.²⁸ Thus, it is telling

27. The exquisite torture of this objective technical training is contradicted by a simultaneous cultural belief in the value of the subjective idiosyncrasies of handwriting and graphology; on this contradiction see Roxanne Panchasi, "Graphology and the Science of Individual Identity in Modern France," *Configurations* 4, no. 1 (1996): 1–31.

28. Elaborating on Walter Benjamin's use of the term, Samuel Weber describes *aura* as "the singular leave-taking of the singular, whose singularity is no longer that of an original moment but of its posthumous aftershock." Certainly, writing by hand (the "singular leave-taking of the singular") and the handwritten object (the letter that stands as and for the "singular leave-taking of the singular" and is, in relation to the original moment of writing, its "posthumous after-

that in the mid-1700s, the period that marks the rise of scientific materialism and the move into mechanical typography and print culture, we find both a complementarity and a contradiction in, on the one hand, the privilege enjoyed by belles lettres as a form of writing that embodies reflexive consciousness and individual sensibility and, on the other hand, a significant increase and interest in mechanical writing automata embodied as human beings.²⁹

One particular example of such Enlightenment writing automata is worth considering in relation to “Susie Scribbles,” the electronic doll who sits at her desk several centuries later. Invented by Pierre Jaquet-Droz and his son Henri-Louis and first exhibited in 1774 in Neuchâtel, Switzerland, where it is still in working order and exhibited today, Susie’s Enlightenment equivalent was known as “The Scribe.” Taking the form of a Caucasian boy aged about three, the mechanical child was accompanied and matched by a twin “brother” known as “The Draughtsman,” who did not write but drew pictures. (Here, in an uncanny way, Sean’s lingering confusion of writing and drawing is at once bifurcated and “twinning” as a difference that is, nonetheless, the same.) Gaby Wood describes the pair at the beginning of *Edison’s Eve*:

These prodigies, who look no older than toddlers, are dressed . . . in identical velvet jackets and silk pantaloons. Their faces are doll-like and blank; their bare feet dangle some way off the ground. The first boy begins by dipping his quill pen in a tiny ink well at the side of his desk. He shakes it twice, then methodically moves his hand across the paper and starts to trace the letters in his message. Meanwhile his twin works on a sketch. He slowly draws a head in profile, then drops his chin and blows away the dust from his pencil.³⁰

A picture shows “The Scribe” seated like “Susie” at his own writing desk in a posture almost identical to hers; indeed, he looks amazingly like her—but

shock”) are auratic. See Samuel Weber, “Mass Mediauras, or: Art, Aura and Media in the Work of Walter Benjamin,” in *Mass Mediauras: Form, Technics, Media*, ed. Alan Cholodenko (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 104–5.

29. Although anthropomorphic automata date back to ancient Greek, Chinese, and Arabic cultures and, in Europe, to the medieval and Renaissance periods, the mid-1700s sees a marked proliferation of such fabrications. See, e.g., Jean-Claude Beaune, “The Classical Age of Automata: An Impressionistic Survey from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century,” trans. Ian Patterson, in *Fragments for a History of the Human Body, Part One*, ed. Michel Feher, Ramona Naddaff, and Nadia Tazi (New York: Zone, 1989), 430–80. For a recent history of these and later attempts at “mechanical life” see also Gaby Wood, *Edison’s Eve: A Magical History of the Quest for Mechanical Life* (New York: Knopf, 2002).

30. Wood, *Edison’s Eve*, xiii.

for his differently fashioned clothing, his bare feet,³¹ and the quill rather than ballpoint pen he holds in his fingers.

Such anthropomorphic automata were particularly valued for the exactitude of their lifelike qualities: for example, intricate mechanisms made “a girl’s chest rise and fall at regular intervals in perfect imitation of breathing” and made “the eyes move and animate[d] the head,” turning it round so it looked left and right and down and up again.³² Correlatively, however, human beings of the period were often celebrated for their mechanical and autonomic “clockwork” qualities. Thus, philosopher Julien Offray de La Mettrie could write in 1748, “The human body is a machine which winds its own springs. It is the living image of perpetual movement.”³³ This contradiction and complementarity between anthropomorphic automata and automated human bodies and the conundrum of their “reversibility” continues historically to the present day. In the context of a discussion on the bourgeois fascination with anthropomorphic automata in the nineteenth century, Susan Buck-Morss tells us: “This reversal epitomizes that which Marx considered characteristic of the capitalist-industrial mode of production: Machines that bring the promise of the naturalization of humanity and the humanization of nature result instead in the mechanization of both.”³⁴ We are no less fascinated by notions of these human-machine exchanges, reversals, and reifications today—hence not only Susie in Toys R Us sold as an “interactive” teaching toy and fun-loving companion (with handwriting no better than a five-year-old’s) but also, and more transparently, computers that catch viruses and humans who possess “artificial intelligence.” Thus, how far have we come (or not) from de La Mettrie and the eighteenth century when our dominant techno-logic considers the human body, according to contemporary philosopher Jean-François Lyotard’s provocative phenomenological critique, “as the *hardware* of the complex technical device that is human thought”?³⁵

31. Wood, in *Edison’s Eve*, writes: “The Jaquet-Droz figures conduct their marvellous activities barefoot, illustrating a belief, held by their contemporary Jean-Jacques Rousseau, that children would learn more freely if unhampered by shoes” (xx).

32. Jasia Reichardt, *Robots: Fact, Fiction, and Prediction* (London: Penguin, 1978), 14. For illustrations of writing automata see 13–15.

33. Quoted from his essay “L’Homme Machine,” in Julie Wosk, *Breaking Frame: Technology and the Visual Arts in the Nineteenth Century* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 81. (I am indebted to Jennifer Gonzalez for this reference.)

34. Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 363. Relevant here is Benjamin on late-nineteenth-century bourgeois culture: “You have no idea how these automatons and dolls become repugnant, how one breathes relief in meeting a fully natural being in this society” (363).

35. Jean-François Lyotard, “Can Thought Go On without a Body?” trans. Bruce Boone and Lee Hildreth, in *Materialities of Communication*, ed. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and K. Ludwig Pfeif-

EMBODYING *TECHNĒ*

We can see in this historical and cultural trajectory how the matter of technology elides a humanly embodied meaning that matters and how mechanical technique becomes institutionalized and “industrialized” in penmanship classes where children learn to suppress the idiosyncrasies of their uniquely embodied “existential style,” their very “originality.” A paradox emerges, however: today, precisely because of this social suppression of writerly idiosyncrasy and the valuation of “originality” and “spontaneity” amidst the institutionalized and technological management of our lives, unlike some of our historical predecessors we tend to think that “painstaking penmanship betrays a deficient imagination.”³⁶ Indeed, as Thornton suggests, since the onset of mechanical typography and print culture there has been an essential ambiguity about the relationship between the technological and mass production of writing and the lived body engaged in writing as an act of self-expression. Ever more troubling in highly technologized cultures that depend on standardization, an ongoing argument exists “between the forces of conformity and those of individuality” about “the nature of the self.”³⁷

In this sense, however much we may deny it, we are hardly yet post-Enlightenment or postindustrial, even as we are post-postmodern. “Susie Scribbles” is a concrete extension of the Enlightenment objectification of both writing and human being and the nineteenth century’s valuation of assembly-line standardization, conformity, and repetition—which, among other things, gave us first the typewriter, then the word processor, and now “repetitive stress injury.”³⁸ Susie is a specific anthropomorphic and electronic writing machine aimed not at provoking intellectual reflection and amusing adults but at constituting “good parents” and at “engaging” and

fer, trans. William Whobrey (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 291 (emphasis added). It is worth noting that the same techno-logic that informs Lyotard’s description of the human body as the “hardware” of thought also informs its description as the completely disposable and despised “wetware” of “neuromancers.” See, e.g., William Gibson’s influential novel, *Neuromancer* (New York: Ace, 1984).

36. Thomas Mallon, “Minding Your ‘P’s’ and ‘Q’s,’” review of *Handwriting in America: A Cultural History*, by Tamara Plakins Thornton, *New Yorker*, Feb. 3, 1997, 79.

37. Thornton, “Handwriting as an Act of Self-Definition,” B7.

38. Writing of the historical recognition of “occupational diseases,” Carolyn Steedman, in *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), notes the emergence of what we now call “repetitive stress injury” in the 1920s, when “the British Association of Women Clerks focused a century of complaints about writers’ cramp among clerical workers, in their attempts to have it scheduled as an industrial sickness with no limit of compensation. But theirs were arguments about the physical effect of minutely repeated movements of hand and arm; the comparison was with telegraphists (telegraphists’ cramp was a scheduled industrial disease for which benefit might be claimed indefinitely under the National Insurance legislation of 1911) and with comptometers” (33n14).

“instructing” children on what it is to write. Materially, despite her Oshkosh B’Gosh overalls and her blonde ponytail, Susie bears great resemblance—if a different “clockwork”—to the automata that have preceded her from the 1740s on. Indeed, if one looks at pictures and diagrams of past automated writing dolls, Susie’s robotic arm mechanism, albeit directed electronically, is hardly that different from theirs. Yet, for all her similarity, Susie differs significantly from her forebears. It is not only that in a nonphilosophical culture she is not perceived as a philosophical toy or that her cloyingly sweet voice and horrid taped laughter and song keep insisting aloud how much “fun” she and the child-consumer will have writing “together.” Whereas the first thing written by her Enlightenment predecessor, “The Scribe,” was a provocative “I think, therefore I am,” followed by “Our mechanisms defy time,”³⁹ the first thing Susie writes is the toll-free telephone number of a “help line” in Edison, New Jersey, that one can call if she breaks down. These things give one pause, of course, as does her drawing of the two “C” batteries that give her the charge of her artificial life. Despite these differences, however, it is the very *similarity* of Susie to her childish ancestors that marks her real—and radical—*difference* from them. That is, it seems both culturally logical and technologically natural that Enlightenment automata wrote with quill pens in their mechanical hands. The dip pen was then a common writing technology. Thus we must ask, Why, in an electronically driven and obsessed culture, does Susie write with a pen at all? Why is she not seated at a little word processor or computer? Why is a pen, even a plastic ballpoint with four color ink cartridges, the preferred instrument for an electronic doll in an electronic culture? Indeed, if one thinks historically backward, we might ask if there have been any writing dolls that, when it was a common mode of writing, sat at a typewriter? Although I don’t know for sure, I rather think not.

The answers to these questions lie, I believe, quite precisely, *in the hand*. That Susie still writes with a pen in an electronic culture demonstrates that we know deeply, and with the knowledge of the lived body, that writing is not merely a learned mechanical technique. Rather, and more significantly, it is always also *auratic* insofar as it is enabled not just by a material body but by a *lived body* that, however regulated, cannot avoid inscribing its singular intentionality in acts and marks of *expressive improvisation*.⁴⁰ Even after years

39. Wood, *Edison’s Eve*, xiv, xvii.

40. This relation between various representational and expressive technologies and “the hand,” between the mechanical and the improvisational, are quite wonderfully elaborated in two works by phenomenological sociologist David Sudnow. See his *Ways of the Hand: The Organization of Improvised Conduct* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978); and *Talk’s Body: A Meditation between Two Keyboards* (New York: Knopf, 1979). In the latter Sudnow contrasts touch typing with jazz improvisation on a piano keyboard.

of discipline in penmanship classes, in that pen and pencil enable the broadest and most idiosyncratic expression of the lived body making matter from “no-thing”—that is, transforming meaning to matter and making matter mean—pen and pencil are the technologies that best extend the idiosyncrasies of the *hand* and most fully and materially mark the embodied, intentional, and contingent *excess* of what writing is over its objectification, standardization, and mechanization. Although one might be mildly amused at its transparent social commentary, there would be no fascination, nothing *uncanny*, in seeing an anthropomorphic writing machine write *through* a nonanthropomorphic writing machine—particularly those like the typewriter or the computer, which have greatly reduced the unique *graphological excess* that brings into being and matter an embodied *existential style*.⁴¹

Thus, in a review of Thornton’s *Handwriting in America*, although Thomas Mallon applauds the author’s tracking of changes in methods and styles of penmanship, as well as her discussions of the history of handwriting analysis (which began in the romantic period) and the “twentieth-century showdown between characterological and physiological notions of handwritten individuality,” he also chides Thornton for not considering the contemporary moment and “what has been lost or gained by our cultural shift toward mouse and screen.” Mallon points out that although “the fax and E-mail have brought back letter-writing to an encouraging extent,” they have marked the “limits of that revival, too.” As both writers and readers, he says, we know that “you can’t seal E-mail with a kiss, and the latest laptops protect us from even our own bodily fluids: the Macintosh Power Books have eliminated trackballs in favor of trackpads, so the sweat from one’s thumb won’t gum up the works.” In contrast to electronic writing (even of an amorous kind), Mallon notes how the power and value of handwritten love letters emerge from the exchange of indexical signs of the physical proximity of the lovers’ bodies to the page and from the graphological transfer and display of a “physical motion and intensity”—which does let them see you sweat or weep. Whatever an individual lover’s method of penmanship, the embodied movement that

41. In regard to graphological excess and its marking of existential style, it bears noting that idiosyncrasies in typewriting usually belong less to the human user than to the machine (hence, police work occasionally involves finding a particular typewriter so as to find the person who might have composed something incriminating on it). In contrast, the computer as a writing machine is much more standardized: no keys to chip, no misalignments of letters, etc. However, as mentioned previously, writing on a computer “builds in” some small level of “personal choice” and “expressive potential” that exceeds the typewriter insofar as the writer can use a broader number and variety of typefaces, font sizes, and diacritical marks through which to express existential style. E-mail writers in particular have developed a novel mode of using diacritical marks to indicate existential tone: the ironic wink, peals of laughter, etc. Nonetheless, whatever graphological excess the computer allows over what the typewriter can provide, it still does not afford the personal expression of the “expressive hand” as do pencil and pen.

made his or her expression matter was, as Mallon concludes, “connected to all those other movements that would make him, once he appeared in the flesh, yours truly.”⁴² (And, here, I might point out that Susie untruly—that is, mechanically albeit electronically—prints “I love you” on her writing pad to anyone and everyone who, dare I say it, turns her on.)

Our handwriting is singular—and it has taken on an increasingly auratic and precious quality as it has become increasingly scarce. Susie’s difference from her mechanical ancestors is that, in an electronic culture, she further hyperbolizes the mystery not of writing as a technical enterprise but as an expression of the human hand. Thus, however hidden it is by her Oshkosh B’Goshes and saccharine songs and ignored by the adults who buy her, Susie is a philosophical toy after all. She and her forebears affirm across time that although writing is a technique and employs technology, it is always also something *more*. And in so doing, they charge us to reframe “the question concerning technology” to accommodate the intentional and lived body-subject in the act of writing not only the word but also the world and herself. As Heidegger reminds us, technology consists not merely of objective tools, nor is technique merely their objective application. “Technology is . . . no mere means,” he tells us. “Technology is a way of revealing.” Thus, he returns us to the Greek notion of *technē*: “the name not only for the activities and skills of the craftsman, but also for the arts of the mind and the fine arts. *Technē* belongs to bringing-forth, to *poiēsis*; it is something poetic.”⁴³ Furthermore, *technē* is a way and manner of knowing. Making, bringing forth, and revealing are integral not only to the existence of matter but also to why and how some “thing” is known and understood as “mattering.”

Necessarily and materially implicated in both this bringing forth and its particular modes of knowing is an embodied and intentional subject. Unlike Susie (the intentionless simulacrum who laughs without mirth and writes without mattering), this lived body subjectively incorporates and excorporates objective technologies and, in what Scarry calls a “consensual materialism,” brings into material being both the variety of herself and multiple worlds.⁴⁴ Thus, even seated before a computer printing my thoughts in a ten-point Geneva font that reveals nothing idiosyncratic of my hand, I am never reduced to a mere writing machine and never completely forget or forgo the mystery of the human hand’s ability to reveal and bring forth an expression of human being. Even here, before my computer screen, even if in a relatively reduced way, my writing materially reveals itself as an existential style as well as a cultural habit. Indeed, my lived body is “continuous with the

42. Mallon, “Minding Your ‘P’s’ and ‘Q’s,”” 81.

43. Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” trans. William Lovitt, in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 294.

44. Scarry, “Merging of Bodies,” 97.

modes of reproduction that it also disrupts.”⁴⁵ As I write, my choices of font and diacritical marks begin to signify something in excess of the digitized regularity of my words on the screen. (By the time you read this in a printed book, however, press editors surely will have further reduced my idiosyncrasies, pleading a “house style” that takes precedence over my original authorial style as it once was manifest in typographical and diacritical “preferences.”) In sum, objectively material means (*technology*) and the tropology of subjective desire (*poiësis*) are bound in an irreducible intentional relation as a revelatory bringing forth (*technē*) that, in its diverse historical and personal practices, makes matter meaningful and meaning matter.

I have no idea whether, seated at their little desks and writing mechanically, historical versions of Susie provoked first in the children of their owners and later in their child owners an overwhelming urge to rip apart the “signifying scene.” But I rather think so. Even though I am an adult who certainly respects a doll for which I paid \$119 and who has read the brochure admonishing me to “remember that Susie is a machine” and, therefore, that I should not “abuse” her, I nonetheless admit to wanting to take off Susie’s pink long-sleeved polo shirt and to wrench her robotic writing arm from its socket “to see how it works.” (I rather think, to the disappointment and horror of the adults who bought it for them, this is the only real interactivity the young owners of this supposedly “interactive” toy ever actually experience.) Although, on the surface, this urge “to see how it works” seems grounded in a sense of technology as mere *mechanical means*, I would suggest it reveals a much deeper curiosity about the radical *bringing forth* of both action and matter. Indeed, writing “by hand” (even, or especially, when it’s mechanical) keeps alive the question of the animate and the inanimate, the lived body and the material “thing” that merely simulates a lived body, which is not only a material object but also an intentional and sentient subject. It is apposite here that “The Scribe” not only wrote the simulated assertion, “I think, therefore I am,” but also wrote, as Wood tells us, “a more ironic tribute: ‘I do not think . . . do I therefore not exist?’ The writer, a mere machine, is able to communicate the fact that it cannot think. Clearly, however, it does exist: and if it is able to communicate that fact that it cannot think, is it possible that it can think after all? Might the machine be lying?”⁴⁶

Given this question of the animate and the inanimate, the auratic lived body and its uncanny simulation, it is hardly surprising that children are usually so deeply disappointed after they have ripped apart their mechanical but animated playthings and found no *objective* and *technical* correlative to the *subjective* and deeply *poetic* curiosity they themselves have about the world and

45. Brown, *Roland Barthes*, 185.

46. Wood, *Edison’s Eve*, 8.

human being. Either in animatronic operation or dissected in a childish autopsy, Susie's robotic writing arm would tell us nothing *truly material* to either the meaning of writing or the matter of the hand. In fact, our fascination with the anthropomorphic writing machine lies precisely in its inability to tell us anything truly material to writing—even as it writes and “brings forth” meaning in material form. Ripping apart Susie's signifying scene would reveal nothing significant—either about signifying or about mattering. Susie is, after all, just a machine. Despite her technical facility for mechanical mimesis, she lacks precisely the ability to respond to what we really want to know: that is, how the intentionality, subjective desire, and existential style of the lived body come to materiality and matter through the *poiēsis* of *technē* rather than the mechanics and automation of technique.

The Scene of the Screen

Envisioning Photographic, Cinematic, and Electronic “Presence”

The essence of technology is nothing technological. —MARTIN HEIDEGGER

What happens when our *expressive* technologies also become *perceptive* technologies—expressing and extending us in ways we never thought possible, radically transforming not merely our comprehension of the world but also our apprehension of ourselves? Elaine Scarry writes that “we make things so that they will in turn remake us, revising the interior of embodied consciousness.”¹ Certainly, those particularly expressive technologies that are entailed in the practices of writing and the fine arts do, indeed, “remake” us as we use them—but how much more powerful a revision of our embodied consciousness occurs with the inauguration of perceptive technologies such as the telescope and the microscope or the X-ray? Changing not only our expression of the world and ourselves, these perceptive technologies also changed our sense of ourselves in radical ways that have now become naturalized and transparent. More recently (although no longer that recently), we have been radically “remade” by the perceptive (as well as expressive) technologies of photography, cinema, and the electronic media of television and computer—these all the more transformative of “the interior of embodied consciousness” (and its exterior actions too) because they are technologies that are culturally *pervasive*. They belong not merely to scientists or doctors or an educated elite but to all of us—and all of the time.

Indeed, it almost goes without saying that during the past century photographic, cinematic, and electronic technologies of representation have had enormous impact on our means and modalities of expression and signifi-

1. Elaine Scarry, “The Merging of Bodies and Artifacts in the Social Contract,” in *Culture on the Brink: Ideologies of Technology*, ed. Gretchen Bender and Timothy Druckrey (Seattle: Bay Press, 1994), 97.

tion. Less obvious, perhaps, is the enormous impact these technologies have had on the historically particular significance or “sense” we have and make of those temporal and spatial coordinates that radically in-form and orient our social, personal, and bodily existence. At this time in the United States, whether or not we go to the movies; watch television or music videos; own camcorders, videotapes, or digital video disc recorder/players; allow our children to engage video and computer games; write our academic papers on personal computers; do our banking and shopping online—we are all part of a moving-image culture, and we live cinematic and electronic lives. Indeed, it is not an exaggeration to claim that none of us can escape daily encounters—both direct and indirect—with the *objective* phenomena of photographic, cinematic, televisual, and computer technologies and the networks of communication and texts they produce. It is also not an extravagance to suggest that, in the most profound, socially pervasive, and yet personal way, these objective encounters transform us as *embodied subjects*. That is, relatively novel as materialities of human communication, photographic, cinematic, and electronic media have not only historically *symbolized* but also historically *constituted* a radical alteration of the forms of our culture’s previous temporal and spatial consciousness and of our bodily sense of existential “presence” to the world, to ourselves, and to others.

This different sense of subjectively perceived and embodied presence, both signified and supported by first photographic and then cinematic and electronic media, emerges within and co-constitutes objective and material practices of representation and social existence. Thus, while certainly cooperative in creating the moving-image culture or lifeworld we now inhabit, cinematic and electronic technologies are quite different not only from photographic technologies but also from each other in their concrete materiality and particular existential significance. Each technology not only differently *mediates* our figurations of bodily existence but also *constitutes* them. That is, each offers our lived bodies radically different ways of “being-in-the-world.” Each implicates us in different structures of material investment, and—because each has a particular affinity with different cultural functions, forms, and contents—each stimulates us through differing modes of presentation and representation to different aesthetic responses and ethical responsibilities. As our aesthetic forms and representations of “reality” become externally realized and then unsettled first by photography, then cinema, and now electronic media, our values and evaluative criteria of what counts in our lives are also unsettled and transformed. In sum, just as the photograph did in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, so in the late twentieth and early twenty-first, cinematic and electronic screens differently solicit and shape our presence to the world, our representation in it, and our sensibilities and responsibilities about it. Each differently and objectively alters our subjectiv-

ity while each invites our complicity in formulating space, time, and bodily investment as significant personal and social experience.

These preliminary remarks are grounded in the belief that historical changes in our sense of time, space, and existential, embodied presence cannot be considered less than a consequence of correspondent changes in our technologies. However, they also must be considered something more—for, as Martin Heidegger reminds us in the epigraph that begins this essay, “The essence of technology is nothing technological.”² That is, technology never comes to its particular material specificity and function in a neutral context to neutral effect. Rather, it is historically informed not only by its materiality but also by its political, economic, and social context, and thus it both co-constitutes and expresses not merely technological value but always also cultural values. Correlatively, technology is never merely used, never simply instrumental. It is always also incorporated and lived by the human beings who create and engage it within a structure of meanings and metaphors in which subject-object relations are not only cooperative and co-constitutive but are also dynamic and reversible.

It is no accident, for example, that in our now dominantly electronic (and only secondarily cinematic) culture, many people describe and understand their minds and bodies in terms of computer systems and programs (even as they still describe and understand their lives in terms of movies). Nor is it trivial that computer systems and programs are often described and understood in terms of human minds and bodies (for example, as intelligent or susceptible to viral infection) and that these new computer-generated “beings” have become the explicit cybernetic heroes of our most popular moving-image fictions (for example, *Robocop*, Paul Verhoeven, 1987; or *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, James Cameron, 1991). As Elena del Río suggests, “[T]echnology springs from the very human condition of embodiment and . . . the human imaginary is of necessity a technologically drawn and grounded structure.”³ Thus, even in the few examples above we can see how a qualitatively new techno-logic begins to alter our perceptual orientation in and toward the world, ourselves, and others. Furthermore, as this new techno-logic becomes culturally pervasive and normative, it can come to inform and affect profoundly the socio-logic, psycho-logic, axio-logic, and even the biologic by which we daily live our lives.

Most powerful of all, in this regard, are those perceptual technologies that

2. Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” trans. William Lovitt, in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 317.

3. Elena del Río, “The Body as Foundation of the Screen: Allegories of Technology in Atom Egoyan’s *Speaking Parts*,” *Camera Obscura* 37–38 (summer 1996): 97. Subsequent references will be cited in the text.

serve also as technologies of representation—namely, photography, cinema, television, and, most recently, computers. These technologies extend not only our senses but also our capacity to see and make sense of ourselves. Certainly, a technological artifact that extends our physical capacities like the automobile (whose technological function is neither perception nor representation but transportation) has profoundly changed the temporal and spatial shape and meaning of our lifeworld and our own bodily and symbolic sense of ourselves.⁴ However, such perceptual and representational technologies as photography, motion pictures, television, video, and computers in-form us twice over: first through the specific material conditions by which they latently engage and extend our senses at the transparent and lived bodily level of what philosopher of technology Don Ihde calls our “microperception,” and then again through their manifest representational function by which they engage our senses consciously and textually at the hermeneutic level of what he calls our “macroperception.”⁵ Most theorists and critics of cinematic and electronic media have been drawn to the latter—that is, to macroperceptual descriptions and interpretations of the hermeneutic-cultural contexts that inform and shape both the materiality and social contexts of these technologies and their textual representations. Nonetheless, we would not be able to reflect on and analyze either technologies or texts without, at some point, having engaged them *immediately*—that is, through our perceptive sensorium, through the *immanent mediation* and materiality of our own bodies. Thus, as Ihde reminds us, although “there is no microperception (sensory-bodily) without its location within a field of macroperception,” it is equally true that there is “no macroperception without its microperceptual foci.” Indeed, all macroperceptual descriptions and interpretations “find their fulfillment *only* within the range of microperceptual possibility.”⁶ It is important to emphasize, however, that because perception is constituted

4. Reference here is not only to the way in which automotive transportation has extended the capacity for movement of our physical bodies and thus our lived sense of distance and space, the rhythms of our temporality, and the hard currency that creates and expresses our cultural values relative to such things as class and style but also to the way in which it has changed the very sense we have of our bodies. The vernacular expression of regret for “being without wheels” speaks ontologically to our very real incorporation of the automobile, as well as to its incorporation of us.

5. Don Ihde, *Technology and the Lifeworld: From Garden to Earth* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990). Ihde distinguishes two forms of perception: “What is usually taken as sensory perception (what is immediate and focused bodily in actual seeing, hearing, etc.), I shall call *microperception*. But there is also what might be called a cultural, or hermeneutic, perception, which I shall call *macroperception*. Both belong equally to the lifeworld. And both dimensions of perception are closely linked and intertwined” (29; emphasis added).

6. *Ibid.* (emphasis added).

and organized as a bodily and sensory *gestalt* that is always already meaningful, a microperceptual focus is *not* reducible to a focus on physiology. That is, insofar as our senses are not only sensible but also “make sense,” the perceiving and sensible body is always also a *lived body*—immersed in, making, and responding to social as well as somatic meaning.

In what follows, then, I want to emphasize certain microperceptual aspects of our engagement with the perceptual technologies of photographic, cinematic, and electronic representation that have been often overlooked. I also want to suggest some of the ways the respective *material* conditions of these media and their reception and use inform and transform our microperceptual experience—particularly our temporal and spatial sense of ourselves and our cultural contexts of meaning. We look at and carry around photographs or sit in a movie theater, before a television set, or in front of a computer not only as *conscious beings* engaged in the activity of perception and expression but also as *carnal beings*. Our vision is neither abstracted from our bodies nor from our other modes of perceptual access to the world. Nor does what we see merely touch the surface of our eyes. Seeing images mediated and made visible by technological vision thus enables us not only to see technological images but also to see technologically. As Ihde emphasizes, “the concreteness of [technological] ‘hardware’ in the broadest sense connects with the equal concreteness of our bodily existence”; thus, “the term ‘existential’ in context refers to perceptual and bodily experience, to a kind of ‘phenomenological materiality.’”⁷ Insofar as the photographic, the cinematic, and the electronic have each been *objectively constituted* as a new and discrete techno-logic, each also has been *subjectively incorporated*, enabling a new and discrete perceptual mode of existential and embodied presence. In sum, as they have mediated and represented our engagement with the world, with others, and with ourselves, photographic, cinematic, and electronic technologies have transformed us so that we presently see, sense, and make sense of ourselves as quite other than we were before each of them existed.

The correlation and materiality of both human subjects and their objective artifacts not only suggests some commensurability and possibilities of confusion, exchange, and reversibility between them but also suggests that any phenomenological analysis of the existential relation between human lived-body subjects and their technologies of perception and representation must be semiological and historical even at the microperceptual level. Description must attend both to the particular objective materiality and modalities through which subjective meanings are signified and to the sub-

7. *Ibid.*, 21.

jective cultural and historical situations in which both objective materiality and meaning come to cohere in the praxis of everyday life. Like human vision, the materiality and modalities of photographic, cinematic, and electronic perception and representation are not abstractions. They are concretely situated and finite, particularly conventional and institutionalized. They also inform and share in the spatiotemporal structures and history of a wide range of interrelated cultural phenomena. Thus, in its attention to the broadly defined “material conditions” and “relations” of production (specifically, the conditions for and production of both technological perception and its existential meaning), existential phenomenology is compatible with certain aspects of new historicism or Marxist analysis.

In this context we might turn to Fredric Jameson’s seminal discussion of three crucial and expansive historical “moments” marked by “a technological revolution within capital itself” and the related “cultural logics” that correspondingly emerge and become dominant in each of them to radically inform three revolutions in aesthetic sensibility and its representation.⁸ Situating these three critical moments in the 1840s, 1890s, and 1940s, Jameson correlates the major technological changes that revolutionized the structure of capital—changing market capitalism to monopoly capitalism to multinational capitalism—with the changes wrought by the “cultural logics” identified as, respectively, realism, modernism, and postmodernism, three radically different axiological forms and norms of aesthetic representation and ethical investment. Extrapolating from Jameson, we can also locate within this historical and logical framework three correspondent technological modes and institutions of visual (and aural) representation: respectively, the photographic, the cinematic, and the electronic. Each, I would argue, has been critically complicit not only in a specific *technological revolution* within capital but also in a specific *perceptual revolution* within the culture and the subject. That is, each has been significantly co-constitutive of the particular temporal and spatial structures and phenomeno-logic that inform each of the dominant cultural logics Jameson identifies as realism, modernism, and postmodernism.

In this regard, writing about the technologically inflected and pervasive perceptual revolution in the lived experience of time and space that took place in Europe and the United States during the period between 1880 and 1918, phenomenological historian Stephen Kern demonstrates that although some major cultural changes occurred relatively independent of technology, others were “*directly* inspired by new technology” or emerged more subtly from the new technological “metaphors and analogies” that *indi-*

8. Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” *New Left Review* 146 (July–Aug. 1984): 77.

rectly altered the structures of perceptual life and thought.⁹ What is suggested here is that the technologically discrete nature and phenomenological impact of new technologies or “materialities” of representation co-constitute a complex cultural gestalt—one implicated in and informing each historically specific “technological revolution in capital” and transformation of cultural logic. Thus, the technological “nature” of the photographic, the cinematic, and the electronic is graspable always and only in a qualified manner—that is, less as a technological essence than as a cultural theme.

Although my most novel contributions here are, I hope, to our understanding of the technologies of cinematic and electronic representation (those two materialities that constitute our current moving-image culture), something must first be said of that culture’s grounding in the context and phenomenology of the *photographic* (which has provoked a good deal of phenomenological description).¹⁰ The photographic mode of perception and representation is privileged in the period of market capitalism located by Jameson as beginning in the 1840s. This was a “moment” emergent from and driven by the technological innovations of steam-powered mechanization, which both enabled unprecedented industrial expansion and informed the new cultural logic of realism. Not only did industrial expansion give rise to other modes and forms of expansion, but this expansion was itself historically unique because of its unprecedented *visibility*. As Jean-Louis Comolli points out: “The second half of the nineteenth century lives in a sort of frenzy of the visible. . . . [This is] the effect of the social multiplication of images. . . . [It is] the effect also, however, of something of a geographical extension of the field of the visible and the representable: by journies, explorations, colonisations, the whole world becomes visible at the same time that it becomes appropriatable.”¹¹ Thus, although the cultural logic of realism has been seen as represented primarily by literature (most specifically, the bourgeois novel), it is, perhaps, even more intimately bound to the mechanically achieved, empirical, and representational “evidence” of the world constituted—and expanded—by photography.

Until very recently the photographic has been popularly and phenomenologically perceived as existing in a state of testimonial verisimilitude—the

9. Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space: 1880–1918* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 6–7.

10. Seminal phenomenological works in this regard are André Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” in *What Is Cinema?* trans. Hugh Gray, vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 9–16; Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Delta, 1973); and Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

11. Jean-Louis Comolli, “Machines of the Visible,” in *The Cinematic Apparatus*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis and Stephen Heath (New York: St. Martin’s, 1980), 122–23.

photograph's film emulsions analogically marked with (and objectively "capturing") material traces of the world's concrete and "real" existence.¹² Unlike the technologies that preceded it, photography produced images of the world with an exactitude previously rivaled only by the human eye. Thus, as Comolli suggests, with the advent of photography the human eye loses its "immemorial privilege"; it is devalued in relation to "the mechanical eye of the photographic machine" that "now sees *in its place*."¹³ This replacement of human with mechanical vision had its compensations, however—among them, *the material control, containment, and objective possession of time and experience*.¹⁴ Abstracting visual experience from an ephemeral temporal flow, the photographic both chemically and metaphorically "fixes" its ostensible subject quite literally as an *object* for vision. It concretely reproduces the visible in a *material process* that—like the most convincing of scientific experiments—produces the seemingly same results with each iteration, empirically giving weight to and proving in its iterability the relationship between the visible and the real. Furthermore, this material process results in a *material form* that can be objectively possessed, circulated, and saved, that can accrue an increasing rate of interest over time and become more *valuable* in a variety of ways. Photography is thus not only a radically new form of representation that breaks significantly with earlier forms, but it also radically changes our epistemological, social, and economic relationships to both representation and each other. As Jonathan Crary tells us: "Photography is an element of a new and homogenous terrain of consumption and circulation in which an observer becomes lodged. To understand the 'photographic effect' in the

12. Contemporary erosion of faith in the photographic as evidence of the real in popular consciousness has been the result of the development of the seamless electronic manipulation of the photographic image—a possible manipulation that now transparently informs our reception and inflects and transforms the photograph's "realism." Although air-brushing and other forms of image manipulation have been practiced for a long while, they have generally left a discernible trace on the image; such is not the case with digital computer alterations of the photographic image. For an overview of this issue see "Ask It No Questions: The Camera Can Lie," *New York Times*, Aug. 12, 1990, sec. 2, pp. 1, 29; for lengthier and more rigorous explanation and discussion of the radical shift from the photographic to the digital see both William J. Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992); and Peter Lunenfeld, "Digital Photography: The Dubitative Image," in *Snap to Grid: A User's Guide to Digital Arts, Media, and Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 55–69.

13. Comolli, "Machines of the Visible," 123.

14. Most media theorists point out that photographic (and cinematic) optics are structured according to a norm of perception based on Renaissance theories of perspective; such perspective represented the visible as originating in, organized, and mastered by an individual and centered subject. This form of painterly representation is naturalized by the optics of photography and the cinema. Comolli, in "Machines of the Visible," says, "The mechanical eye, the photographic lens, . . . functions . . . as a guarantor of the identity of the visible with the normality of vision . . . with the norm of visual perception" (123–24).

nineteenth century, one must see it as a crucial component of the new cultural economy of value and exchange, not as part of a continuous history of visual representation."¹⁵ Indeed, identifying the nineteenth-century photograph as a fetish object, Comolli links it with gold and aptly calls it "the money of the 'real'"—the photograph's materiality assuring the possibility of its "convenient circulation and appropriation."¹⁶

In a phenomenological description of subjective human vision, Merleau-Ponty tells us that "to see is *to have at a distance*."¹⁷ This subjective activity of *visual possession*—of having but at a distance—is objectified by the materiality of photography that makes possible both a *visible*—and closer—possession. That is, the having at a distance that is subjective vision is literalized in an object that not only replicates and fixes the visual structure of having at a distance but also allows it to be brought nearer. With a photograph what you see is what you *get*.¹⁸ Indeed, this structure of objectification and empirical possession is doubled, even tripled. Not only does the photograph materially "capture" and possess traces of the "real world," not only can the photograph itself be materially possessed as a real object, but the photograph's culturally defined semiotic status as a mechanical reproduction (rather than a linguistic representation) also enables an unprecedented, literal, material, and perhaps uniquely complacent form—and ethics—of, first, *self-possession* and then, at a later date when the technology is portable and cheap, of *self-proliferation*. Filled with a currency of the real that—through objectification and mortality—outlasts both its present value and its human subjects to accrue increasing interest, family albums serve as "memory banks."¹⁹ In sum, the photograph's existence as an object and a possession with fixed yet increasing value materializes and authenticates experience, others, and oneself as empirically real.

In regard to the materiality of the photograph's authenticating power, it is instructive to recall one of a number of particularly relevant ironies in

15. Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 13.

16. Comolli, "Machines of the Visible," 142.

17. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," trans. Carleton Dallery, in *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James Edie (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 166.

18. Jean-Luc Godard plays with this notion of photography as an objectified and literalized possession of vision's "having at a distance" in major sequences of his witty *Les Carabiniers* (1963). In the film two conscripts—dumb and dumber—come back from a war "rich" with material loot in their possession: suitcases full of picture postcards they perceive as quite literally capturing the national monuments and treasures they now (re)present.

19. It must be noted that the expression *memory bank* is connected to electronic (not photographic) culture. It nonetheless serves us as a way of reading backward that recognizes a literal as well as metaphorical economy of representation and suggests that any attempts to understand the photographic in its "originality" are pervasively informed by contemporary electronic consciousness.

Blade Runner (Ridley Scott, 1982), a science fiction film made within an electronic culture already hermeneutically suspicious not only of photographic realism but also of any realisms at all.²⁰ Given this cultural context, it is hardly surprising that the film's primary narrative focus is on the ambiguous ontological status of a "more human than human" group of genetically manufactured "replicants"—an ambiguity that also casts epistemological doubt on how one knows one is human. At a certain moment Rachel, the film's heroine and latest replicant prototype, disavows the revelation of her own manufactured status by pointing to a series of keepsake photographs that give "proof" to the existence of her mother, to her own existence as a little girl, and thus to her subjective memory of a real past. Told that both her memory and its material extroversion actually "belong to someone else," she not only becomes distraught but also ontologically re-signed as someone who possesses no real life, no real history—although she still remembers what she remembers, and the photographs still sit on her piano. Indeed, the photographs are suddenly foregrounded in their objective materiality (for the human spectator, as well as for the narrative's replicant) as utterly suspect. That is, when interrogated, they simultaneously both reveal and lose that great material and circulatory value they commonly hold for *all* of us as the "money of the 'real,'" as our means of self-possession.

The structures of objectification, material possession, self-possession, and self-proliferation that constitute the photograph as both a real trace of personal experience and a concrete extroversion of experience that can "belong to someone else" give specific form to its temporal existence. In capturing aspects of life itself in a real object that can be possessed, copied, circulated, and saved as the "currency" of experience, the appropriable materiality and static form of photography accomplish a palpable intervention in what was popularly perceived in the mid-nineteenth century to be time's linear, orderly, and teleological flow from past to present to future. The photograph freezes and preserves the homogeneous and irreversible *momentum* of this temporal stream into the abstracted, atomized, and essentialized time of a *moment*. But at a cost. A moment cannot be inhabited. It cannot entertain in the abstraction of its visible space, its single and static *point* of view, the presence of a lived and living body—so it does not really invite the spectator *into* the scene so much as it invites contemplation *of* the scene. In its conquest of temporality and its conversion of time's dynamism into a static and essential moment, the photograph constructs a space one can hold and look at, but in its conversion to an object to behold that space becomes paradoxically thin, insubstantial, and opaque. It keeps the lived body out even as it may

20. Suspension of belief in "realism" is not the same as disbelief in the real. It is, however, a rejection of the transparency of such belief in "realism" and a recognition that our access to the real is always mediated and epistemologically partial.

imaginatively catalyze—in the parallel but dynamically temporalized space of memory or desire—an animated drama.

The cinema presents us with quite a different perceptual technology and mode of representation. Through its objectively visible spatialization of a frozen point of view into dynamic and intentional trajectories of *self-displacing vision* and through its subjectively experienced temporalization of an essential moment into *lived momentum*, the cinematic radically reconstitutes the photographic. This radical difference between the transcendental, posited moment of the photograph and the existential momentum of the cinema, between the scene to be *contemplated* and the scene as it is *lived*, is foregrounded most dramatically in Chris Marker's remarkable short film, *La Jetée* (1962).²¹ A cinematic study of desire, memory, and time, *La Jetée* is presented completely through the use of still photographs—except for one extraordinarily brief but utterly compelling sequence late in the film. Lying in bed and looking toward the camera in yet another photograph, the woman—who has through time and memory been the object of the hero's desire and whom we have only come to know in frozen and re-membered moments that mark her loss as much as her presence—suddenly blinks. Yet this is a peculiar sense of “suddenly”—one that speaks more to surprise at an unexpected and radical shift in the ontological status of the image and our relation to it than to a more superficial narrative or formal surprise. Indeed, just prior to the brief momentum and intentional revelation of the woman actively blinking, we have watched an increasingly rapid cinematic succession of stilled and dissolving photographic images of her supine in bed that increasingly approach motion but *never achieve it*. The editorial succession thus may prepare us narratologically or formally *for* motion, but, however rapid, this succession alone does not animate the woman or give her substantial presence as more than her image. Thus, even as we are seemingly prepared, and even though the photographic move to cinematic movement is extremely subtle, we are nonetheless surprised and deem the movement

21. For readers unfamiliar with the film, *La Jetée* is a narrative articulated in a recursive structure. A survivor of World War III has a recurrent memory of a woman's face and a scene at Orly airport, where, as a child, he has seen a man killed. Because of his vivid memory scientists in his postapocalyptic culture—now living underground with minimal power and without hope—attempt experiments to send him back into his vivid past so that he can, perhaps, eventually time-travel to the future to get help for his present. After many experiments, the man is able to live briefly in his past images and actually meet and start a sporadic relationship with the woman he remembers, as well as to briefly visit the future. Aware, however, that he has no future in his own present, with the assistance of those in the future the protagonist chooses to return to his past and the woman he now loves. But this final return to the scene of his original childhood memory at Orly airport ultimately reveals, first, that what he watched as a child was himself as an adult being pursued by people from his own present, and, second, that his original memory was, in fact, the vision of his own adult death.

startling and “sudden.” And this is because everything radically changes, and we and the image are reoriented in relation to each other. The space between the camera’s (and the spectator’s) gaze and the woman becomes suddenly habitable, informed with the real possibility of bodily movement and engagement, informed with lived temporality rather than eternal timelessness. The image becomes “fleshed out,” and the woman turns from a posed odalisque into someone who is not merely an immortalized lost object of desire but also—and more so—a mortal and desiring subject. In sum, what in the film has been previously a mounting accumulation of nostalgic moments achieves substantial and present presence in its sudden and brief accession to momentum and the consequent potential for effective action.

As did André Bazin, we might think of photography as primarily a form of mummification (although, unlike Bazin, I will argue that cinema is not).²² Although it testifies to and preserves a sense of the world’s and experience’s once-real presence, it does not preserve their present. The photographic neither functions—like the cinematic—as a “coming-into-being” (a presence always presently constituting itself), nor—like the electronic—as “being-in-itself” (an absolute presence in the present). Rather, it functions to fix a “being-that-has-been” (a presence in a present that is always past). Thus, and paradoxically, as it materializes, objectifies, and preserves in its acts of possession, the photographic has something to do with loss, with pastness, and with death, its meanings and value intimately bound within the structure and aesthetic and ethical investments of nostalgia.

Although dependent on the photographic, the cinematic has something more to do with life and with the *accumulation of experience*—not its loss. Cinematic technology *animates* the photographic and reconstitutes its materiality, visibility, and perceptual verisimilitude in a difference not of degree but of kind. The *moving picture* is a visible representation not of activity finished or past but of activity coming into being and being. Furthermore, and even more significant, the moving picture not only visibly represents moving objects but also—and simultaneously—presents *the very movement of vision itself*.²³ The novel materiality and techno-logic of the cinema emerges in the 1890s, the second of Jameson’s transformative “moments” of “technological revolution within capital itself.” During this moment other novel technologies, particularly the internal combustion engine and electric power, literally reenergized market capitalism into the highly controlled yet much more expansive structure of monopoly capitalism. Correlatively, Jameson sees the

22. André Bazin, “Ontology of the Photographic Image,” 9–10.

23. For extended phenomenological description and interpretation of the various movements of cinematic vision see my “The Active Eye: A Phenomenology of Cinematic Vision,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 12, no. 3 (1990): 21–36.

emergence of the new cultural logic of modernism—a logic that restructures and eventually comes to dominate the logic of realism insofar as it represents more adequately the new perceptual experience of an age marked by the strange autonomy and energetic fluidity of, among other mechanical phenomena, the motion picture. Although photographically verisimilar, the motion picture fragments, reorders, and synthesizes time and space as animation in a completely new “cinematic” mode that finds no necessity in the objective teleo-logic of realism. Thus, although modernism has found its most-remarked-on expression in the painting, photography, and sculpture of the Futurists (who attempted to represent motion and speed in static forms) and the Cubists (who privileged and represented multiple perspectives and temporal simultaneity in static forms), as well as in the novels of James Joyce (who articulated the simultaneity of objective and subjective time and the manner in which consciousness “streams”), it is in the cinema that modernism found its fullest representation.²⁴

Philosopher Arthur Danto tells us, “With the movies, we do not just see *that* they move, we see them *moving*: and this is because the pictures themselves move.”²⁵ While still objectifying the subjectivity of the visual into the visible, the cinematic qualitatively transforms the photographic through a materiality that not only claims the world and others as objects for vision (whether moving or static) but also signifies its own materialized agency, intentionality, and subjectivity. Neither abstract nor static, the cinematic brings the *existential activity* of vision into visibility in what is phenomenologically experienced as an *intentional stream* of moving images—its continuous and autonomous visual production and meaningful organization of these images testifying not only to the objective world but also, and more radically, to an anonymous, mobile, embodied, and ethically invested *subject* of worldly space. In this regard it is important to note that the *automatic movement* of the film through the camera and projector is overwritten and transformed by the *autonomous movement* of what is phenomenologically perceived as a visual intentionality that visibly chooses the subjects and objects of its attention, takes an attitude toward them, and accumulates them into a meaningful aesthetically and ethically articulated experience.²⁶ Thus this

24. Here it is worth noting that James Joyce, in 1909, was “instrumental in introducing the first motion picture theater in Dublin” (Kern, *Culture of Time and Space*, 76–77).

25. Arthur M. Danto, “Moving Pictures,” *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 4 (winter 1979): 17.

26. This overriding and transformation of automatic movement by autonomous movement can be understood as a phenomenon that is not merely brought about as mere technological “illusion” if we consider that our relation to our own lived bodies is precisely similar: that is, our automatic physiological operations are constantly overwritten and transformed by our autonomous and intentional actions unless these operations are foregrounded because, in a particular instance, they trouble us and we specifically attend to them.

novel and visible cinematic subject (however physically anonymous) is perceived at the microperceptual level as able to inscribe visual and bodily changes of situation, to dream, hallucinate, imagine, remember, and value its habitation and experience of the world. And, as is the case with human beings, this cinematic subject's potential motility and experience exist as both open-ended and inextricably bound by the existential finitude and material limits of its particular vision and historical and cultural coherence—that is, its narrative.

Here, again, *La Jetée* is exemplary. Despite the fact that the film is made up of what strikes us as a series of discrete and still photographs rather than the “live” and animated action of human actors, even as it foregrounds the transcendental status and atemporal nonbecoming of the photograph, *La Jetée* nonetheless phenomenologically *projects* as a temporal flow and an existential becoming. That is, *as a whole* the film organizes, synthesizes, and enunciates the discrete photographic images into animated and intentional coherence and, indeed, makes this temporal synthesis and animation its explicit narrative theme. What *La Jetée* allegorizes in its explicit narrative, however, is the transformation of the moment to momentum that constitutes the ontology of the cinematic and the latent background of *every* film.

Although the technology of the cinematic is grounded, in part, in the technology of the photographic, we need to again remember that “the essence of technology is nothing technological.” The fact that the technology of the cinematic *necessarily* depends on the discrete and still photographic frame moving intermittently (rather than continuously) through the shutters of both camera and projector does not *sufficiently* account for the materiality of the cinematic as we experience it. Unlike the photograph, a film is semiotically engaged in experience not merely as its mechanical objectification—or material reproduction—that is, as merely an object for vision. Rather, the moving picture, however mechanical and photographic its origin, is semiotically experienced as also subjective and intentional, as presenting representation of the objective world. Thus, perceived as the *subject of its own vision*, as well as an *object for our vision*, a moving picture is not precisely a *thing* that (like a photograph) can be easily controlled, contained, or materially possessed—at least, not until the relatively recent advent of electronic culture. Certainly before videotape and DVDs the spectator could share in and thereby, to a degree, interpretively alter a film's presentation and representation of embodied and enworlded experience, but the spectator could not control or contain its autonomous and ephemeral flow and rhythm or materially possess its animated experience. Now, of course, with the help of consumer electronics the spectator can both alter the film's temporality and materially possess its inanimate “body.” However, this new ability to control the autonomy and flow of the film's experience through fast-forwarding,

replaying, and pausing²⁷ and the ability to possess the film's "body" so as to animate it at will and at home are not functions of the material and technological ontology of the cinematic; rather, they are functions of the material and technological ontology of the electronic, which has come to increasingly dominate, appropriate, and transform the cinematic and our phenomenological experience of its perceptual and representational modalities.

In its pre-electronic state and original materiality, however, the cinema mechanically projected and made visible *for the very first time* not just the objective world but the very structure and process of subjective, embodied vision—hitherto only directly available to human beings as an invisible and private structure that each of us experiences as "our own." That is, the novel materiality and techno-logic of the cinema gives us concrete and empirical insight and makes objectively visible the reversible, dialectical, and social nature of our own subjective vision. Writing of human vision and our understanding that others also see as we do, Merleau-Ponty tells us: "As soon as we see other seers . . . henceforth, through other eyes we are for ourselves fully visible. . . . For the first time, the seeing that I am is for me really visible; for the first time I appear to myself completely turned inside out under my own eyes."²⁸ Prior to the cinema this visual reflexivity in which we see ourselves seeing through other eyes was accomplished only indirectly: that is, we understood the vision of others as structured similarly to our own only through looking at—not through—the intentional light in their eyes and the investments of their objective behavior. The cinema, however, uniquely materialized this visual reflexivity and philosophical turning *directly*—that is, in an objectively visible but subjectively structured vision we not only looked *at* but also looked *through*. In sum, the cinema provided—quite literally—*objective insight* into the subjective structure of vision and thus into oneself and others as always both viewing subjects and visible objects.

Again, the paradoxical status of the more-human-than-human replicants in *Blade Runner* is instructive. Speaking to the biotechnologist who genetically manufactured his eyes with an ironic literality that not only resonates in the narrative but also describes the audience of the film, replicant Roy Batty says, "If you could only see what I've seen with your eyes." The perceptive and expressive materiality of the cinematic through which we engage

27. With the electronic and the advent of the VCR and DVD player, a pause is indeed a pause. However, in the cinema, an image can appear "frozen" on the screen only if it is replicated many times over so that it can *continue moving* through the projector; unlike the still photograph, the film always has to actively work at "arresting" its gaze. For further elaboration see my "The Active Eye."

28. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 143–44.

this ironic articulation of the desire for a supposedly “impossible” form of intersubjectivity is the very materiality through which this desire is objectively and visibly fulfilled.²⁹ Thus, rather than merely replacing human vision with mechanical vision, the cinema functions mechanically to bring to visibility the reversible structure of human vision: this structure emerges in the lived body as systemically both a subject and an object, as both visual (seeing) and visible (seen), and as simultaneously productive of both an activity of seeing (a “viewing view”) and an image of the seen (a “viewed view”).

Indeed, through its motor and organizational agency (achieved by the spatial immediacy of the mobile camera inhabiting a world and the reflective and temporalizing editorial re-membering of that primary spatial experience), the cinema inscribes and provokes a sense of existential presence that is at once subjectively introverted and objectively extroverted; centered synoptically and synthetically yet also decentered and split, mobile and self-displacing. Thus, the cinematic does not evoke the same sense of self-possession generated by the photographic. Indeed, the cinematic subject is sensed as never completely self-possessed, for it is always partially and visibly given over to the vision of others at the same time that it visually appropriates only part of what it sees and also cannot entirely see itself. Furthermore, the very mobility of its vision structures the cinematic subject (both film and spectator) as always in the act of displacing itself in time, space, and the world; thus, despite its existence as materially embodied and synoptically centered (on the screen or as the spectator’s lived body), it is always eluding its own (as well as our) containment.

The cinema’s visible inscription of the dual, reversible, and animated visual structure of embodied and mobile vision radically transforms the temporal and spatial structure of the photograph. Consonant with what Jameson calls the “high-modernist thematics of time and temporality,” the cinematic thickens the photographic with “the elegiac mysteries of *durée* and of memory.”³⁰ Although its visible structure of unfolding does not challenge the dominant realist perception of *objective* time as an irreversible and forwardly directed stream (even flashbacks are contained by the film’s vision in a forwardly directed momentum of experience), the intentional temporal and spatial fluidity of the cinema expresses and makes visible as well—and for the first time—the nonlinear and multidirectional movements of *subjectivity* as it imagines, remembers, projects forward. In this way the cinematic makes time visibly *heterogeneous*. That is, we visibly perceive time as structured differently in its subjective and objective modes, and we understand that these

29. This statement encapsulates the major argument and supporting demonstration of my *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

30. Jameson, “Postmodernism,” 64.

two structures exist *simultaneously* in a demonstrable state of *discontinuity* as they are, nonetheless, actively and constantly *synthesized as coherent* in a specific lived-body experience (that is, a particular, concrete, and spatialized history and a particularly temporalized narrative).

Cinema's animated presentation of representation constitutes its "presence" as always presently engaged in the experiential process of coming into being and signifying. Thus the significant value of the streaming forward that informs the cinematic with its specific form of temporality (and differentiates it from the atemporality of the photographic) is intimately bound to a structure not of possession, loss, pastness, and nostalgia but of accumulation, ephemerality, presentness, and anticipation—to a presence in the present informed by its connection to a collective past and an expansive future. Visually (and aurally) presenting the subjective temporality of memory, desire, and mood through the editorial expansion and contraction of experience, as well as through flashbacks, flash-forwards, freeze-framing, pixilation, reverse motion, slow motion, and fast motion, the cinema's visible (and audible) activity of *retention* and *protension* constructs a subjective temporality other than—yet simultaneous with—the irreversible direction and forward momentum of objective time. This temporal simultaneity not only "thickens" the cinematic present but also extends cinematic presence spatially—both expanding the space in every image between the here, where the enabling and embodied cinematic eye is situated, and the there, where its gaze locates itself in its objects, and embracing a multiplicity of situations in such visual/visible cinematic articulations as double exposure, superimposition, montage, and parallel editing.

The cinematic also radically transforms the spatial phenomeno-logic of the photographic. Simultaneously presentational and representational, viewing subject and visible object, present presence informed by past and future, continuous becoming that synthesizes temporal heterogeneity as the coherence of embodied experience, the cinematic thickens the thin abstracted space of the photograph into a concrete and habitable *world*. We might remember here the sudden animated blinking of a woman's eyes in *La Jetée* and how this visible motion transformed the photographic into the cinematic, the flat surface of a possessed picture into the lived space and active possibility of a lover's bedroom. In its capacity for movement the cinema's material agency (embodied as the camera) thus constitutes visual/visible space as always also motor and tactile space—a space that is deep and textural, that can be materially inhabited, that provides not merely an abstract ground for the visual/visible but also its particular *situation*. Thus, although it is a favored term in film theory, there is no such abstraction as *point of view* in the cinema. Rather, there are concrete *situations of viewing*—specific, mobile, and invested engagements of embodied, enworlded, and situated subjects/objects whose visual/visible activity prospects and articulates a

shifting field of vision from a world whose horizons always exceed it. Furthermore, informed by cinematic temporality, the space of the cinematic is also experienced as heterogeneous—both discontinuous and contiguous, lived and re-membered from within and without. Cinematic presence is thus multiply located—simultaneously displacing itself in the there of past and future situations yet orienting these displacements from the here where the body is at present. As the multiplicity and discontinuity of time are synthesized and centered and cohere as the *experience* of a specific lived body, so are multiple and discontinuous spaces synopsized and located in the spatial and material *synthesis* of a particular body. That is, articulated as separate shots and scenes, discontinuous spaces and discontinuous times are synthetically gathered together in a coherence that is the cinematic lived body: the camera its perceptive organ, the projector its expressive organ, the screen its discrete and material center of meaningful experience. In sum, the cinematic exists as an objective and visible *performance* of the perceptive and expressive structure of subjective lived-body experience.

Not so the electronic, whose materiality and various forms engage its spectators and “users” in a phenomenological structure of sensual and psychological experience that, in comparison with the cinematic, seems so diffused as to belong to *no-body*. Emerging culturally in the 1940s in television (a technology that seemed a domestically benign conjunction and extension of radio and cinema) and in supercomputers (a more arcane technology driven by a less benign military-industrial complex), the electronic can be seen as the third “technological revolution within capital itself.” Both television and computers radically transformed not only capital but also the culture, insofar as both in-formed what was, according to Jameson, an unprecedented and “prodigious expansion of capital into hitherto uncommodified areas,” including “a new and historically original penetration and colonization of Nature and the Unconscious.”³¹ Subsequently, the electronic has increasingly come to dominate not only the photographic and cinematic but also our lives; indeed, as Brooks Landon writes, it has “saturated all forms of experience and become an inescapable environment, a ‘technosphere.’”³² Beginning in the 1940s, this expansive and totalizing incorporation of what was perceived to be natural by what seemed a totally mediated culture, and the electronically specular production, proliferation, and commodification of the unconscious (globally transmitted as visible and marketable desire) restructures monopoly capitalism as multinational capitalism. Correlatively, Jameson (famously) identifies postmodernism as a new cultural logic that

31. *Ibid.*, 78.

32. Brooks Landon, “Cyberpunk: Future So Bright They Gotta Wear Shades,” *Cinefantastique* 18, no. 1 (Dec. 1987): 27.

begins to dominate modernism and to alter our sense of existential (and, I would add, cinematic) presence.

A function of technological (and televisual) pervasion and (World-Wide-Web) dispersion, this new electronic sense of presence is intimately bound up in a centerless, networklike structure of the *present*, of instant stimulation and impatient desire, rather than in photographic nostalgia for the past or cinematic anticipation of a future. Digital electronic technology atomizes and abstractly schematizes the analogic quality of the photographic and cinematic into discrete pixels and bits of information that are then transmitted serially, each bit discontinuous, discontinuous, and absolute—each bit “being-in-itself” even as it is part of a system.³³ Television, videocassettes and digital discs, VCR and DVD recorder/players, electronic games, personal computers with Internet access, and pocket electronics of all kinds form an encompassing perceptual and representational system whose various forms “interface” to constitute an alternative and absolute electronic world of immaterialized—if materially consequential—experience. And this electronic world incorporates the spectator/user uniquely in a spatially decentered, weakly temporalized and quasi-disembodied (or diffusely embodied) state.

Once again we can turn to *Blade Runner* to provide illustration of how the electronic is neither photographic nor cinematic. Tracking Leon, one of the rebellious replicants, the human protagonist, Deckard, searches the replicant’s empty room plus bath and discovers a photograph that seems to reveal nothing but the empty room itself. Using a science fictional device that resembles a television and DVD player, Deckard directs (by voice) its electronic eye to zoom in, close up, isolate, and enlarge to impossible detail various portions of the photograph in which he finally discovers a vital clue to the renegade replicant’s whereabouts. On the one hand, it might seem that Deckard functions here like a photographer, working in his darkroom to make, through optical discovery, past experience significantly visible. (Indeed, this sequence recalls the photographic blow-ups of an ambiguously “revealed” murder in Michelangelo Antonioni’s 1966 cinematic classic, *Blow-Up*.) On the other hand, Deckard can be likened to a film director, using the electronic eye to prospect and probe photographic space and thus to animate through diacritical action an eventually “discovered” narrative. Deckard’s electronic eye, however, is neither photographic nor cinematic. Although it constitutes a series of moving images from the static singularity of Leon’s photograph and reveals to Deckard the stuff of which narrative can

33. Although all moving images follow each other serially, each photographic and cinematic image (or frame) is developed or projected analogically rather than digitally. That is, the image is developed or projected as a whole and its elements are differentiated by gradation rather than by the on/off discretion of absolute numerical values.

be made, it does so serially and in static, discrete bits. The moving images that we see do not move themselves, and they reveal no animated and intentional vision to us or to Deckard. Transmitted to the television screen, the moving images no longer quite retain the concrete, material, and objective “thingness” of the photograph, but they also do not achieve the subjective animation of the intentional and prospective vision objectively projected by the cinema. In sum, they exist less as Leon’s experience than as Deckard’s information.

Indeed, the electronic is phenomenologically experienced not as a discrete, intentional, body-centered mediation and projection in space but rather as a simultaneous, dispersed, and insubstantial transmission across a network or web that is constituted spatially more as a materially flimsy latticework of nodal points than as the stable ground of embodied experience. Electronic representation and presence thus assert neither an objective and material possession of the world and self (as does the photographic) nor a centered and subjective spatiotemporal engagement with the materiality of the world and others accumulated and projected as materially embodied and intentional experience (as does the cinematic). Digital and schematic, abstracted from materially *reproducing* the empirical objectivity of nature that informs the photographic and from *presenting a representation* of embodied subjectivity and the unconscious that informs the cinematic, the electronic constructs a metaworld where aesthetic value and ethical investment tend to be located in *representation-in-itself*. That is, the electronic semiotically—and significantly—constitutes a system of *simulation*, a system that constitutes copies that seem lacking an original ground. And, when there is a thinned or absent connection phenomenologically perceived between signification and its original or “real” referent, when, as Guy Debord tells us, “everything that was lived directly has moved away into a representation,” referentiality becomes not only *intertextual* but also metaphysical.³⁴ Living in such a formally schematized and intertextual metaworld unprecedented in its degree of remove from the materiality of the real world has a significant tendency to liberate the engaged spectator/user from the pull of what might be termed moral and physical *gravity*—and, at least in the euphoria of the moment, the weight of its real-world consequences. (Indeed, not only do the wanton use of credit cards and electronic shopping seem mundane and pervasive evidence of this, but so, too, does the less pervasive and overly optimistic exuberance of easily “discharging” one’s civic responsibility by sending and circulating electronic petitions to save, for example, the National Endowment for the Arts.)³⁵

34. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1983), n.p.

35. I am speaking here of a *dominant* cultural and techno-logic. Obviously, electronic communication (including such things as petition circulation) can and does entail more significant

The immateriality and gravitational release of the electronic also digitizes “the elegiac mysteries of *durée* and of memory” and of human situation. Narrative, history, and a centered (and central) investment in the human lived body and its mortality become atomized and dispersed across a system that constitutes temporality not as a coherent flow of mordantly conscious experience but as the eruption of ephemeral desire and the transmission of randomness, unevaluated, and endless information. (Here we might think, in the first instance, of online merchandising catalogs and the rise of Internet auctions; and, in the second instance, of one’s generally disappointing experience of searching the Internet for things more meaningful than cheap airline tickets.)³⁶ Unlike photographic or cinematic temporality, the primary value of electronic temporality is the discrete temporal bit of *instant present*—that (thanks to television, videotape, digital disc, and computer memory and software) can be selected, combined, and instantly replayed and rerun by the spectator/user to such a degree that the previously irreversible direction and stream of objective time seems not only overcome but also recast as the creation of a *recursive temporal network*.³⁷ That is, on the one hand, the temporal cohesion of history and narrative gives way to the *temporal discretion* of chronicle and episode, to music videos once narratologically shocking in their discontinuities and discontiguities, and to the kinds of narratives that find both causality and the realizations of intentional agency multiple, random, or comic.³⁸ On the other hand, however, temporality is also *dispersed* and finds resolution not in the intelligibility of narrative coherence or in the stream of

degrees of moral gravity with correlatively significant material consequences. This, however, tends to be the case in circumstances and for people in cultures in which electronic and post-modern logic is *not* a dominant and in which embodied being is truly at referential stake and cannot be forgotten or so easily “liberated.”

36. Although it may undermine my argument here, I do admit that there may not be anything more meaningful than cheap airline tickets.

37. Michael Heim, *Electric Language: A Philosophical Study of Word Processing* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), is apposite here. He writes: “Though it may have identical content, the film viewed through personal videocassette technology is not really the same film projected on the . . . silver screen. There is a profound change in the experience, . . . in the sense of what is being seen, when the projected images are no longer bigger than life and are manipulable through fast-forward, freeze-frame, and every kind of fingertip control. Such viewing is no longer an occasion to which you must adjust your attention. With it, cinema culture comes to be on tap, manipulable at will. The videocassette provides a different psychic framework for the film” (118).

38. See, e.g., *Sliding Doors* (Peter Howitt, 1998), in which a character lives out two dramatically different existential possibilities; *Run Lola Run* (Tom Tykwer, 1998), in which a character literally runs through several iterations of a situation where—following chaos theory—small changes in initial conditions have major existential consequences; *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000), in which time seems to move linearly backward toward the inauguration of a past event but is actually full of gaps and overlaps and also moves ambiguously forward in relation to another of the film’s narrative foci; and *Mulholland Drive* (David Lynch, 2001), in which there

interior consciousness that used to temporally “co-here” as one’s subjective identity but rather in a literal network of instants and instances that literally “call” it into being. It is thus not surprising that today what seems, for many, to hold identity together is coherence of another kind: the ongoing *affirmation* of constant cell phone calls, electronic pages, “palm pilot” messaging—these standing less as significant communication than as the exterior, objective proof of one’s existence, of one’s “being-in-the-world.”

The once dominant cultural logic of modernism and its cinematic technological phenomenologically informed and transformed an earlier moment’s primarily objective and linear sense of temporality with the material realization of time as *heterogeneous*. That is, it re-cognized and representationally realized that objective and subjective time were lived simultaneously but structured quite differently. By means of a perverse turn, the now dominant cultural logic of postmodernism (and, perhaps, post-postmodernism) and its electronic techno-logic phenomenologically informs—and transforms—modernist and cinematic temporality with a sense of subjective and objective time as once again *homogeneous*. However, this is a radical transformation rather than a return to an older phenomeno-logic in which the sense of objective time as constitutively streaming forward in a linear progression that marked past, present, and future was dominant, and subjective time was subordinated to this movement and thus transparently sensed as homogeneous with it. The modernist period marked by the technological shifts of which cinema was primary split our sense of time in two and made visible—and sensible—the difference between the linearity of objective time and the nonlinearity of subjective time and thus constituted our sense of these as heterogeneous. What is novel—and radical—about temporality as it has been transformed by electronic culture is that while our sense of subjective time has retained its modernist nonlinear structure, our sense of objective time has been reconstituted from its previous constancy as streaming forward in a linear progression into a nonlinear and discontinuous structure that is, to a great degree, now *homologous* with the nonlinear and discontinuous structure of subjective time. Thus, objective time is no longer at odds with the nonlinear and discontinuous structure of subjective time, and most of the clear distinctions that marked them as separate modalities of temporality have faded. Temporality is now constituted and lived paradoxically as a *homogeneous experience of discontinuity*. The distinctive subjective nature of high modernist (and cinematic) “durée” is also extroverted into the objective temporality of “read-only” and “random-access” computer—and cultural—memory, and the regulative strictures and linear teleology of objective time

seems only local temporal cohesion and subjectivities, and agency free-floats among the characters.

now seem to turn back in on themselves recursively in a nonlinear structure of equivalence and reversibility. (Where the railroads once ran “on time,” we need only look to the airlines and our general disbelief in the “reality” of their schedules—and, then, of course, there’s TiVo.) This temporal transformation is a radical one—and it shifts our sensibilities from *Remembrance of Things Past*, a modernist, elegiac, and grave re-membering of experience, to the postmodernist, comic, and flighty recursivity of a *Back to the Future*.³⁹

Again the genre of science fiction film is illuminating.⁴⁰ The *Back to the Future* films are certainly apposite, and Alex Cox’s postmodern, parodic, and deadpan *Repo Man* (1984) manifests even more clearly the phenomenologically experienced homogeneity of postmodern heterogeneity. The film is a picaresque, loose, strung-out, episodic, and irresolute tale about an affectless and dissolute young man involved with car repossessions, aliens from outer space, Los Angeles punks, government agents, and others, but it is also constructed as a complexly bound and chaotic system of coincidences.⁴¹ At the local and human level of narrative coherence, individual scenes are connected not through narrative causality or psychological motivations but through literally material signifiers. A dangling dashboard ornament, for example, provides the acausal and material motivation between two of the film’s otherwise disparate episodes. However, at a transcendently global level the film resolves its acausal and chaotic structure by a narrative recursivity that links what seem random characters and events together in the complex relationship and order of what one spaced-out character describes as both the “cosmic unconsciousness” and a “lattice of coincidence.”⁴² Employment

39. Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, vol. 1., trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (1922; reprint, New York: Random House, 1981). The *Back to the Future* films—a trilogy—were all directed by Robert Zemeckis: *Back to the Future* (1985), *Back to the Future Part II* (1989), and *Back to the Future Part III* (1990).

40. Of all narrative film genres, science fiction has been most concerned with poetically mapping those transformations of spatiality, temporality, and subjectivity informed and/or constituted by new technologies. As well, SF cinema, in its particular materiality, has made these new poetic maps concretely visible. For elaboration see my *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 223–305.

41. My references to chaos in terms of complex systems are both specific and purposeful and derive from new circumscriptions of the complex relations between chaos and order in what were formerly seen as random and coincidental phenomena. For the most readable elaboration see James Gleick, *Chaos: Making a New Science* (New York: Viking, 1987); for an application to cultural issues related to contemporary representations of chaos see also my own “A Theory of Everything: Meditations on Total Chaos,” *Artforum International* (Oct. 1990): 148–55.

42. This character, Miller, is both the film’s most far-sighted “seer” and the narrative’s most spaced-out “loony.” He is prone to articulating disjointed yet strangely logical systems of relation in which connections between UFOs and South America explain where all the people on Earth have come from and where they are going. He demonstrates his notions of the “cosmic unconsciousness” and the “lattice of coincidence” by pointing out how “you’ll be thinking of a plate of shrimp and suddenly someone will say ‘plate’ or ‘shrimp’ or ‘plate of shrimp.’”

and identity in *Repo Man* become diffused across a vast relational “lattice of coincidence”—a “network,” a “worldwide web” constituted by nodular and transient encounters and events. It is thus no accident that the car culture of Los Angeles figures prominently in *Repo Man*—not only fragmenting individual experience at the local level into separate segments and discrete and chaotic bits lived only, and incoherently, through the windows of an automobile but also enabling such experience’s transcendent coherence in that literal but global “lattice of coincidence,” the “network” and “web” of the Los Angeles freeway system, which reconnects experience as intelligible at another and less grounded and human order of magnitude.

The postmodern and electronic instant, in its break from the modernist and cinematic temporal structures of retention and protension, constitutes a form of *absolute presence* (one abstracted from the objective and subjective discontinuity that gives meaning to the temporal system past/present/future). Correlatively, this transformation of temporality changes the nature and qualities of the space it occupies. As subjective time becomes experienced as unprecedentedly extroverted and is homogenized with a transformed sense of objective time as less irrefutably linear than directionally mutable, space becomes correlatively experienced as abstract, ungrounded, and flat—a site (or screen) for play and display rather than an invested situation in which action counts rather than computes. Such a superficial space can no longer precisely hold the interest of the spectator/user but has to constantly stimulate it. Its flatness—a function of its lack of temporal thickness and bodily investment—has to attract spectator interest at the surface. To achieve this, electronic space constructs objective and superficial equivalents to depth, texture, and invested bodily movement. Saturation of color and hyperbolic attention to detail replace depth and texture at the surface of the image, and constant action and the simultaneous and busy multiplicity of screens and images replace the gravity that grounds and orients the movement of the lived body with a purely spectacular, kinetically exciting, often dizzying sense of bodily freedom (and freedom from the body). Thus, along with this transformation of aesthetic characteristics and sensibility emerges a significant transformation of ethical investments. Whether negative or positive in effect, the dominant cultural techno-logic of the electronic and its attendant sense of electronic “freedom” have a tendency to *diffuse* and/or *disembody* the lived body’s material and moral gravity.⁴³

What I am suggesting is that, ungrounded and nonhierarchical as it is,

43. Since this essay was originally published, I have been confronted by arguments about this assertion, particularly in relation to virtual reality and various attempts to mobilize the human sensorium in electronic space. The argument is that electronic space “reembodies” rather than “disembodies” us. Although, to some extent, this is true, the dominant cultural logic

electronic presence has neither a point of view nor a visual situation, such as we experience, respectively, with the photograph and the cinema. Rather, electronic presence randomly disperses its being *across* a network, its kinetic gestures describing and lighting on the surface of the screen rather than inscribing it with bodily dimension (a function of centered and intentional projection). Images on television screens and computer terminals seem neither projected nor deep. Phenomenologically they seem, rather, somehow “just there” as we (inter)face them. This two-dimensional, binary superficiality of electronic space at once disorients and liberates the activity of consciousness from the gravitational pull and orientation of its hitherto embodied and grounded existence in a material world. All surface, electronic space cannot be inhabited by any body that is not also an electronic body. Such space both denies and prosthetically transforms the spectator’s physical human body so that subjectivity and affect free-float or free-fall or free-flow across a horizontal/vertical grid or, as is the case with all our electronic pocket communication devices, disappear into thin air. Subjectivity is at once decentered, dispersed, and completely extroverted—again erasing the modernist (and cinematic) dialectic between inside and outside and its synthesis of discontinuous time and discontinuous space in the coherence of conscious and embodied experience. As Jameson explains this novel state of being:

[T]he liberation . . . from the older *anomie* of the centered subject may also mean, not merely a liberation from anxiety, but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling. This is not to say that the cultural products of the postmodern era are utterly devoid of feeling, but rather that such feelings—which it might be better and more accurate to call “intensities”—are now free-floating and impersonal, and tend to be dominated by a peculiar kind of euphoria.⁴⁴

Co-constituted and brought to visibility by the cultural and techno-logic of the electronic, this kind of euphoric presence is not merely novel and peculiar. At the risk of sounding reactionary I would suggest that it also can be dangerous—and this not merely because its abstraction tends to cause car accidents. At a much deeper level its lack of specific and explicit interest and grounded investment in the human body and enworlded action, its free-floating leveling of value, and its saturation with the present instant could well cost us all a future.

In “The Body as Foundation of the Screen” Elena del R o points out that a phenomenological and existential description of technologically produced

of the electronic tends to elide or devalue the bodies that we are in physical space—not only as they suffer their flesh and mortality but also as they ground such fantasies of reembodyment.

44. Jameson, “Postmodernism,” 64.

images must insist “on the structuring role of the body in the production and reception of images, but more importantly, on *the reconfiguration of the body itself*—one that extends limits beyond the objective frames of visibility and presence” (95). In the context of discussing the singular films of Atom Egoyan, who explores human relationships as they are lived negatively and positively within multiple—and primarily electronic—modes of technologically mediated perception and expression, del Río describes the reconfiguration of the lived-body subject in a similar yet much more positive way than does Jameson. Pointing to our experience of the multiplicity of screens and the simultaneity of heterogeneous spaces in electronically mediated image culture, she writes: “Such coexistence of images has the effect of dispersing the punctual and self-possessed body into a multiplicity of bodies inhabiting different temporal and spatial sites. Thus, rather than sustaining the illusion of a narcissistic ego-logical identity, the electronic screen is able to provide a symbolic paradigm of impermanence and insubstantiality” (109). Nonetheless, she also notes that the more positive aspects of this electronic dispersal and reconfiguration of the lived-body subject are hardly normative—and indeed contradict the dominant logic of recent cybernetic environments that, however futilely, attempt “to shun and erase the body as if its existential and organic weight could simply be wished away” (97). Thus, Egoyan’s “use of the electronic screen” as a new mode of humanization capable of articulating and representing substance and value is “radical” and “does not contradict the effects normatively produced by electronic media.” And, it is worth noting, this electronic reconfiguration of the lived-body subject occurs through the *cinematic*—Egoyan’s films incorporating the electronic (rather than the other way round) so that his cinema constitutes, as del Río describes it, “a self-conscious representational process that is absent in the majority of mainstream uses of electronic technologies” (112).

Phenomenological analysis does not end with the “thick” description and thematization of the phenomenon under investigation. It aims also for an interpretation of the phenomenon that discloses, however partially, the lived meaning, significance, and nonneutral value it has for those who engage it. In terms of contemporary moving-image culture, however much they both engage and contest each other and however much they borrow on each other’s figures and metaphors, the material differences between cinematic and electronic representation emerge as significant differences in their historically lived meaning and value. Cinema is an objective technology of perception and expression that comes—and becomes—before us in a structure that implicates both a sensible body and a sensual and sense-making subject. In its visual address and movement it allows us to see objectively for the first time what was once a visible impossibility: that we are at once both intentional subjects and material objects in the world, both the seer and the seen. Thus, it shows us and affirms the embodied being of consciousness as it mate-

rially and intentionally engages the substantial world. It also affirms and shows us that, sharing materiality and the world through vision and action, we are intersubjective beings.

Now, historically, it is the techno-logic of the electronic—and not the residual logic of the cinematic—that dominates the form and in-forms the content of our cultural representations. And, unlike cinematic representation, electronic representation by its very structure phenomenologically diffuses the fleshly presence of the human body and the dimensions of that body's material world. However significant and positive its values in some regards, however much its very inventions and use emerge from lived-body subjects, the electronic tends to marginalize or trivialize the human body. Indeed, at this historical moment in our particular society and culture, we can see all around us that the lived body is in crisis. Its struggle to assert its gravity, its differential existence, status, and situation, its vulnerability and mortality, its vital and social investment in a concrete lifeworld inhabited by others, is now marked in hysterical and hyperbolic responses to the disembodied effects of electronic representation. On the one hand, contemporary moving images show us the human body (its mortal "meat") relentlessly and fatally interrogated, "riddled with holes" and "blown away," unable to maintain material integrity or moral gravity. If the Terminator doesn't finish it off, then electronic smart bombs will. On the other hand, the current popular obsession with physical fitness and cosmetic surgery manifests the wish to reconfigure the human body into something more invulnerable—a "hard body"; a lean, mean, and immortal "machine"; a cyborg that can physically interface with the electronic network and maintain a significant—if altered—material presence in the current digitized lifeworld of the subject. Thus, it is no historical accident that, earlier in our electronic existence, bodybuilder Arnold Schwarzenegger played the invulnerable, hard-body cyborg Terminator, whereas, much more recently and more in tune with the lived body's dematerialization, the slightly built Keanu Reeves flexibly dispersed and diffused what little meat he had across *The Matrix* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999), *The Matrix Reloaded* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 2003), and *The Matrix Revolutions* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 2003).

Within the context of this material and technological crisis of the flesh, one can only hope that the hysteria and hyperbole surrounding it are strategic responses—and that through this crisis the lived body has, in fact, managed to reclaim our attention sufficiently so as to forcefully argue for its existence and against its simulation or erasure. For, within the dominant cultural and techno-logic of the electronic there are those out there who prefer the simulated body and a virtual world. Indeed, they have forgotten that "technology springs from the very human condition of embodiment" and actually believe the body (contemptuously called "meat" or "wetware") is best lived only as an image or as information. Indeed, they suggest that the only possi-

bility for negotiating one's presence in our electronic lifeworld is to reconfigure the body through disembodiment, to digitize and download our consciousness into the neural nets and memory and onto the screens of a solely electronic existence.⁴⁵ Such an insubstantial electronic presence can ignore AIDS, homelessness, hunger, torture, the bloody consequences of war, and all the other ills the flesh is heir to outside the image and the datascape. It can ignore the lived body that not only once imagined its techno-logic but gave it substantial grounding, gravity, and value. It can ignore its own history. Indeed, devaluing the physically lived body and the concrete materiality of the world, the dominant cultural and techno-logic informing our contemporary electronic "presence" suggests that—if we do not take great care—we are all in danger of soon becoming merely ghosts in the machine.

45. Since this essay was first written, it is interesting to note that the rhetoric of *downloading* one's consciousness into the computer has become further dispersed and "transcendentalized." Now, the rhetoric speaks of *uploading* one's consciousness onto the World Wide Web.

PART TWO

Responsible Visions

Beating the Meat / Surviving the Text, or How to Get Out of the Century Alive

This demise of feeling and emotion has paved the way for all our most real and tender pleasures—in the excitements of pain and mutilation; in sex as the perfect arena . . . for all the veronicas of our own perversions; in our moral freedom to pursue our own psychopathology as a game; and in our apparently limitless powers for conceptualization—what our children have to fear is not the cars on the highways of tomorrow but our own pleasure in calculating the most elegant parameters of their deaths.

—J. G. BALLARD, Introduction to *Crash*

Some time ago, in an issue of *Science-Fiction Studies*, I had occasion to rip into Jean Baudrillard's body—both his lived body and his techno-body and the insurmountable, unthought, and thoughtless gap between them.¹ The journal had published an English translation of two of the French theorist-critic's short essays on science fiction and technoculture,² one of them celebrating *Crash*, an extraordinary novel written by J. G. Ballard, first published in 1973, with a significant author's introduction added in 1974 that was carried forward in subsequent editions.³ My anger at Baudrillard arose from what seemed his willful misreading of a work whose pathological characters "get off" on the erotic collision and collusion between the human body and technology and who celebrate sex and death in wrecked automobiles and through violent car crashes.

A moral tale written in the guise of a "pornographic" quasi-science fiction narrative, *Crash's* cold, clinical, and aseptic prose leaches the sex acts and the wounds described in detail by the narrator of feeling and emotion and (I would assume in most cases) also of the ability to erotically arouse the living flesh of the reader. Indeed, in his introduction Ballard is explicit both

1. Vivian Sobchack, "Baudrillard's Obscenity," *Science-Fiction Studies* 18 (Nov. 1991): 327–29.
2. "Jean Baudrillard: Two Essays," trans. Arthur B. Evans, *Science-Fiction Studies* 18 (Nov. 1991): 309–20. Subsequent references will be cited in the text.
3. J. G. Ballard, *Crash* (New York, Vintage, 1985). The epigraph to this essay can be found on p. 1. Subsequent references will be cited in the text.

about the novel's project and his own grave concern about the potentially fatal consequences of contemporary culture's increasing technophilia. Viewing pornography as "the most political form of fiction, dealing with how we use and exploit each other in the most urgent and ruthless way," he describes *Crash* as "the first pornographic novel based on technology." It is, he says, "an extreme metaphor for an extreme situation, a kit of desperate measures only for use in an extreme crisis" (6). Excoriating the world around him in explosive prose quite unlike that of the novel itself, Ballard's prescient introduction speaks of "voyeurism, self-disgust, the infantile basis of our dreams and longings" and suggests that, in a "communications landscape" of "sinister technologies," "mass merchandising," unlimited options, and "the dreams that money can buy," "these diseases of the psyche have now culminated in the most terrifying casualty of the century: the death of affect" (1). Feeling himself at a moral loss in the context of what is now—but was not then—called postmodern culture, Ballard is, nonetheless, a moralist. The "ultimate role of *Crash* is cautionary," he tells us. The novel "is a warning against the brutal, erotic, and overlit realm that beckons more and more persuasively to us from the margins of the technological landscape" (6).

Baudrillard, however, refuses Ballard's warning while praising his book, and—as is usual in his earlier writing—succumbs to the "brutal" and "erotic" realm of the technological. Indeed, writing about *Crash*, the lived body sitting at Baudrillard's desk must have forgotten itself to celebrate, instead, "a body with neither organs nor organ pleasures, entirely dominated by gash marks, cut-outs, and technical scars—all under the sign of a sexuality that is without referentiality and without limits." And, having forgotten itself while transparently grounding his celebratory fantasies of "a body commixed with technology's capacity for violation and violence," Baudrillard's lived body is most certainly disaffected, if not completely disavowed (313). Indeed, responding to *Crash*, Baudrillard's body is *thought* always as an object and (at least in his writing) never *lived* as a subject—and, thought rather than lived, it is able to bear all sorts of symbolic abuse with indiscriminate and undifferentiated pleasure. Such a techno-body as Baudrillard longs for, however, is (as Ballard understands) a porno-graphic fiction, objectified and written beyond belief and beyond the real—which is to say, it is always something other than the body Baudrillard lives as both "here" and "mine." Thus alienated from his own lived body and its existence as the material premise for very real—rather than merely literal—pain, Baudrillard gets into the transcendent sexiness of the "brutal surgery" that technology "continually performs in creating incisions, excisions, scar tissue, gaping body holes" (313). Explicitly rejecting Ballard's cautionary and moral gaze as outmoded and inappropriate to the contemporary moment, he luxuriates in the novel's wounds, "artificial orifices" (316), and "artificial invaginations" (315). And, at least on the page, he "gets off" on the convergence of "chrome and mucous membranes" and

“all the symbolic and sacrificial practices that a body can open itself up to—not via nature, but via artifice, simulation, and accident” (316).

Where, in all this erotic technofantasy, I asked at the time, was Baudrillard’s body? Both the one at the desk, the physical and intentional lived body of the man, and the repressed or disavowed lived body of the post-modernist? At once decentered and completely objectified and extroverted, alienated in a phenomenological structure of *sensual thought* and merely *psychic experience*, it seemed to be *re-signed* to being a *no-body*. The man’s lived body (and, perhaps not coincidentally, the body of a man), in all its material facticity, its situatedness, its finitude, and its limitations, seemed to have been transubstantiated through textualization into the infinite possibility, receptivity, literality, and irresponsibility of the “pure” sign. Summarizing this kind of critical collapse of the materially real into “readable text,” Fredric Jameson points to how “finally the body itself proves to be a palimpsest whose stabs of pain and symptoms, along with its deeper impulses and its sensory apparatus, can be *read* fully as much as any other text.”⁴ The sense of the body that Baudrillard privileges, then, is sense as it is amputated from its origins and grounding in the very premises of embodied existence. That is, Baudrillard’s body finds its erotic pleasure located only in the jouissance of semi-otic play, its pain only in writer’s block. And so—given that I first read Baudrillard’s essay on *Crash* while I was recuperating from major cancer surgery on my left distal thigh and knew all about gash marks, cutouts, technical scars, artificial orifices, and invaginations—I wished the man a car crash or two, as well as a little pain to bring him (back) to his senses.

Indeed, there is nothing like a little pain to bring us back to our senses, nothing like a real (not imagined or written) mark or wound to counter the romanticism and fantasies of technosexual transcendence that characterize so much of the current discourse on the techno-body that is thought to occupy the virtual cyberspaces of postmodernity.⁵ As Jameson reminds us: “History is what hurts. It is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis.”⁶ And what hurts forcibly reminds us to our immanence, to the real, and to the physical necessity, if not the ethi-

4. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 186.

5. There is by now an extensive literature exploring these fantasies of the techno-body. See, as early examples, Scott Bukatman, *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993); Scott Bukatman, “X-Bodies (The Torment of the Mutant Superhero),” in *Uncontrollable Bodies: Testimonies of Identity and Culture*, ed. Rodney Sappington and Tyler Stallings (Seattle: Bay Press, 1994), 93–129; Claudia Springer, *Electronic Eros: Bodies and Desire in the Postindustrial Age* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996); and Mark Dery, *Escape Velocity: Cyberculture at the End of the Century* (New York: Grove, 1997).

6. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 102.

cal mandate, of our inherent “response-ability.” Thus, although it is true that, between operations, I joked about how my doctor “had gone where no man had gone before,” sitting there reading Baudrillard as I was currently experiencing the pain of those artificial orifices and technical scars, I could attest to the scandal of metaphor and the bad faith informing all that talk about “the political economy of the sign.” The “semiurgy of contusions, scars, mutilations, and wounds” on *my* thigh were nothing at all like “new sexual organs opened in *the* body” (314, emphasis added). Even at its most objectified and technologically caressed, I live this thigh—not abstractly on “the” body but concretely as “my” body. Thus, sharp pain, dull aches, and numbness (which, after all, is not not-feeling but the feeling of not-feeling), the cold touch of technology on my flesh, were distractions from my erotic possibilities, and not—as Baudrillard would have it—erotically distracting.

This critique, however, was leveled at Baudrillard a long time ago—before I actually *became* a techno-body and experienced the assorted dimensions of prosthetic pleasure. After recurrences of the cancer and three surgeries, my left leg was amputated high above the knee and I learned to use—and enjoy—a prosthetic replacement. Quickly done with pain (even the phantom sensations disappeared after five months), I went out and bought a whole new wardrobe of fancy underwear to don for my biweekly visits to the prosthetist—a quite good-looking young man who was extremely absorbed in me and generally positioned around crotch-level as he knelt to tinker with my titanium knee. I have to say that I learned to love my prosthesis with its sculpted foam cosmetic cover—particularly the thigh that will never get cellulite and is thinner than the thigh of my so-called good leg. With much effort I learned to walk again, the stump (euphemistically, my residual limb) thrust first into the socket of a leg held on by a suspension belt and then into what is called a “suction” socket of a leg that—when it or I am working right—almost transparently feels like “me.” It was this suction socket that allowed me a new kind of experience with “artificial orifices” that had none of the pain of surgery and all of the erotic play of technology. Every time I put the leg on, I literally “screw” a valve into a hole in my new thigh, depressing it to let the air out so that the prosthetic sucks my stump into the very depths of its silicone and fiberglass embrace.

I have also become (at least in my own eyes) a “lean, mean machine.” After the amputation I lost an extraordinary amount of weight—not from dieting in the mode of the self-loathing females of our culture but from the intensive exercise of, first, merely getting from here to there on crutches and, now, from “pumping iron” to keep the rest of my body (the “meat” as we techno-bodies or cyborgs contemptuously call it) up to the durability and strength of my prosthetic leg. Indeed—and here I admit to a confessional stance I don’t usually condone in others—I gave up dieting years ago in anger at its built-in and perpetual self-criticism and, hardly a glutton, worked

on accepting myself “as I was.” However, after the amputation and major exercise I admit to having felt more positive about my loss of weight than negative about the loss of my leg. (This constitutes, I suppose, a “fair”—if hardly equitable—trade-off in the “meat” department.)

The truth of the matter is that once I got my prosthetic leg, I felt more, not less, attractive than I used to. Hard (albeit partial) body that I became, I felt more erotically distracting and distracted than I had in years—although it was hard to find the time to do anything about it given all the hours I spent in physical therapy and then at the gym. Indeed, over the ten years since my amputation I have come to learn that it’s ridiculous (if not positively retrograde) to accept myself “as I am.” I have found that, should I wish it—and with the aid of technology—I can “make myself over,” reinvent myself as a harder and, perhaps, even younger body. (Unfortunately, my residual body—its “wetware” imprinted with the memory of pain—keeps putting me off, but I’m sure that my technodesire will eventually win out.) Indeed, given the techno-body that I have become, I now have the power of transformation supposedly available to the polymorphously perverse cyborg—although I am hardly what Donna Haraway had in mind when she wrote her ironic, but utopian, manifesto.⁷

In regard to irony, if you’ve believed all of what I’ve written to this point, you probably think me less polymorphously perverse than self-deluded, mordantly bitter, in major compensatory mode, or in some really peculiar state of denial. All of which, in fact, I’m not. Although much of what I’ve written here is actually true (including buying the fancy underwear), what is *not* true is that, since acquiring the prosthetic leg, I’ve resigned myself to being a cyborg, a techno-body, or in more recent terms, to being “posthuman.”⁸ My prosthesis has *not* incorporated me. Indeed, the whole aim of my physical existence in the early years after my amputation and before I achieved a certain competency was to incorporate it.⁹ Thus my stance toward—and on—

7. Donna Haraway, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s,” *Socialist Review* 80 (1985): 65–107. Haraway’s “cyborg” has inspired an extensive literature, such as *The Cyborg Handbook*, ed. Chris Hables, Heidi Jul Figuroa-Sarriera, and Steven Mentor (New York: Routledge, 1996); for an excellent elaboration of the cyborg in relation to gender see also Anne Balsamo, *Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).

8. On the posthuman see N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); R. L. Ruskay, *High Techne: Art and Technology from the Machine Aesthetic to the Posthuman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); and *Posthuman Bodies (Unnatural Acts)*, ed. Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

9. For more on this issue of incorporating artifacts (among them artificial limbs and/as dolls) see Elaine Scarry, “The Merging of Bodies and Artifacts in the Social Contract,” in *Culture on the Brink: Ideologies of Technology*, ed. Gretchen Bender and Timothy Druckrey (Seattle: Bay Press, 1994), 85–87.

my prosthetic leg differs quite a bit from the one I've entertained here as a playful but ironic response to the delights of the techno-body as celebrated by Baudrillard and his followers.¹⁰ What many surgeries and my prosthetic experience have really taught me is that if we are to survive our new century, we must counter the millennial discourses that would decontextualize our flesh into insensate sign or digitize it into bits of information in cyberspace, where, as one devotee enthusiastically put it, "it's like having had your everything amputated."¹¹ Well, I've had "something" amputated—and not in cyberspace. Hence my enthusiasm for being a virtual "no-body" is somewhat limited. In the (inter)face of the new technological revolution and its transformation of every aspect of our culture (including our bodies, which now have permanently attached to them cell phones, Walkmans, and PDAs), we have to recognize and make explicit the deep and dangerous ambivalence that informs the reversible relations we, as lived bodies, have with our tools and their function of enabling us to transcend many of our physical limitations. Let's not get (as some of us have)—literally—carried away.

Speaking a number of years after the publication of her then optimistic manifesto for cyborgs, Haraway recognized the self-exterminating impulses of the discourses of disembodiment suggested by Baudrillard's pornography of the body on the one hand and the *Mondo 2000/Wired*—let's upload into the datascape and beat the meat—subculture on the other. In an interview in *Social Text* she warns against the very "liberatory" cyborgism she once celebrated (however ironically) insofar as it jacks into (and off on) what she calls "the God trick" and attempts to deny (or defy) mortality. Our implicitly reversible relations with technology, our confusion of consciousness with computation and of subjectively lived flesh with objective metal and hard-wiring, is—Haraway points out—a "transcendentalist" move: "it produces death through the fear of it," disavowing as it does the fact that "we really do die, that we really do wound each other, that the earth really is finite, that there aren't any other planets out there that we know of that we can live on, that escape-velocity is a deadly fantasy."¹²

In an extremely important essay entitled "The Technical Body: Incorporating Technology and Flesh," philosopher John Barry Jr. addresses precisely these issues from a phenomenological perspective. His focus is on the advent

10. It is worth noting that, in a period celebrating and/or critiquing technology, the term *prosthetic* has itself become "sexy," replacing the "cyborg" in the context of poststructuralist and cultural studies. For elaboration see my "A Leg to Stand On: Prosthetics, Metaphor, and Materiality" in the present volume.

11. John Perry Barlow, "Being in Nothingness: Virtual Reality and the Pioneers of Cyberspace," *Mondo 2000* 2 (1990): 42.

12. Donna Haraway, quoted in Constance Penley and Andrew Ross, "Cyborgs at Large: Interview with Donna Haraway," *Social Text* 25/26 (1991): 397.

of modern technology as an increasing and pervasive familiarization with our tools. These have become incorporated, at a deep structural and social level, as modalities of perception and thus have become so naturalized as to erase our sense of their historical specificity. In regard to this very human tendency to quite literally incorporate our technologies, Barry uses the simple example put forward by Maurice Merleau-Ponty of a blind man's relation to his cane as he walks (a relation in many ways analogous to mine with my prosthetic leg). For the blind man intending toward the world and not the cane, the cane "becomes an extension of his sense of touch . . . becoming invisible as cane and 'visible' as body."¹³ This relation to technology is similar to the way scientists transparently look through a microscope or I through my bifocals; both become extensions (however differently modulated) of our eyes as we intend toward the objects of our vision: the slide, the text. Whatever the examples of the way in which our technologies tend to become transparent in the accomplishment of our intentions, they all "demonstrate the human body's talent for extending itself beyond its objective boundaries" and highlight how the body "can in fact get caught up almost entirely in what concerns it to such an extent that it incorporates its material preoccupations."¹⁴ Thus, not only for Merleau-Ponty and Martin Heidegger but for all of us, it becomes "increasingly crucial to understand how the human body and the technical body provoke and sustain one another, and how together they exceed or 'amplify' one another." However, "this technical 'amplification' of the body . . . has a price. All such amplification is, in fact, deformation or transformation." And "implicit in this transformation is the privileging of a certain form of perception and the concomitant *forgetting* or *masking* of other possibilities."¹⁵

The tendency to privilege our technologically enhanced capacities but also to forget or mask the fact that our capacities are technologically enhanced and not the result of our natural bodily capacities leads to both latent and manifest forms of ambivalence. Indeed, in *Technology and the Lifeworld*, philosopher Don Ihde discusses this ambivalence, or what he calls the "doubled desire," that exists in our relations with any technology that extends our bodily sensorium and, thereby, our perception—be it a cane, a pair of eyeglasses, a prosthetic leg, a motion picture camera, or a computer:

On the one side is a wish for total transparency, total embodiment, for the technology to truly "become me." Were this possible, it would be equivalent to there being no technology, for total transparency would *be* my body and senses. . . . The

13. James Barry Jr., "The Technical Body: Incorporating Technology and Flesh," *Philosophy Today* (winter 1991): 397.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*, 398 (emphasis added).

other side is the desire to have the power, the *transformation* that the technology makes available. Only by using the technology is my bodily power enhanced and magnified by speed, through distance, or by any of the other ways in which technologies change my capacities. These capacities are always *different* from my naked capacities. The desire is, at best, contradictory. I want the transformation that the technology allows, but I want it in such a way that I am basically unaware of its presence. I want it in such a way that it becomes me. Such a desire both secretly *rejects* what technologies are and overlooks the transformational effects which are necessarily tied to human-technology relations. This illusory desire belongs equally to the pro- and anti-technology interpretations of technology.¹⁶

Obviously, transparency is what I wish—and strive—for in my relation to my prosthetic leg. I want to embody it subjectively. I do not want to regard it as an object or to think *about* it as I use it to walk. Indeed, in learning to use the prosthesis, I found that *looking objectively* at my leg in the mirror as an exteriorized thing—a piece of technology—to be thought about and manipulated did not help me to improve my balance and gait so much as did *subjectively feeling* through all of my body the weight and rhythm of the leg in a gestalt of intentional motor activity. Insofar as the leg remains an object external to me, a hermeneutic problem to be solved, a piece of technology to “use,” I cannot live it and be enabled by it to accomplish those intentional projects that involve it but don’t concern it. So, of course, I want the leg to become totally transparent. However, the desired transparency here involves my incorporation of the prosthetic—and not the prosthetic’s incorporation of me (although, seen by others to whom a prosthetic is strange, I may well seem its extension rather than the other way around).

This is to say that although my enabling technology is made of titanium and fiberglass, I do not really or literally perceive myself as a hard body—even after a good workout at the gym, when, in fact, it is my union with the weight machines (not the prosthetic leg) that momentarily reifies that metaphor. Nor do I think that because my prosthetic will, in all likelihood, outlast me, it confers on me invincibility or immortality. Technologically enabled in the most intimate way, I am, nonetheless, not a cyborg. Unlike Baudrillard, I have not forgotten the limitations and finitude and naked capacities of my flesh—nor, more important, do I desire to disavow or escape them. They are, after all, not only what ground the concrete gravity and value of my life and the life of others. The limitations, finitude, and naked capacities of my flesh also ground the very possibility of my partial transcendence of them through various perceptual technologies—be they my prosthetic leg, my bifocals, or my computer as I write. That is, it is my lived body—not my prosthetic leg, which stands inert in a corner by the bed before I put it on in

16. Don Ihde, *Technology and the Lifeworld: From Garden to Earth* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 75.

the morning—that provides me *the material premises* and, therefore, the *logical* and *ethical* grounds for the intelligibility of those ethical categories that emerge from a bodily sense of gravity, finitude, and (dare I bring it up again) pain. It is also my lived body that provides me the material premises for the playful irresponsibility of my imagination—as do the lived bodies of those who imagine they can think their way out of their bodies through a technology that replaces bodies rather than merely extending them.

Throughout this chapter (as well as others) I have used the phenomenological term “lived body” to what I feel is significant purpose. Although it might seem redundant, it is meant to serve as an emphatic corrective to those prevalent objectifications that complacently—and irresponsibly—regard the body, even one’s own, as primarily a conceptual or objective “thing,” or as a virtual “no-thing.” One of the consequences of our high-tech millenarianism is that the responsive and responsible material and ethical significance of the lived body have been elided or disavowed. This disavowal can be seen not only in the delusional liberatory rhetoric of technophiles who long to become immortal and “pure” electronic information, or self-repairing cyborgs like Schwarzenegger’s Terminator, or the latter’s updated models, which can endlessly morph into anything and everything.¹⁷ It can also be seen in the dangerous liberatory poetics of cultural formalists who, like Baudrillard, long to escape the lived body and its limitations and write it off (quite literally) as just another sign of its times. This is to say, Baudrillard is of a piece with all those in our culture who revile the lived body for its weaknesses and who wish to objectify its terrible mortality away. There are those, for example, who are obsessed with the body’s limited durability and who, through various and often perverse or pathological means, attempt to transform themselves into hard bodies and morbidly lean machines. There are those who are—perhaps abjectly—“turned on” by images of the body being blown away by explosives and riddled by bullet holes (how clearly the vernacular speaks the substance of desire). There are also those who refer to their bodies contemptuously as “meat” and “wetware” and, like Hans Moravec, want to ditch the body to “upload” and immortalize consciousness into the neural nets of the datascape.¹⁸ And there are even those who, less overtly than Baudrillard, theorize and intellectually commodify the

17. Reference here is, of course, to the culturally significant Terminator films: *The Terminator* (James Cameron, 1984), *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (James Cameron, 1991), and *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* (Jonathan Mostow, 2003). For discussion of the Terminator films and the more general cultural implications of morphing see Vivian Sobchack, ed., *Meta-Morphing: Visual Transformation and the Culture of Quick Change* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

18. See Hans P. Moravec, *Mind Children: The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

body as an *objective thing* that one can hold—dare I pun here to insist on the inherent contradiction?—at arm’s length, available for disinterested scrutiny. This alienated yet highly fetishized fascination with the body object (the body that we *have*) and the devaluation of embodiment and the lived body (the body that we *are*) is a consequence of an increasingly dangerous confusion between the agency that is “our bodies/ourselves” and the objective power of our incredible new technologies of perception and expression.

Referring to this dangerous confusion and its consequences in her relevantly titled *The Body in Pain*, philosopher Elaine Scarry considers our subjective experience of the lived body and its objective transformation into a technology through the process of what she calls “fetishist animism”:

To conceive of the body as parts, shapes, and mechanisms is to conceive of it from outside: though the body contains pump and lens, “pumpness” and “lensness” are not part of the felt-experience of being a sentient being. To instead conceive of the body in terms of capacities and needs (not now “lens” but “seeing,” not now “pump” but “having a beating heart,” or, more specifically, “desiring” or “fearing”) is to move further in toward the interior of felt-experience. To, finally, conceive of the body as “aliveness” or “awareness of aliveness” is to reside at last within the felt-experience of sentience. “Aliveness” or “awareness of aliveness” . . . is in some very qualified sense projected out onto the object world. . . . The reist takes that apparent-aliveness as a basis for revering the object world.¹⁹

Cultural theorist Kathleen Woodward, in an essay focused on the negative attitudes about human aging implicit in the technophilia of contemporary “technocriticism,” also criticizes the privileging of technological development in Western culture and the way it has been structured as a “story about the human body”:

Over hundreds of thousands of years the body, with the aid of various tools and technologies, has multiplied its strength and increased its capacities to extend itself in space and over time. According to this logic, the process culminates in the very immateriality of the body itself. In this view technology serves fundamentally as a prosthesis of the human body, one that ultimately displaces the material body, transmitting instead its image around the globe and preserving that image over time.²⁰

Thus, as we increasingly objectify our thoughts and desires, not only realizing but also reifying them through modern technologies of perception and

19. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 285–86.

20. Kathleen Woodward, “From Virtual Cyborgs to Biological Time Bombs: Technocriticism and the Material Body,” in *Culture on the Brink: Ideologies of Technology*, ed. Gretchen Bender and Timothy Druckrey (Seattle: Bay Press, 1994), 50.

communication, our subjective valuation of our own fleshed bodies diminishes. Indeed, as Woodward notes, “there is a beguiling, almost mesmerizing relationship between the progressive vanishing of the body, as it were, and the hypervisuality of both the postmodern society of the spectacle, . . . and the psychic world of cyberspace.”²¹

Both the fetishistic animism that would reify our lived bodies as merely sentient objects or technologies and the disappearance (or increased transparency) of the bodies that we actually live and that, in fact, ground all our incorporations of technology provoke in some the heady sensation of having “beat the meat.” An interesting, albeit also appropriately gruesome and frightening, example of such literal headiness can be found in the research of one Robert J. White, director of the Brain Research Laboratory at Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine. Working with brain transplantation in monkeys, in which the animals’ heads are severed and then reattached to donor bodies, White has been quoted as saying, “For the first time in the history of medicine, we proved that the body was nothing more than a power pack.”²² Here, as elsewhere in our brave new world, the increasing disappearance or “backgrounding” of our lived bodies as their fleshy capacities are extended by new technologies and the correlative ubiquitous visibility and privilege given to these technologies leads to a certain crazy euphoria and a sense of the limitless extension of our being far beyond its materiality and mortality. This, however, is “false” consciousness—for it has “lost touch” with the very material and mortal *ontological premises* that enabled the imagination and imagery that gave birth to our technologies and their powers in the first place.

Thus I have no desire, like Baudrillard or Moravec or Professor White in their respective disembodied fantasies, to “beat the meat.” Indeed, in light of Ihde’s description of our relations with technologies, this phrase resonates with both double desire and contradictions that are tied not only to contemporary relations with technology but also (and perhaps not surprisingly) to gender. In American vernacular “beating the meat” speaks (dare I say), on the one hand, of male erotic desire and the physical act of masturbating to orgasm. On the other hand, in today’s world, where many males transparently “jack off” by “jacking in” and playing with a more objectified “joy stick,” the phrase also speaks to a desire to lose the body and to exist only as consciousness enabled by and through technology. Simultaneously, then, “beating the meat” expresses a contradictory wish: to get rid of the body through technology so as to overcome the material demands and limitations

21. Ibid.

22. Lou Jacobson, “A Mind Is a Terrible Thing to Waste,” *Lingua Franca* 7 (Aug. 1997): 6.

of the flesh—and “to escape the newly extended body of technological engagement” so as “to reclaim experience through the flesh.”²³

The narrator of *Crash* (an “other” named Ballard) reveals this contradictory desire to reclaim experience through the flesh in the most perverse way. That is, his desire to “escape the newly extended body of technological engagement” and return to lived-body experience can only be imagined—and effected—through technology. Initially recovering from a horrible car crash, Ballard, the narrator, tells us: “The crash was the only real experience I had been through for years. For the first time I was in physical confrontation with my own body, an inexhaustible encyclopedia of pains and discharges” (39). Hence the novel’s conjuncture and conflation of wounds and orgasms with the steering wheels, stick shifts, and windshields of automobiles; its confusions of flesh and metal; its characters’ imagination of “a sexual expertise that would be an exact analogue of the other skills created by the multiplying technologies of the twentieth century” (100). Hence Ballard’s narrator dreams “of other accidents that might enlarge [the] repertory of orifices, relating them to more elements of the automobile’s engineering, to the ever-more complex technologies of the future” (179). And hence he goes on to ask, “What wounds would create the sexual possibilities of the invisible technologies of thermonuclear reaction chambers, white-tiled control rooms, the mysterious scenarios of computer circuitry?” and to visualize, “extraordinary sexual acts celebrating the possibilities of unimagined technologies” (179).

In this regard it is perhaps illuminating to bring up David Cronenberg’s film adaptation of *Crash* (1997), which was released in the United States to hyped promotion and heated discussion of its pornographic status. Certainly, Cronenberg’s was an interesting attempt to find a cinematic equivalent to the novel’s cautionary narrative and to its clinical and cold prose descriptions of the sexual couplings of human flesh and automobiles. His strategy was to give us chilly performances and distanced (yet detailed in close-up) treatment of the narrative’s automotive sexual encounters. It seems to me, however, that what Cronenberg missed in his adaptation was Ballard’s insistent displacement of Eros onto the automobile: that is, the pornographic fetishization of its very particular parts, contours, sheen that become animated through a perverse human desire to mate with—or become—technology. Thus, although Cronenberg shows us “the death of affect” in his characters, he does not show us the pornographic effects of “the brutal, erotic, and overlit” technological realm that Ballard cautions against and Baudrillard celebrates. Cronenberg has, after all, been consistently more interested in bodies than in technology—although he has always been inter-

23. Ihde, *Technology and the Lifeworld*, 75–76.

ested in what technology *does* to bodies. Thus, although Cronenberg, like Ballard and unlike Baudrillard, is also attempting a cautionary tale about the “veronicas of our own perversions,” his erotic and morbid fascination with flesh is not displaced onto technology. What the film *Crash* shows us—quite unlike the novel—is people having sex *in* cars, not *with* them.

Throughout the discourses of cyborgism that emerged long after Ballard’s cautionary novel, there exists an extraordinary and frightening emphasis on an erotics of technology that is transparently flesh-based. This transparency is certainly an effect of our culture’s overvaluation of technology and devaluation of bodily being and is informed by a transcribed and transubstantiated sexuality that is fatally confused as to the site of its experience. Baudrillard, Moravec, the *Mondo 2000* and *Wired* folks all want, as Ihde puts it, “what the technology gives but do not want the limits, the transformations that a technologically-extended body implies.”²⁴ Thus, the disavowal inherent in Baudrillard’s celebratory description of the techno-body as “under the gleaming sign of a sexuality that is without referentiality and without limits.” Wanting what “technology gives,” but disavowing what it reduces or “limits,” those who find the techno-body “sexy” forget that screwing the valve into place on my prosthetic thigh brings me no shudder of physical pleasure. This is a thigh that cannot make sense of the lacy lingerie that touches it, cannot feel the silk stocking that caresses its artificial skin. In sum, my prosthetic leg has its limits, and whatever it does to extend my “being-in-the-world,” whatever way it amplifies my perceptions and enhances the significance of my existence, however much it seems to bring me into intimate material contact with the technological world, I still had to give up my fleshy leg in trade—to lose, that is, something in the bargain. What is particularly dangerous about Baudrillard’s erotics of technology—and utterly different from Ballard’s pornography of technology in *Crash*—is that, despite its seeming heightened consciousness, it finally disavows *the technological status of technology*. Thus, unlike Ballard, Baudrillard’s dizzying protechnological rhetoric hides his antitechnology desire, and this kind of self-deception promotes deadly, terminal confusions between meat and hardware.

In our current cultural moment, when “high technology” has given so many cultural critics and academics a “technological high,” there might be some cachet in claiming for myself the “sexiness” of cyborg identity. Rather than—as had been the twentieth century—being on my “last leg,” I could describe myself as being on the “first leg” of some devoutly wished for transformation of my human frailty and mortality. I could indulge in fantasies of new and increasingly possible forms of personal invulnerability and immortality. However, as Woodward rightly suggests, “The possibility of an invul-

24. *Ibid.*, 76.

nerable and thus immortal body is our greatest technological illusion—that is to say, *delusion*.²⁵ This is a delusion of which I want no part. Living—rather than merely writing or thinking—my “newly extended body of technological engagement,” I find the fragility of my flesh significantly precious. Although I am deeply grateful for the motility my prosthetic affords me (however much in a transformation that is perceptually reduced as well as in some ways amplified), this new leg is dependent finally on my last leg. Without my lived body to live it as a meaningful capacity, the prosthetic exists as part of a body without organs and no sense of responsibility: if you prick it, it does not bleed. Such a techno-body has no sympathy for human suffering, cannot understand human pleasure, and—since it has no conception of death—cannot possibly place value on a human life.

So here, as in that original short piece for *Science-Fiction Studies*, I wish Baudrillard a little pain—maybe a lot—to bring him to his senses. Pain would remind him that he doesn’t just *have* a body but that he *is* his body and that it is on this material fact of existence that affect, and anything we might call an ethical stance, is grounded. Both significant affection and an ethical stance (whether on prosthetic legs or not) are based on the lived sense and feeling of the human body not merely as a material object one possesses and analyzes among other objects but as a material subject that experiences and feels its own objectivity, that has the capacity to bleed and suffer and hurt for others because it can sense its own possibilities for suffering and pain. If we don’t keep this subjective kind of bodily sense in mind as we negotiate our technoculture, we may very well—and perhaps all too soon—objectify ourselves to death. It is only by embracing the lived body in all its vulnerability and imperfection, by valuing the limitations as well as the possibilities of our flesh, and by accepting the mortality that gives us gravity and grace that we will get out of this—or any—century alive.

25. Woodward, “From Virtual Cyborgs,” 51.

Is Any Body Home?

Embodied Imagination and Visible Evictions

The body tends to be brought forward in its most extreme and absolute form only on behalf of a cultural artifact or symbolic fragment or made thing . . . that is without any other basis in material reality: that is, it is only brought forward when there is a crisis of substantiation. —ELAINE SCARRY, *The Body in Pain*

To say we've lost touch with our bodies these days is not to say we've lost sight of them. Indeed, there seems to be an inverse ratio between *seeing* our bodies and *feeling* them: the more aware we are of ourselves as the cultural artifacts, symbolic fragments, and made things that we see in—and as—images, the less we seem to sense the intentional complexity and richness of the corporeal existence that substantiates them. In a culture like ours, so preoccupied with images of bodies and bodies of images, we tend to forget that both our bodies and our vision have lived dimensions that are not reducible to the merely visible. Indeed, our far-sighted focus on the objective artifacts of vision has led to an unfortunate and paradoxical oversight. Rather than coming to intimate recognition of the substance and gravity that thicken our images and give them existential meaning and ethical weight, we have gotten lost in the superficial and insubstantial outlines of existence, in the optical illusion that what we look like is identical to what we are.¹

In this chapter I want to consider the correspondence (or lack of it) between our subjective imagination of ourselves and its objective imaging—

1. In *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), Elaine Scarry is apposite: "Those who have attempted to describe the experienced difference between 'an image' and 'a perception'—Hume, Jaspers, Sartre—have all agreed that the perception has a 'vivacity' (from *vivere*, to live—the sensorially 'alive' experience of seeing, smelling, touching, tasting; thus one's own aliveness is experienced and seems to certify the object's reality, its 'vivacity') that the 'image' simply does not have. The image, to use Sartre's description, is by comparison 'depthless,' 'two-dimensional,' 'impoverished,' 'dry,' 'thin'" (147). (For the epigraph that begins the present chapter see 127.) Here it is worth glossing Scarry and her philosophical forebears to emphasize the phenomenological distinction between vision as a subjective *capacity* and perceptual *activity* and the visible as an objective and perceptual *product*.

my thoughts initially provoked both by my own body's forced recognition of the irreducibility of the one to the other and by a "historic" cultural moment in which, suffering a form of vision that dominates and reduces subjective feelings to objective images, the bodies of cultural others attempted (with only partial success) to contest this reduction in the Enlightened eyes of both the television camera and the public sphere. In the first instance I refer to a personal event: the above-the-knee amputation of my left leg. Paradoxically, this surgical alienation of part of my body ultimately put me in phenomenological touch with the rest of it—in what was, for me, an unprecedented intimacy that came to know vision beyond its production of the objectively visible. As I will elaborate later, learning to walk with a prosthetic leg became an activity grounded more in my subjective bodily imagination than in my objective body image. In the second instance I refer to a cultural event: the "Million Man March" on Washington, D.C., that occurred on October 16, 1995. Confronted with what seemed an exceedingly peculiar treatment of the march by the media, I found myself fascinated and saddened by the incommensurability of the two ways in which the bodies of the black American men who participated were "counted" and "accounted for." Whatever the controversy over the specific politics of the event (Farrakhan's leadership and the exclusion of women), its meaning was articulated publicly as an opposition between the objective sight and the subjective imagination of lived bodies. In terms of objective sight, emphasis was on a quantitative body count of marchers who physically responded to the call; in terms of subjective imagination, however, emphasis was on bodies that "counted" in a qualitatively rich experience of ethical responsibility that demanded narrative, not numeracy, for its articulation.²

One a personal confrontation with the challenge of my own body to the self-distancing objectifications of its own vision, the other a social confrontation between bodies made simultaneously—but incommensurably—intelligible by an alienated and objective response on one side and by a sense of communal and subjective responsibility on the other, these two instances foreground the hegemony of the merely visible and a consequent impoverishment of vision in contemporary American culture. Although these events may seem worlds apart and certainly are not reducible each to the other, and although neither seems immediately to engage the current concerns of

2. Relevant to the Million Man March, in *The Body in Pain* Scarry speaks of the body as it is used and valued by both "sides" in war and posits the difference between two models that operate on *each* side in the contestation but are *reversible* in terms of what existential phenomenology would articulate as "both sides" of the body (the "my" side and the "your" side of it). Of cultural belief in the value of the sacrifice of human bodies in war she writes, "[I]n one the belief belongs to the person whose body is used in its confirmation; in the other, the belief belongs to a person other than the person whose body is used to confirm it" (149).

media studies, both my personal experience of learning to walk and the social experience of the Million Man Marchers assert the lived body's material reality as something more than the merely visible. Both also attest to the fact that the lived body (and, with it, vision) is always lived dialectically, dialogically, and ambiguously from both its "my" side and its "your"—or "other"—side. That is, materially embodied and visual beings, we are always and simultaneously *personal subjects of vision* and *social objects for vision*. These two events, then, highlight the way in which the objectively visible stands as only one side of vision and needs to be thickened by the subjective and value-laden side of vision that exceeds and enfolds vision's visible productions. Both events remand us, as media scholars (and human beings), to the rich *corporeal in-formation* of our images—an in-formation from which we have become visually abstracted and alienated.

Our contemporary image culture (as well as our contemporary theory) has increasingly reified our bodies as manageable matter. We have become fixated on the appearance and objectivity of the visible—and, as a consequence, both images and bodies have lost their other dimensions and values. Here Jean Baudrillard is apposite:

Everyone seeks their *look*. Since it is no longer possible to base any claim on one's own existence, there is nothing for it but to perform an *appearing act* without concerning oneself with *being*—or even with *being seen*. So it is not: I exist, I am here! but rather: I am visible, I am an image—look! look! This is not even narcissism, merely an extraversion without depth, a sort of self-promoting ingenuousness whereby everyone becomes the manager of their own appearance.³

Thus we live in what has been called "the age of the world picture,"⁴ "the society of the spectacle,"⁵ and "the frenzy of the visible."⁶ The very visibility of the world and ourselves in represented images "drives everything together in the unity of that which is thus given the character of an *object*."⁷ Which is to say that contemporary image culture (and theory) has qualified and transformed the essential structures that constitute the duality of our subjective and objective modalities of being as necessarily *objectivating*—that is open,

3. Jean Baudrillard, "Transsexuality," in *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena*, trans. James Benedict (London: Verso, 1993), 23.

4. Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 115–54. For Heidegger *world picture* "does not mean a picture of the world but *the world conceived and grasped as picture*" (129; emphasis added).

5. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1983).

6. Jean-Luc Comolli, "Machines of the Visible," in *The Cinematic Apparatus*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis and Stephen Heath (New York: St. Martin's, 1980), 122.

7. Heidegger, "Age of the World Picture," 150 (emphasis added).

noncoincident, and intersubjective—into merely sufficient and reductive structures of *objectification* and *reification*.⁸ That is, our bodies have become increasingly distanced and alienated, increasingly viewed as “resources,” and increasingly lived as “things” to be seen, managed, and mastered. In this regard I remember an extraordinary billboard advertisement promoting a Health Maintenance Organization I saw some years ago. Displaying a sleeping newborn’s face (a pacifier in its mouth), the sign advised: “You’ve been with your body since day one. You should be the boss.”⁹ In this context, as Heidegger says, “the Open becomes an object.”¹⁰ In sum, our image culture’s dominant mode of foregrounding the *body-object* and regarding it as coincident and synonymous with the *embodied subject* constitutes a particular phenomeno-logic and is a consequence of specific cultural practices that could—and should—be other than they are.

I promise to return eventually to the two events that generated this essay and had particular significance for me in terms of the lived body’s personal and social relations to vision and the visible. First, however, I think it important to consider our current fascination and preoccupation with “the” body in the context of a more general and grounding phenomenology of embodiment. That is, in what follows I want to foreground the way in which our culture’s reduction of vision to the merely visible constitutes our *epistemological* relation to our own bodies and the bodies of others as impoverished, alienated, and two-dimensional—and, conversely, I want to explore those structures that constitute our *ontological* relation to our bodies as rich, ambiguous, and multidimensional.

I

Both empirically and philosophically our bodies are the essential *premises* of our being in the world. Metaphorically, we might think of our bodies in an objectivated way as that part of ourselves that stands substantially as our “home”—that is, as a place that protects us and is familiar and intimately

8. Although the terms *alienation*, *objectification*, and *reification* are quite familiar to theorists living in late capitalist and postmodern culture, the term *objectivation* is perhaps less so. As will become clear in what follows, objectivation as a concept allows a distinction between the *necessary* and *intersubjective* experience of having the capacity to see oneself objectively as one might be seen by an other self (that is, as a material, substantial, embodied self intentionally occupying space as well as time) and the more alienated, distanced, and merely *sufficient* experience of the subject *reduced to object* as an effect of a particular economic and social formation. For a clear and useful differentiation of these four terms see Peter Berger and Stanley Pullberg, “Reification and the Sociological Critique of Consciousness,” *History and Theory* 4 (1965): 196–211.

9. Access HMO, Blue Shield of California.

10. Martin Heidegger, “What Are Poets For?” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 110.

responsive to our intentions and desires; and where our consciousness “hangs its hat,” where it is concretely spatialized and lives in a relative state of transparency, unselfconsciousness, and comfort. In felicitous circumstances, then, our bodies are *lived as* our permanent if mutable address, as our primary if self-displacing abode, as—whether sleek Air-Stream or chunky Winnebago—our quintessential mobile home. In other circumstances, however, our bodies are less *lived as* ourselves than they are *lived in* by ourselves—the “in” to be distinguished from “as” for its marking the movement from self-objectivation to self-objectification and an increased sense of noncoincidence between one’s consciousness and one’s body. Metaphorically, in these instances, we feel “housed” in our bodies. That is, in a more objectified mode we experience our bodies as providing the concrete premises in which each of us, as a relative—if intimate—“other,” resides. Indeed, these days, with a certain cheerful American can-do pragmatism many of us have turned our bodies into exteriorized and reified “house beautification” projects: we spend our off-hours getting them into shape, giving them a new face, painting and remodeling them in quite the same house-proud and self-satisfied manner in which homeowners treat their prized and objectified secondary dwelling places.

In infelicitous circumstances, however, many of us have also experienced our bodies neither as *lived* nor even as *lived in*.¹¹ Rather, we metaphorically apprehend them as a material limit, a “prison-house” to be *endured*. At such times (most commonly in the physical experience of illness but also in emotional experiences such as humiliation) our bodies are not transparently our mobile homes, taking us where we want to go, enabling us access to and commerce with the world—nor do we take them up as things that, like houses, belong to us, that we possess in the pride or despair that attaches to the ownership of a perpetual “fixer-upper.” Indeed, in the worst circumstances our bodies seem not to belong to us at all. As Marquard Smith writes: “A body is by no means owned by the body inhabiting it. It is not proper to, the property of, itself.”¹² In this state our bodies seem neither the home nor hearth of our being but, instead, the property of another (“property” referring not

11. An entire companion essay could be written here on the uncanny in relation to our home-bodies insofar as we experience them in a certain state of dis-ease: at once, both utterly familiar and estranged, utterly our home and an alien if recognizable place. As we now well know, *uncanny* in German is the “unheimlich,” the “un-homeliness” that is nonetheless disturbingly familiar. See Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” in *Studies in Parapsychology*, ed. Philip Rieff (New York: Collier, 1963), 21–30. In relation to the present discussion, it would seem to me that the uncanny emerges at the moment of transformation, when the body as familiar home changes into an estranged and “other” thing.

12. Marquard Smith, “The Uncertainty of Placing: Prosthetic Bodies in Sculptural Design, and Unhomely Dwelling in Marc Quinn, James Gillingham, and Sigmund Freud,” *New Formations* 46 (spring 2002): 101.

only to one's body perceived as the "real estate" of an other but also as seeming to have nothing to do with one's self but for the protocols and mediation of commerce). Our bodies, insofar as we endure them, seem an objective and exteriorized physical limit holding us—our consciousness, intentionality, and desire—captive from without, constraining and restraining us from doing the things we want to do and being all that we think we can be. This is "the" body (perhaps ours, but not us) experienced as a containment cell that would inhibit our intentional movement and deny our volition.¹³ This is the body experienced as a prison-house of semiotically marked flesh whose cultural display of the objectively material substance of our subjective existence—skin pigmentation, the shape of our eyelids, the sag of a breast or belly, the size of breasts or penis, the lack of a leg—constrains us like so many iron bars that would keep us from the free and open play of both our existential and social possibilities.

Our bodies, then, can be experienced as home, as house, and as prison. As "home" it is the objectivated place that intimately grounds us in a felicitous condition of enablement, that provides our original and initial opening on and access to the world, and that gives dimension and sense and value to our lives through its motility and senses and gravity. As "house" it is the place in which we live in a variable relationship and degree of hermeneutic objectification, that we decorate and display for the edification of both ourselves and others, that confounds us with problems and expense but allows us still a certain familiarity, a place to hang our hats, to let it all hang out. And as "prison-house" it is the reified and alien place that grounds us in negativity and denies us access to the world in an infelicitous condition of constraint and discipline, that locks us up in a room everyone else regards as ours but that we understand as really belonging to "others."

Until the amputation that shocked and moved me to a deep intimacy with it, I tended to live my body from a disapproving distance. Immersed in my culture and qualified by its nominations and standards, I looked at my body as problematically female, unsatisfactorily short, uncontrollably awkward, and never, never thin enough—so, as a perverse comfort and reminder that I was not alone in experiencing my body as a prison-house, for years I carried around in my wallet an unaddressed postcard on whose front a crudely drawn figure shouted the caption: "Help! I'm trapped in a human body!" Indeed, in contemporary (self) surveillance culture, how many among us—men as well as women—feel at home in our bodies rather than trapped by

13. For related discussion of alienation from one's own body, particularly in states of pain and disease, see the chapter "The Dys-appearing Body," in Drew Leder, *The Absent Body* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 69–99. Leder writes, "The disruption and constriction of one's habitual world thus correlates with a new relation to one's body. In pain, the body or a certain part of the body emerges as an *alien presence*" (76).

them? (Naïvely, I suppose that dancers and athletes must, but I also realize that because they perform for the eyes of others and are always pushing themselves, they not only watch and judge their bodies even more than I do but are also likely to be much more aware and frustrated than I am by their own physical limitations and bodily recalcitrance.)

Indeed, at this point in time who among us is “at home” in our bodies? We live in a still-Enlightened culture that, despite its current post-Enlightenment fascination with and fetishization of “the body,” regards the body as an alienated object, quite separate from—if housing—the subjective consciousness that would discipline it into visible shape or visibly shape it into a discipline. This disciplining the body into visible shape and shaping it into a discipline is not only attributable to film and media studies and cultural studies; it is pervasive. In a critique by phenomenological sociologist Jack Katz, for example, we read the following:

Anyone who briefly glances at the last decade’s literature of social theory and interactionist sociology will see volumes of works on “the body.” But like the writings of both depth and academic psychology, this sociological work is overwhelmingly two-dimensional and rationalistic. The focus is either on the body as represented and read in culture (in ads, in movies and novels, in the content of talk about the body, or more generally, in “discourse”), or the body as manipulated to give off indications about the self or one’s place in an emerging sequence of collaborative action. The body so regarded is either a mannequin, a billboard, a neon sign, a puppet, or some kind of symbolic text. The person is not seen as embodying a moving comprehension of various depths and regions of self.¹⁴

Thus, how many of us, after a hard day at the academy lecturing about the deplorable colonization, technologization, and reification of “the body” in “the society of the spectacle,” go off (often for all the wrong reasons) to treadmills, Stairmasters, and Cybex machines to make that body hard? We have images in our heads of “ripped” pecs and abs, oblivious to (or perhaps aware and proud of?) the hostility and violence of such description. We abhor and make fun of (because we secretly desire?) the “gym-bunny” body foregrounded, for example, by Demi Moore in *G.I. Jane* (Ridley Scott, 1996); we are simultaneously fascinated by the discipline it must have taken to achieve such a rigorous outside and horrified by our sense that, given its rigor, this is a body that admits no inside. (One critic, commenting on the film, writes that “Moore has tooled her body so that it resembles a gleaming hunk of military hardware—stomach muscles like iron, breasts like B-52s”—and correlatively notes the star’s “humorless self-regard,” her inability “to

14. Jack Katz, *How Emotions Work* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 334.

crack a smile.”)¹⁵ In sum, as we teach or cite Donna Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto” (a work that privileged not the hard fixity but the fluid mutability of the cyborg body), how many of us fantasize about having our own home gym and our own personal trainer?¹⁶

This is certainly not to deny a real physical and psychic need for exercise, particularly in a sedentary culture peopled by both academics and couch potatoes (who, in film and media studies, are too often one and the same).¹⁷ Nor is it to deny that sweating feels good, even if it doesn’t look good, or that some people exercise to avoid heart attacks or to get an endorphin rush. Rather, it is to suggest that too often our central concern is to create an impossibly *extroverted* body whose investments have become completely exteriorized and performative, a body that we paradoxically have trouble seeing “as it is” because we are no longer ourselves in touch with it. Certainly, the rise of eating disorders (particularly in women) is blatant evidence of this alienating—and blinding—extroversion, even though by now it is old (if still highly disturbing) news. More novel is the increase in a body disorder medical researchers have named “muscle dysmorphia”—a reverse form of anorexia nervosa. Afflicting more and more physically healthy people (men as well as women), the disorder is one in which “a muscle-bound body-builder,” informed by “an irrational fear that they may look unhealthy or puny to others,” will “look in the mirror and see himself or herself as out of shape”; those with the disorder are so preoccupied with their bodies that “they [give] up desirable jobs, careers, and social engagements to spend more time in the gym.”¹⁸ As Baudrillard notes (in a different if related context), “What is sought today is not so much health, which is an organic equilibrium, as an ephemeral, hygienic and promotional radiance from the body—much more a performance than ideal state. In terms of fashion and

15. Owen Gleiberman, “Demi Seminude Ain’t Enough,” *Entertainment Weekly*, July 12, 1996, 38, 40.

16. Donna Haraway, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s,” *Socialist Review* 80 (1985): 65–107.

17. Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna Shalala publicly reported in 1996 that the number of Americans who were out of shape was increasing and that, paradoxically, this increase could be attributed, in part, to the rise of fitness centers: most Americans cannot afford memberships and thus do not exercise at all. “Everyone feels that they have to join a health club,” she is reported as saying, “but they can rake the lawn or wash the car” (KFWB News Radio, July 12, 1996). This “feeling” the need for a *technology of fitness*—as opposed to *bodily action in the lived world*—corresponds to the increasing belief in the body as an object to be manipulated.

18. Kim A. McDonald, “A ’90s-Style Disorder: ‘Muscle Dysmorphia,’” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Nov. 18, 1997, A17. An interviewed doctor predicts “that as more men and women take up weightlifting, ‘muscle dysmorphia will become the body-image disorder of the ’90s, just as eating disorders leapt into public awareness in the ’80s.’”

appearances, what we seek is less beauty or attractiveness than the right *look*.¹⁹

Thus, despite the academic embrace of our so-called visual culture as an object of study, it is much more accurate to suggest that we actually live in the reductiveness of a “visible culture.” This is no small distinction—for if we are to understand vision in its fullest, embodied sense, it seems imperative that we move from merely *thinking* about “the” body (that is, about bodies always posited in their objective mode, always seen from the position of another) to also *feeling* what it is to be “my” body (lived by me uniquely from my side of it, even as it is always also simultaneously available to and lived by others on their side of it). It is not only personally but also politically important that we inform critical thought and cultural studies with a phenomenological understanding of the body that includes and resonates with our own bodies—that is, bodies not merely objectively beheld but also subjectively lived. Unlike the beheld body, this lived body provides the material premises for meaning—giving ethical gravity to semiotic and textual production and circulation, serving and far too often suffering as their very ground. In sum, we need to remind ourselves that our bodies are lived and make meaning in ways that inform and include but also far exceed the particular sense and image-making capacities of vision. This corrective is critical to a culture in which vision dominates our sensory access to the world and in which a discrete and reductive emphasis on visibility and body image greatly overdetermines our more expansive possibilities for seeing and making sense of our enworldedness. In such a visible culture the sensual thickness of lived experience has been thinned to the superficiality of two dimensions, and we have lost touch with what really matters about ourselves and others. What we need, however, is not to rid ourselves of images but to flesh them out.

II

“Help! I’m trapped in a human body!” As it happens, the figure on that postcard I once carried was male, but this in no way forestalled, and perhaps even added to, the recognition I felt every time I saw it—for the figure’s maleness pointed to a carnal incarceration to which everyone was condemned. To be sure, given a person’s reasonable state of physical health, this alienated sense of being trapped in one’s own body is historical and acculturated; nonetheless, it is also grounded on the necessarily objective—and objectivating—condition of being both a self-conscious and objectively physical subject. Here I

19. Baudrillard, “Transsexuality,” 23.

am going to go out on the one humanist limb remaining to me (my prosthetic limb is clearly “post-poststructuralist”) and make some universal claims about human embodied existence. In general, and barring extreme neurological or psychic pathology, every human body lives its subjective and objective existence both transparently and opaquely, both transcendentally and immanently. Our bodies are, at once, the transparent enabling power and “zero-degree” of our agency and yet are also opaque—within our agency, yes, but certainly in excess of our volition.

This is another way of saying that we are not transcendental subjects. Subjective consciousness is borne into the world objectively embodied—always materially concrete, finite, and situated. Thus, it has an incomplete and delimited view of itself. It trips itself up. It encounters not only worldly resistance but also self-resistance. Our corporeal materiality always ultimately grounds us even as it allows us to continually displace, disassemble, and reassemble ourselves. Thus, everybody lives always as an object as well as a subject in the world, and every body is as much a puzzle and obstacle to the consciousness that lives it as that body is also a transparent or pleasurable means by which consciousness can have, experience, and value a world at all. “Consciousness is not a pure self-presence,” Gary Madison emphasizes: “the subject is present to and knows itself only through the mediation of the body, which is to say that presence is always mediated, i.e., is indirect and incomplete.”²⁰

Among the modes by which our substantial bodies mediate and enable consciousness access to both itself and the world is our sense of *vision*. Vision instantiates our knowledge of existential objectivity in that its structure constitutes a necessary and critical distance between the seer and the seen. Maurice Merleau-Ponty tells us that “to see is to *have at a distance*.”²¹ Thus, although vision gives us one modality by which we can take objective possession of ourselves, the world, and others, this possession is both partial and ambiguous. Visual self-possession allows us objective knowledge of ourselves as visible bodies, but we are significantly revealed as distant not only from others but also from our own consciousness and our own substantiality—insofar as, reflectively, we become two-dimensional body-objects under our own eyes. That is, our vision removes and places us at a distance from the very incarnation we presently live and on which we gaze as an externalized, estranged, and reductive version of ourselves. From this perspective we are both objectivated and objectified: necessarily objectivated in that we are conscious of being never completely coincident with

20. Gary Brent Madison, “Did Merleau-Ponty Have a Theory of Perception?” in *Merleau-Ponty and Postmodernism*, ed. Thomas Busch (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), 92–94.

21. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” trans. Carleton Dallery, in *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James M. Edie (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 166.

or self-disclosed to ourselves, never seeing ourselves in all our lived dimension—and unnecessarily objectified in that, in the hegemonic partiality of vision, we have increasingly forgotten that we are more than visible body-objects.

Our indirect, incomplete, and ambiguous presence and absence to ourselves emerges in the most basic and intimate processes of bodily existence. Paradoxically, our overarching sense of self-transparency and the correspondent feeling we have of self-coincidence require a necessary distance between our consciousness and our material existence. Indeed, we could not function “transparently” if we were completely and fully at home in our bodies. Not only might we trip over our own feet if we were too aware of all the motor tasks they accomplished in the walk from here to the door, but we also might not even have the intentional capacity to walk if the blood pulsing through our veins, the air inflating and collapsing our lungs, and our digestive juices dissolving breakfast became the primary focus of our consciousness. The door, the world, our intentions would recede against the overwhelming horizon of our own material processes. Indeed, sometimes conscious awareness of even one of these processes can paralyze us into a frightening bodily self-absorption or bring on a panic attack. In order to act in the world, we must to a certain degree be noncoincident with and ignorant of our bodies, not feel or listen to them too carefully or too deeply. Ultimately, our physical self-transparency and ease depend on a certain correlative bodily opacity. Indeed, as Drew Leder suggests, “While in one sense the body is the most abiding and inescapable presence in our lives, it is also essentially characterized by absence.”²²

In a paradoxical way, then, we are most “at home” in our bodies when we are most absent from them—that is, when they ground us in the world as a transparent capacity for significant action and sensible meaning. As children we pick at the scabs on our knees, hermeneutically probing for the secrets beneath, but at the same time, we thoughtlessly, transparently, plunge our bodies/ourselves into the living of our lives. Even as adults self-consciously immersed in the “society of the spectacle,” even as particular persons who have had our bodies marked by others (and often ourselves) as somehow inadequate, inferior, lacking, we still live our bodies thoughtlessly and transparently more often than we think (even if less often than we might). As Merleau-Ponty characterizes it: “My body is the fabric into which all objects are woven, and it is, at least in relation to the perceived world, the general instrument of my ‘comprehension.’”²³ Furthermore, he notes: “I am not in front of

22. Leder, *The Absent Body*, 1. For discussion of this bodily opacity as essentially enabling see esp. chap. 2, “The Recessive Body,” 36–68.

23. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), 235.

my body, I am in it, or rather *I am it*.”²⁴ It is in this ontological sense, although always qualified to varying degree by cultural epistemes, that all of us are generally at home in our bodies and at ease with them. That is, *our bodies are ourselves*: they are not things that trap us, as suggested by the fellow on my postcard; rather, however finite, situated, and delimited, they are modes of access and capacities that enable us. At the ontological level, then, it is usually not until we suffer illness, physical incapacity, or social discrimination that our bodies become major hermeneutic problems and that we objectify (rather than merely objectivate) them. Awareness of the gap between the intentionality of our consciousness and the bodies that we are emerges precisely at the moment when our material existence in the objective and always social world nonpluses us, undermines us, overruns us, or stops us short.

Usually, however, and in the most mundane ways, our material existence both grounds and motivates us, and we take it so for granted that our own bodies are not lived primarily as visible sights but rather as sense-making sites for constituting meaning and realizing both ourselves and a world. Of course, as I write this, immersed in a culture that marks and discriminates bodies by their visible properties in a variety of consequential ways, I feel extremely uncomfortable—even insincere—foregrounding our bodies as generally transparent and at ease in the world. I am, after all, aware of the dubious transparency and ease of being “white.” And I am also too often intensely aware of my present embodiment as an aging female with an artificial leg. Yet even contemporary culture’s heightened preoccupation with, reification of, and discrimination against certain bodies is foregrounded against the transparency of bodies that we generally live without thought. “Our” body (even as it may be visually possessed by others) is a body whose image we forget in its actions, a body we ignore in the synthetic mobilizations of nerves and fluid and mass that articulate our being and intentions in the world. Thus, most of the time, most of us walk to the door without a thought. And as we walk, we think thoughts *without* a thought of the body that transparently makes not only our walking but also our thoughts possible. Thus, as Merleau-Ponty tells us:

I move my body without even knowing which muscles and nerve paths should intervene or where I should look for the instruments of this action. I want to go over there, and here I am, without access to the inhuman secret of the bodily mechanism, without having adjusted it to the objective requirements of the task or to the position of the goal defined in relation to some system of coordinates. I look where the goal is, I am drawn by it, and the whole bodily machine does what must be done for me to get there. Everything happens in

24. *Ibid.*, 150 (emphasis added).

that human world of perception and gesture, but my “geographical” or “physical” body obeys the requirements of this little drama which never ceases to produce a thousand natural miracles in my body.²⁵

These “thousand natural miracles” were something I retrospectively treasured as, learning to incorporate and walk with a prosthetic leg, I had to consciously direct my body in each move of what previously had been a transparent action. Now, however, even if with a cane, I too walk to the door without thought of my walking, at home in both my body and the world.²⁶

Here I have been emphasizing the general ontological ease we generally feel as lived bodies or, more precisely, our *easement*—a term that better describes the ambiguity, accommodation, and slippage on which our “homey” sense of bodily transparency is grounded.²⁷ At this point, however, I want to affirm this ontological easement of usually feeling at home with our bodies/ourselves through three anecdotal narratives of variously caused dis-ease with one’s lived body. The first narrative foregrounds a *neurological disease* that evicts consciousness from its home body through the subject’s loss of proprioception and thus a sense of being embodied. The second and third narratives return us, as promised, to the embodied events that inaugurated this essay. That is, the second foregrounds my *physical disability* and my initial dis-ease in learning to walk with a prosthetic limb, as well as how this process, paradoxically, prompted and enabled a reconciliation of my body and its image, thus dramatizing the possibility of “coming home” to our “*corps propre*” (as Merleau-Ponty calls it throughout his work). Finally, culminating in the ambivalent accounts of the Million Man March and their meanings, the third narrative foregrounds a *cultural disorder* through three related anecdotes of racism: a

25. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. John O’Neill (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 77.

26. In this sense there is only a difference of degree between my conscious struggle to incorporate my prosthetic limb so it will realize my intention to walk and a “full-bodied” athlete’s conscious struggle to match her body to her aspirations. Thus, in “The Merging of Bodies and Artifacts in the Social Contract,” in *Culture on the Brink: Ideologies of Technology*, ed. Gretchen Bender and Timothy Druckrey (Seattle: Bay Press, 1994), what Elaine Scarry says in relation to the hermeneutics of dealing with the artifactual nature of a prosthetic limb applies as well to the ontological hermeneutics of our subjective relation to our objective embodiment: “We continually incorporate, then repudiate, then reincorporate the artifact. Etymologically, the word ‘limb’ is from the Latin ‘limbus,’ for border or edging” (97).

27. Definitions of *easement* suggest slippage between what would be an exact self-coincidence resulting in total transparency of one’s body. Not only does the word mean “[r]elief from pain, discomfort, or any burden; alleviation,” rather than absolute removal of the pain or “burden” of being embodied, but it also means “accommodation” as well as “the right or privilege of using something not one’s own; an entitlement to rights over another’s land.” See *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. 1, ed. Lesley Brown (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 776.

social dis-ease that reduces the gravity and substance of the lived body and relocates consciousness to the (“colored”) surface of the skin.

These narratives all differ from each other in both kind and degree. Thus, it is not my intention here to suggest that they are in any way reducible to each other. The neurological loss of proprioception is not equivalent to the surgical loss of a leg, and neither can be equated to the social loss of the very substance of personhood that is a consequence of racism. Nonetheless, although quite different as to the cause, nature, and consequences of the bodily dis-ease they demonstrate, these narratives share a common theme: each is a recounting of bodily experience that foregrounds the radical rupture that can occur within the psychosomatic whole that is the generally transparent correlation of “consciousness” and “body.” Furthermore, each provokes us to reflect on the various and ambiguous ways *vision* operates in this correlation or its rupture. In sum, these anecdotal accounts dramatize the radical eviction of consciousness from the comfortable—and generally unconscious—assumption of its material premises.

The first narrative, about an *ontological* dis-ease with one’s body, concerns what clinician (and phenomenologist) Oliver Sacks calls the “neurology of identity.”²⁸ In *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales*, Sacks presents the case of a neurologically damaged patient he calls “the Disembodied Lady.” A victim of a sudden attack of pervasive polyneuritis, Christina loses nearly all her proprioception—that sixth and grounding sense we have of ourselves as positioned and embodied in worldly space, that sense that could be said to provide us our body image but for the fact that such an image emerges not from the objective sight of our bodies (or directly from vision) but from the invisible and subjective *lived feeling* of our material being. Sacks tells us of Christina’s physical comportment in the days after the disease’s onset:

Standing was impossible—unless she looked down at her feet. She could hold nothing in her hands, and they “wandered”—unless she kept an eye on them. When she reached out for something, or tried to feed herself, her hands would miss, or overshoot wildly, as if some essential control or coordination was gone. She could scarcely even sit up—her body “gave way.” Her face was oddly expressionless and slack, her jaw fell open, even her vocal posture was gone.²⁹

Indeed, given her sudden eviction from her body and the loss of nearly all of what we might call her subjective bodily imagination, Christina consequently becomes highly dependent on her objective sense of vision. She eventually

28. Oliver Sacks, preface to *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), viii.

29. Sacks, “The Disembodied Lady,” in *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, 45. Subsequent references will be cited in the text.

learns to use her eyes to position or, more aptly, pose her body in the world, to operate it and move it about as an objective thing. Her ontological alienation from her body is chilling—but so is her (only) recourse to its calculated and studied reclamation, one that acts out in dire extremity the bodily reification celebrated in that HMO billboard: “You’ve been with your body since day one. You should be the boss.”

Sacks points out that our subjectively felt and grounding “sense of the body . . . is given by three things: vision, balance organs (the vestibular system), and proprioception” (47). Under normal (that is, nonpathological) circumstances, all these modes of sense-making and simultaneous access to the world and ourselves work cooperatively. In Christina’s situation vision dominates out of necessity. However, although it allows her “some-thing” of a body and thus something of a life (for she is never cured), the objectifying sense of a vision dissociated from the subjective sense of proprioception is not sufficient to allow her to repossess her body as home and to abide in its material premises. She tells Sacks, in a voice he hears as ghostly and flat, “I can’t feel my body. I feel weird—disembodied” (45). Recalling Merleau-Ponty, we could say that Christina feels she is in front of her body, rather than in it or being it. Furthermore, consonant with the philosopher’s characterization of vision as a discrete form of access to the world in which “to see is to have at a distance,” we could say that Christina has possession of herself only at a distance—initially as a horrified spectator, eventually as an expert director and actor. Sacks tells us: “She could at first do nothing without using her eyes, and collapsed in a helpless heap the moment she closed them. She had, at first, to monitor herself by vision, looking carefully at each part of her body as it moved, using an almost painful conscientiousness and care” (48). Initially clumsy, her every movement the result of visually calculated artifice, Christina goes on to become more proficient, her movement more modulated and eventually, although still vision dependent, more automatic and—here the word takes on a deep resonance—accomplished. Sacks describes her bodily posture as appearing “statuesque,” artful, forced, willful, histrionic; her voice, too, emerges as stacy and theatrical, the voice of a performer.

Although she eventually returned to her family and work, Christina’s visual possession of her visible body in no way replaced her nonvisual and proprioceptive sense of her body as she once “lived” it. Although corporeal, she remained unable to *incorporate* her consciousness, and thus her body was never again her abode. As Sacks points out, her visual skills at objective self-direction “made life possible—they did not make it normal” (50). Christina “continues to feel . . . that her body is dead, not-real, not-hers—she cannot appropriate it to herself” (51). Furthermore, watching home movies of herself made before her ontological crisis, she can’t identify with the person she recognizes on the screen. She tells Sacks not only that she can’t remember her but that she can’t even *imagine* her. Losing, with her sense of proprio-

ception, the fundamental, organic mooring of identity, Christina has lost that visual and invisible part of vision: her bodily *imagination*. Living one's body from within—as subjectively “me” and “mine”—has no dimension or meaning and thus no reality for her, and she describes herself as feeling “pithed” like a frog—eviscerated. Living her body from without with the aid of vision's objective vigilance, she feels evicted, thrown outside herself—feeling, to a radical extent most of us will never experience, derealized.

What strikes me most as I retell Christina's experience is its parallels with and yet reversals of my own. That is, it was the visible aspect of vision that saved her life, helped her walk, gave her the only (re)possession of herself she was likely to achieve, visibly realized her against her annihilating proprioceptive and imaginative derealization. Alternatively, when I first started physical therapy, the task at hand (or, more precisely, leg) was to realize a visibly inanimate and artificial (hence derealized) limb, to incorporate and animate its dead weight into the proprioceptive and felt reality not only of my bodily intentions but also of my bodily imagination. To do so, however, I needed to learn to give up possessing myself only at a distance, as a visible object given to the sight of others and myself from outside myself. Initially, the therapist put me in front of a mirror so I could see myself and supposedly adjust my body according to my visible image. (We've all seen this scene in movies: the patient grasping the aluminum bars that frame a long, narrow walkway paved in rubber, stiff-leggedly lurching toward a full-length mirror.)

However, as a film scholar expert in evaluating visible images and a phenomenologist versed in (and often averse to) Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, it was truly epiphanic that the mirror was for me—from the first—a highly charged and negative site of *méconnaissance*, or misrecognition. That is, my visibility in it taught me nothing. Indeed, its location “on the wrong side” of me was confusing, and I would get my feet mixed up, falter, and fall. Not only did looking at my mirror image demand that I find the shape and rhythm of my steps solely from my objective and distanced outlines but also that I perform them in reverse. Thus, in order to learn to walk, I had to stop looking at myself in the mirror. I was forced to reject my location “there” in my exteriorized “Imaginary” reflection and to refind myself “here” in the supposedly unspeakable and invisible visual space of the “Real” that preoccupied my body. In sum, trying to properly locate, sense, and imagine my gravity, balance, comportment, and capacity for movement, I found I could not stand the distanced sight of my own body if I wanted to stand the actual site of it. (Intellectually, this is no small pun—and, as an intellectual, I found regrounding myself no small achievement.)

Here, I was radically different from Christina, who had lost her proprioception and could only sense her body through her eyes. What helped me walk was not the sight of my body or the artificial limb given to me outside

myself but rather my subjective imagination of the bodily arrangement or *comportment* informing my actions from “my side” of my body as I tried to incorporate and intend the prosthetic leg. Of course, like Christina, I too had to initially direct and manage my body to learn to walk again. There were all sorts of physical things I had to learn, and because I had always looked at myself from the outside, I was suddenly confronted with what seemed an impossible task of bodily coordination—impossible not only because I had to think what my body had thoughtlessly accomplished before but also because I had much less intimacy with my body than I did with its image.

Ultimately I learned to walk by locating myself and being on “my” side of my body—that is, not by *seeing* my body as an image of me but by *feeling* my body image as me. I averted my eyes from the superficial form of my visible mirror image and imagined instead—and predominantly—the shape that my other modes of self-awareness and access to the world made. I learned my body—my substance, weight, and dimension; my balance, my gravity, my tension and motility—not as an objective and visible *thing* but as a subjective and synoptic *ensemble of material capacities* for being. It was this re-cognition of my body that helped me incorporate and transform the objectivity of a prosthetic leg into the subjectivity of a leg I could stand on, into *my* leg. In sum, I could not fall back on seeing myself as I was given in my image, or I might fall literally; rather, I had to take myself up imaginatively and feel my comportment as meaningfully and substantially present. This was an exact reversal of Christina’s task. Lacking bodily imagination, Christina was forced to take up her objective and visible image so as to mimic a meaningful comportment and realize the existence and possibility of bodily capacities she could not actually or substantially feel. Conversely, much of my ability to intentionally realize—to incorporate—my prosthetic leg resulted from the actual presence of a subjective bodily imagination experienced under the signs of objective—that is, visible—absence. Indeed, such terms as “phantom limbs” and “phantom sensations” became literally nonsensical to me when, in fact, part of my visibly missing—if nonetheless presenced—leg was not only substantially experienced but also critically functional in helping me adapt to the amputation both before and after I got the prosthetic. Although radically transformed in its perceived shape over several years (it became longer and more tapered than what was visibly “there”), my “phantom limb” literally grew into the hollow shell of my prosthetic socket, occupying, thickening, and substantiating it, finally grasping it so that it made sense and became corporeally integrated and lived as my own.

I suggested earlier in this chapter that what we need is not to rid ourselves of images but to flesh them out, to recognize the substantial, if subjective, dimension and value that in-form their objective visibility. During my rehabilitation (an interesting term in context) this recognition was quite literally brought home to me by visible images of my body of quite another kind than

those offered by the mirror. These images represented not the form and movements of my objective body as it is seen and lived from outside by others but rather the form and movements of my subjective body as it is lived from my side as me. These were images simultaneously generated both by me and a computer. These were responsive images, not directive ones—for they led me again and again from their objectively visible surfaces and movements back to my own invisible substance. Represented on the computer screen in the form of two dynamic bar graphs in one instance and two circles moving from quadrant to quadrant in another was not an image of how my body objectively looked but how I subjectively distributed my body's weight over my legs and how I shifted my balance and center of gravity on a movement-sensitive platform. These, then, were objective images of subjective embodiment. Unlike mirror images that presented the contours and surface of objective embodiment, they were not reversed or confusing as to the source of their agency. Although it would seem counterintuitive to think of these seemingly abstract images as mimetic representations of my lived body, that is, in fact, what they were—albeit certainly mimetic of something other than the surface of my exterior appearance. Thus, one could say these were not merely objective and *visible* images; they were also subjective and *visual* images. Not only did they actually help me learn to walk, but they also provided a corrective—a quite literal counterbalance—to my tendency to place too much weight on the visible. Indeed, they provided a model of vision that helped me learn to see that even the most ordinary images find their value, their substance, their impetus in the agency and investments of our flesh.

III

Let me now move to quite a different narrative of bodily eviction and alienation. The anecdotes that constitute its primary narrative speak not to the ontological dis-ease or opacity of one's home body as a result of something like neurological catastrophe or the physical amputation of a body part but rather to epistemological and axiological dis-ease, to pathologies of knowledge and value that result in an impoverished and alienated sense of both bodies and vision. I will ultimately focus on the Million Man March, but I want first to consider the experiences of two individuals—one a little girl, the other a grown man—both African Americans.

Unlike Christina, the little girl in question has no bodily problem sensing *that* she is embodied; her problem emerges in the uncertainty she suddenly senses at *what* she is as a body. This is a problem not in ontological necessity but in epistemological (in)sufficiency. The dis-ease that emerges here is not the illness, impoverishment, or failure of one's own lived body but rather the illness, impoverishment, and failure of a culture that has lost its equivalent

of proprioception and no longer feels the lived body intimately. The objectifying function of vision is also consequential here, and here, too, it is used to dominate and direct the body—although from quite a different source and to quite a different end from Christina’s directorial vision. The autobiographical scene that follows is described by Audre Lorde in her essay, “Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger”:

The AA subway train to Harlem. I clutch my mother’s sleeve, her arms full of shopping bags, christmas-heavy. . . . My mother spots an almost seat, pushes my little snowsuited body down. On one side of me a man reading a paper. On the other, a woman in a fur hat staring at me. Her mouth twitches as she stares, and then her gaze drops down, pulling mine with it. . . . She jerks her coat closer to her. I look. I do not see whatever terrible thing she is seeing on the seat between us—probably a roach. But she has communicated her horror to me. It must be something very bad from the way she’s looking, so I pull my snowsuit closer to me away from it, too. When I look up the woman is still staring at me, her nose holes and eyes huge. And suddenly I realize there is nothing crawling up the seat between us: *it is me* she doesn’t want her coat to touch.³⁰

Like Christina, little Audre has suddenly lost her body image—been robbed of her dimension, been distanced from herself by vision. But in this circumstance she has been “pithed” and eviscerated from without—not by a failure of her own proprioception but by the perceptual pathology of an other. Lorde marks this experience in terms of vision: “I don’t like to remember the cancellation and hatred, heavy as my wished-for death, seen in the eyes of so many white people from the time I could see.”³¹ Once at home and warm within—and as—her “little snowsuited body,” she is abruptly evicted from it, placed outside of herself “in the cold,” subjectively perceiving and recognizing what was once the transparent and unthought unity of her lived body as now uncannily split in two—on one side her conscious sense of herself, on the other her body, the latter now some distanced, objective, and terrible thing.

Telling Christina’s story, Sacks evokes Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty* and suggests it might as readily have been titled *On Doubt*—for Wittgenstein questions “whether there might be situations or conditions which take away the certainty of the body, which do give one grounds to doubt one’s body, perhaps indeed to lose one’s entire body in total doubt” (Sacks, 44). Certainly, Christina’s ontological pathology presents such a condition, but—just as cer-

30. Audre Lorde, “Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger,” in *Sister Outsider* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 147 (emphasis added).

31. *Ibid.*

tainly—so too does Audre’s suffering from a cultural pathology. In “A Phenomenology of the Black Body” philosopher Charles Johnson speaks eloquently to this problem of bodily doubt as an effect of the cultural pathology of a racial caste system. Johnson evokes the lived sense of what it means when consciousness is eviscerated and evicted from its home body, when it has no abode, no address, no residence—when, through a look, it is thrown outside itself: “I do not see what the white other sees in my skin, but I am aware of his intentionality, and—yes—aware that I often disclose something discomfiting to him. . . . Yet it is *I* who perceive myself as ‘stained,’ as though I were an object for myself and no longer a subject.”³² In a significant neologism coined by Frantz Fanon, Johnson calls this lived sense and process of being substantially hollowed out, “pithed,” and ultimately evicted from the transparent comfort afforded by one’s material premises, “epidermalization.”³³

At the moment little Audre experiences what Johnson describes as “the searing Sartrean ‘look’ of the hate-stare,” the entire world is “epidermalized” (130). Extending Lorde’s childhood experience into adulthood, Johnson tells us of his own embodied response to the pathological look that “realizes something larval” in him and transforms his body: “My world is epidermalized, collapsed like a house of cards into the stained casement of my skin. My subjectivity is turned inside out like a shirtcuff. . . . Epidermalization spreads throughout the body like an odor, like an echoing sound . . . a sudden dizziness and disorientation, an acute awareness of my outside, of its being for others” (128). Subjected to this abrupt evisceration, the epidermalized “black body,” Johnson tells us, “comes awake, translates itself as a total physicality—it, oddly enough, feels as if it is listening with its limbs to the Other as my interiority shrivels like something burned, falls into confusion, feels threatened and, if it does not make me constitute myself as hatred (unable to change the world, I emotionally change myself), it momentarily, like a misty field, hazes over” (130). Ices over, we could say, in the context of little snowsuited Audre’s “soul murder.”

Johnson’s description of the epidermalized body is to some extent paradoxical or—more precisely—ambiguous. On one side the epidermalizing gaze locks his consciousness out of a body that no longer is his, its sense and its meaning possessed by and devalued by another. Yet on the other side this is a body he still can proprioceptively *feel* even as he *sees* it through the eyes

32. Charles Johnson, “A Phenomenology of the Black Body,” in *The Male Body: Features, Destinies, Exposures*, ed. Laurence Goldstein (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 126. Subsequent references will be cited in the text.

33. Johnson attributes the term *epidermalization*, in its phenomenological sense, not to Fanon but to Thomas Slaughter, in an unpublished paper, “Epidermalizing the World” (see Johnson, “Phenomenology of the Black Body,” 136n14).

of an eviscerating other.³⁴ The feeling “is intense, as though consciousness has shifted to the skin’s seen surfaces.” He tells us:

Our body responds totally to this abrupt epidermalization; consciousness for the subject is violently emptied of content: one, in fact, draws a “blank.” . . . There are physiological reactions: the pulse and adrenaline increase, the seen skin becomes moist, as if the body is in open conspiracy with the white Other to confirm the sudden eclipse of my consciousness entirely by corporeality. I feel its sleepy awkwardness, and know myself not as subject but as slumberous, torpid matter. (129)

That is, the white other’s visual perception of him and his own bodily capacities “stand in a relation of reversibility; an impairment in the functioning of one . . . leads to an impairment in the functioning of the other.”³⁵ Johnson’s very comportment changes and—in a reversible and negative reciprocity—both his world and his body (the double horizon that bounds intentional action) are diminished and shrink. Thus trapped in and inhibited by the

34. It should not be surprising that there are certain aspects to the structure of epidermalization Johnson describes that are quite similar to aspects of the structure of shame as described by Katz in *How Emotions Work*. Katz considers shame as three-dimensional and constituted by three sets of elements:

The first set of elements clarif[ies] how shame is an interpretive process, or a way of seeing oneself from the standpoint of others. The second set shows shame to be a form of impotent praxis, a sensed inability to take control of one’s identity and organize a response. The third set describes shame as a feeling in metamorphosis, an unstable sensuality that desperately seeks metamorphosis into the expressive corporeality of some other emotion. The overall argument is that shameful moments distinctively have in common the following features. As a form of self-reflection, shame is (1) an eerie revelation to self that (2) isolates one (3) in the face of a sacred community. What is revealed is a (4) moral inferiority that makes one (5) vulnerable to (6) irresistible forces. As a state of feeling, shame is (7) fearful, (8) chaotic, (9) holistic, and (10) humbling. (147)

Shame, of course, is part of the structure of epidermalization, a complicity between the seer and the seen that generates in the latter a sense that one’s body has betrayed one “by being vulnerable to alien forces that transcend [one’s] will,” a sense of impotence in “shaping one’s identity along morally desirable lines despite one’s will and best efforts” (156). Of course, unlike shame, epidermalization is generated by a self-named “sacred community” constituted by those self-identified as “white” (and therefore moral), and the “humbling” going on has nothing sacred about it.

35. Iris Marion Young, “Throwing like a Girl,” in *Throwing like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 153. Young is here referencing Merleau-Ponty’s argument in *Phenomenology of Perception* (133–37) to describe the effects on the lived body of sexism rather than racism; she writes that “the diverse senses and activities of the lived body are synthetically related in such a way that each stands in a mutually conditioning relation with all the others” (153). I am purposefully mobilizing Young’s work on sexism and its effects on women’s motility, spatiality, and intentional realization as a complement and bridge to similar (although not necessarily identical) inhibitions wrought by racism.

“torpid matter” of his epidermalized body, Johnson no longer *posits* his existence through the transparent habitation and agency of his lived body but rather “is *positioned* by a system of coordinates that does not have its origins in [his] own intentional capacities.”³⁶ To avoid trouble in the visible white face of the pathological and epidermalizing look, Johnson suggests one restrictive and self-inhibiting scenario of black embodiment: “I must forever be on guard against my body betraying me in public; I must suppress the profile that their frozen intentionality brings forth—I police my actions, and take precautions against myself so the myth of stain, evil, and physicality, like a Platonic form, does not appear in me” (129).

In this sense, and in a way comparable in result, little Audre will learn to pose her body, like Christina, from without. She will learn to operate and act it out in and for the sight of others—and herself. She will need to keep an eye on it at all times or run the risk of losing grounding and ground in the world in which she lives and in which she will never feel quite so much at home again because she has lost her original premises to others. Of course, Audre’s pathology, even as she will live it, is not her own as is Christina’s. It is a single instance of the epidemic and epidermalizing cultural dis-ease of and with the body also experienced and described by Johnson, and it is attributable not only to a history of multifarious racist practices and relations but also—and in no small part—to our culture’s increasing dependence on the distancing and objectifying function of vision as it has become a *technology* detached from our bodies. Indeed, given the primacy of the visible in our culture, we could say, along with Johnson, that our entire world and most of what we mean in it as human beings has been epidermalized. And epidermalized, we have all come to see ourselves as epiphenomenal.

Now, in no way do I want to flatten out or trivialize the particular forms of alienation and eviction from one’s own body effected through a specifically racial caste system. Epidermalization, in Johnson’s sense, has its own quite particular phenomeno-logic, qualified by specific historical circumstance and cultural practice and manifest in particular structures and dynamics of response and responsibility. Nonetheless, I think most of us in our present culture can recognize in this phenomeno-logic what it means to be a victim of vision and subject to—not of—the visible. Johnson himself suggests that “it is reasonable to say that there is neither an impenetrable ‘white’ or ‘black’ experience which is mutually exclusive, but rather that there are diverse human variations upon experience, which can always be communicated imaginatively or vicariously across racial, political, and cultural lines” (122). Thus, even as many of us do not suffer the particular form of epider-

36. Young, “Throwing like a Girl,” 152 (emphasis added).

malization that devalues and reduces “my” substantial lived body to the superficial surface of a merely “black body,” we do have a sense of what it means to be alienated and evicted from our own dimension and thickness, what it means to lose our lived bodies not in the felicitous transparency of our intentional action but in the infelicity of an objectified vision of ourselves as mere epidermis. How, in this circumstance and from this vantage point, can we not feel, as Johnson puts it, “the sudden eclipse” of our consciousness by our corporeality, our transformation into “torpid matter”?

Today, nearly every quality that gives dimension and more than superficial significance to the lived flesh we merely “see” does not count as significant cultural capital, does not compute on screens. Thus, it is no simple coincidence that the public meaning of the 1995 Million Man March was debated primarily in terms of the visible: new technologies of vision were enlisted not only to display televisually the bodies of those present but also to scan electronically these televisual images to count the bodies in them. Arguments over the results of this visible numeration received enormous attention in the public sphere (were four hundred thousand or more than a million bodies present and accounted for?), completely overshadowing those few anecdotal articulations that focused not only on what it was to *see* all those people gathered together on common ground but also what it was to *feel* thousands of hands and bodies “in touch” with themselves and each other. This qualitative accounting of the event literally incorporated the abstraction of quantifiable numbers in the significance and substance of bodily mass, in the force of proximity, in the power of flesh as it described new forms of bodily comportment in both those who attended and those who watched. In sum, this accounting recognized dimensions and consequences to the March invisible to the technological—and technologized—eye.

Whereas the public’s eyes were directed by the media toward the “hard news” of the black body count, this more qualitative form of accountancy was marginalized as the “soft” stuff of human interest. Nonetheless, however sidebarred, this qualitative accounting told of something much more powerful and world-changing than any mere body count based on visibility, for it was focused neither in mere numbers nor merely on the surface of the skin. A participant, Kristal Brent Zook, writes in an op-ed piece:

For many of us who were there, the debates around the march have become almost beside the point. The day, for me, is etched in my memory like a series of snapshots and vignettes, all of which bring me back to the same place: the humanity of black men. October 16th was . . . about resurrecting the spirits of an all but defeated people and giving them back their destinies, their rightful place in the world. . . . Above all else, I’ll remember my first early morning prayer best: standing on the grass alongside the Mall with head bowed and my heart wide open. On my right, I held the hand of a shy 13-year-old boy. On my

left, an elderly man in a wheelchair held the tips of my fingers with a contorted, misshapen grasp.³⁷

What is meaningful here is the substance, the gravity, the weight and press of flesh, its empirically felt and therefore symbolic *mass*. The bodies described here do not have the dead weight of a body count. Rather, they are living, and they dramatize their own significance in weighty ways: “They push against one another, lean on one another, push off one another, embrace one another.”³⁸ What counts in Zook’s description are not the numbers but the lived bodies (here epidermalized to others and themselves as “black”) using their weight and gravity, their other-than-superficial dimensions, their imagination to find a new and substantial compartment in the world. As Elena del Río suggests: “Corporeal spatiality and unity (the *corps propre*) is thus not something that can be ascertained through parameters of objective visibility, but rather something whose nature is evasive and enigmatic.”³⁹ In counterpoint to the dominant view of the Million Man March as meaningful primarily in terms of the visibility of the bodies that attended, it is particularly telling, then, that Zook concludes her description by focusing on a black man who is *blind*: “Stevie Wonder said that while he couldn’t see the men, he could feel them. Lifting his head to the sky, Wonder paused and listened. Like a wave, the crowd responded with an amazing electromagnetic force that washed over us from the Lincoln Memorial to the Capitol and back again.”⁴⁰ However briefly, and however much against the grain of a culture that has technologically abstracted visibility from the full-bodiedness of vision, this qualitative account of the Million Man March marks the press of flesh against flesh and the movement of the bodily imagination of black men from a fixed regard on the visible surface of the skin to the reclamation of its grounding premises. As Jack Katz tells us: “The invisibility that creates all that is visible in social life is the three-dimensional body, and in emotional experience, one turns, sensually rather than via thought, toward background corporeal foundations of the self.”⁴¹ Reclaiming and, in that momentous moment, at home not only in their bodies but also among other bodies, the march’s participants experienced—and, yes, saw—a renewed sense of the lived body’s open capacity for stance and movement, for the future possibility—experienced in the present—of a less inhibited and constrained com-

37. Kristal Brent Zook, “Multiple Images from Million Man March,” *UCLA Today*, Oct. 27, 1995, 7.

38. Alphonso Lingis, “Bodies That Touch Us,” in “Sense and Sensuousness: Merleau-Ponty,” special issue, *Thesis Eleven* 36 (1993): 166.

39. Elena del Río, “The Body as the Foundation of the Screen: Allegories of Technology in Atom Egoyan’s *Speaking Parts*,” *Camera Obscura*, nos. 37/38 (summer 1996): 102.

40. Zook, “Multiple Images,” 7.

41. Katz, *How Emotions Work*, 335.

portment in the world. For a brief time, then, these bodies were significant not merely because they were numerically visible but because they were fully realized.

IV

To foreground the “feeling” of the lived body (experienced both by oneself and by others) is not to sentimentalize it. Neither is it to assert a soft metaphysics predicated on the ineffable. It is, rather, to emphasize those aspects of our home bodies that are not completely captured in visible images although they make their mark there and can be read and understood if we acknowledge their existence. Here, philosopher Alphonso Lingis is most eloquent:

Human bodies . . . move in the world . . . leaving traces, . . . rustlings, footsteps, murmurings, coughs, sighs, echoes, winks, sweat, tears. Their freedom is a material freedom by which they decompose whatever nature they were given and whatever form culture put on them, leaving the lines their fingers or feet dance in the street or the fields, scattering their colours in the sunlight and the shadows, leaving their warmth in the winds, their fluids on chairs and tools and in the hands of others, their dreams in the night.⁴²

My bodily imagination of myself has its visible effects and makes itself present not as my epidermis but in my bodily comportment, which is not fixed but is rather a mobile style of always decomposing and recomposing myself in relation, response, and responsibility to the world and others.

The reversible pathology of a consciousness evicted from its home body and a home body pithed of its consciousness derealizes one’s comportment in the past and forestalls its imaginative possibilities in the future. To varying degrees the disembodiments and derealizations experienced by Christina, Audre Lorde, and Charles Johnson make the effects of this disembodiment and derealization abundantly clear. Obviously, Christina’s eviction from her body is virtually singular in its ontological extremity (Sacks knows of only one other similar case). Indeed, its singularity foregrounds the way in which the *neurologically* “normal” rest of us are generally at home in our bodies, living them as a capacious and mobile site transparently grounding and enabling our intentional activity in a world that is reciprocally expansive. Lorde’s and Johnson’s experiences, however, although extreme in their particular and personal manifestation and effects, are hardly singular. Indeed, they are unhappily common. And, insofar as their eviction from their bodies resonates to different degrees within our own personal but never privatized experience of being suddenly disclosed to ourselves as colored or fat

42. Lingis, “Bodies That Touch Us,” 167.

or old or female or diseased or disabled, their experiences suggest the ways in which the normative practices of our culture estrange us *phenomenologically* from our own bodies and the bodies of others. As a consequence our comportment becomes inhibited and restrictive rather than a capacious system and style of corporeally addressing our objectives, of realizing ourselves as intentional and substantial beings always engaged in the open process of becoming. As for me, it was not until I fleshed out my mirror image and repudiated its normative and reductive epidermalization of me that I reclaimed my agency and posture, incorporated my prosthetic leg into the home of my body, and was able to relocate my intentional grounding and walk in the world.

The lessons I learned from my own rehabilitation, reclamation, and recomposition of my body, and from the accounting of experience by Christina, Audre Lorde, Charles Johnson, and participants in the Million Man March, suggest not that we reject visual representation and embrace iconomachy. Rather, it is that we recognize vision as embodied and representable not only in its objective dimension as the visible skin of things but also in those subjective dimensions that give us visual gravity. That is, we must remember *in our seeing* that we transcend and subtend the images we produce and allow ourselves to be produced by. At home and regrounded in our lived bodies, we have dimension, gravity, and the enabling power to regain our sense of balance and to comport ourselves differently—first, perhaps, *before* our images and then, one hopes, *within* them.

A Leg to Stand On

Prosthetics, Metaphor, and Materiality

Matter has been given infinite fertility, inexhaustible vitality, and at the same time, a seductive power of temptation which invites us to create as well.

—BRUNO SCHULZ, *The Street of Crocodiles*

It is this submission which is offered as a sacrifice to the glamorous singularity of an inhuman condition. —ROLAND BARTHES, “The Jet-man,” in *Mythologies*

Let me begin again with the fact that I have a prosthetic left leg—and thus a certain investment in and curiosity about the ways in which “the prosthetic” has been embraced and recreated by contemporary scholars trying to make sense (and theory) out of our increasingly technologized lives. When I put my leg on in the morning, knowing that I am the one who will give it literal—if exhaustible—vitality even as it gives me literal support, I don’t find it nearly as seductive a matter—or generalized an idea—as do some of my academic colleagues. And walking around during the day, going to teach a class or shop at the supermarket, neither do I feel like Barthes’s “reified hero,” the “Jet-man”: a mythological “semi-object” whose prosthetically enhanced flesh has sacrificially submitted itself to “the glamorous singularity of an inhuman condition.”¹ Not only do I see myself as fully human (if hardly singular or glamorous), but I also know intimately my prosthetic leg’s essential inertia and lack of motivating volition. Indeed, for all the weight I place on it, it does not run my life. And thus, as I engage a variety of recent work in the humanities and arts, I am both startled and amused at the extraordinary moves made of and by “the prosthetic” of late—particularly since my prosthetic leg can barely stand on its own and certainly will never go out dancing without me.

Although part of vernacular expression, “A Leg to Stand On” is also the title of a book by phenomenological neurologist Oliver Sacks that deals with a topic somewhat related to the present one: Sacks’s experience with a neurologically damaged leg. See Oliver Sacks, *A Leg to Stand On* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984).

1. Roland Barthes, “The Jet-man,” in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957), 72–73. The Bruno Schulz epigraph that begins this essay can be found in Bruno Schulz, *The Street of Crocodiles*, trans. Celina Wieniewska (London: Penguin, 1963), 59.

Particularly, shall we say, “well equipped” to do so, I want both to critique and redress this metaphorical (and, dare I say, ethical) displacement of the prosthetic through a return to its premises in lived-body experience. However, this return will not be direct—but rather by way of what might be called a “topological phenomenology.”² In *The Rule of Metaphor* Paul Ricoeur writes: “If there is a point in our experience where living expression states living existence, it is where our movement up the entropic slope of language encounters the movement by which we come back this side of the distinctions between actuality, action, production, motion.”³ Thus, in what follows, I will pay as much attention to language as I will to lived bodies. This is because there is not only an *oppositional tension* but also a *dynamic connection* between *the* prosthetic as a topological figure and *my* prosthetic as a material but also a phenomenologically lived artifact—the *the* and the *my* here indicating differences both of kind and degree between generalization and specificity, figure and ground, aesthetics and pragmatics, alienation and incorporation, subjectivity and objectivity, and between (as Helen Deutsch and Felicity Nussbaum put it) “a cultural trope and a material condition that indelibly affect[s] people’s lives.”⁴ Thus, it is not my aim to privilege here autobiographical experience as somehow “more authentic” than “less authentic” discursive experience. Experience of any kind requires both bodies and language for its expression, and both autobiographical and discursive experience are real in that they each have material causes and consequences. It is also not my aim here to hobble flights of scholarly or artistic imagination and deny them the freedom of mobility that I have come to dearly cherish. In this regard, although I will return to my own prosthetic leg at a later moment—as well as to the prosthetic legs of an extraordinary woman who has made both the metaphorical and the material dance to her own choreography—such an anecdotal move is not meant to overvalue the “secret” knowledge possessed and revealed by the cultural other who has a real prosthetic but, rather, meant to ground and expand the topological premises of “the prosthetic” as it informs the aesthetic and ethical imagina-

2. It is worth noting here that *trope* has a philosophical definition as well as a rhetorical one: a “trope” is a figural use of language, but it is also an argument advanced by a skeptic. In this regard a “topological phenomenology” would take into account both senses of the word and would proceed in its “thick description” both fully aware and productively suspicious that lived-body experience is always also being imaginatively “figured” as it is literally being “figured out.”

3. Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny, Kathleen McLaughlin, and John Costello (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 309. Subsequent references will be cited in the text.

4. Helen Deutsch and Felicity Nussbaum, introduction to *Defects: Engineering the Modern Body*, ed. Helen Deutsch and Felicity Nussbaum (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 1–2.

tion of the humanities and arts. Perhaps a more embodied “sense-ability” of the prosthetic by cultural critics and artists will lead to a greater apprehension of “response-ability” in its discursive use.

I

Sometime, fairly recently, after the “cyborg” became somewhat tired and tiresome from academic overuse, we started to hear and read about “the prosthetic”—less, in its ordinary usage, as a specific material replacement of a missing limb or body part than as a sexy, new metaphor that, whether noun or (more frequently) adjective, has become topological currency for describing a vague and shifting constellation of relationships among bodies, technologies, and subjectivities. In an important essay called “The Prosthetic Imagination” that investigates the scholarly uses and abuses of the prosthetic, Sarah Jain writes: “As a trope that has flourished in a recent and varied literature concerned with interrogating human-technology interfaces, ‘technology as prosthesis’ attempts to describe the joining of materials, naturalizations, excorporations, and semiotic transfer that also go far beyond the medical definition of ‘replacement of a missing part.’”⁵

We have, for example, “prosthetic consciousness” (“a reflexive awareness of supplementation”)⁶ and “prosthetic memory” (the public extroversions of photography and cinema that cast doubt on the privilege of interiority that once constructed individual subjectivity and identity).⁷ Then there is the “prosthetic aesthetic,” which “extends our thinking on the relationship between aesthetics, the body, and technology as an a priori prosthetic one.”⁸ We have also “prosthetic territories,” described as “where technology and humanity fuse”⁹; “prosthetic devices,” such as “autobiographical objects,” which are “an addition, a trace, and a replacement for the intangible aspects of desire, identification, and social relations”¹⁰; and “prosthetic processes,” such as “contemporary aging,” which point to a “postmodern state [that] is

5. Sarah S. Jain, “The Prosthetic Imagination: Enabling and Disabling the Prosthetic Trope,” *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 24, no. 1 (winter 1999): 32.

6. Robert Rawdon Wilson, “Cyber(body)parts: Prosthetic Consciousness,” *Body & Society* 1, nos. 3–4 (1995): 242.

7. Alison Landsberg, “Prosthetic Memory: *Total Recall* and *Blade Runner*,” *Body & Society* 1, nos. 3–4 (1995): 175–89.

8. Joanne Morra and Marquard Smith, eds. “The Prosthetic Aesthetic,” introduction to “The Prosthetic Aesthetic,” special issue, *New Formations* 46 (spring 2002): 5.

9. See the blurb on the back cover of Gabriel Brahm Jr. and Mark Driscoll, eds., *Prosthetic Territories: Politics and Hypertechnologies* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995).

10. Jennifer A. Gonzalez, “Autotopographies,” in *Prosthetic Territories: Politics and Hypertechnologies*, ed. Gabriel Brahm Jr. and Mark Driscoll (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 134.

clearly a prosthetic creature cobbled together out of various organic and cybernetic sub-units."¹¹ And, then, there is a recent issue of *Cultural Anthropology* that produces what might be called the "prosthetic subaltern" in two essays, respectively entitled "Stumped Identities: Body Image, Bodies Politic, and the *Mujer Maya* as Prosthetic" and "Desire and the Prosthetics of Supervision: A Case of Maquiladora Flexibility."¹² Indeed, as Diane Nelson (author of one of the essays) points out in her introduction to the issue's focus on prosthesis and cultural analysis: "The prosthetic metaphor is drawn from recent work in cyborg anthropology, feminist studies of science, philosophy, political economy, disability studies, and neurophysiology. . . . [P]rosthesis mediate a whole series of those binaries we know we need to think beyond, but which still tend to ground our politics and our theory (self/other, body/technology, actor/ground, first world/third world, normal/disabled, global/local, male/female, West/East, public/private)."¹³

This is a tall order for a metaphor to fill. Furthermore, somehow, somewhere, in all this far-reaching and interdisciplinary cultural work (and with the exception of disability studies), the literal and material ground of the metaphor has been largely forgotten, if not disavowed. That is, the primary context in which "the prosthetic" functions literally rather than figuratively has been left behind—as has the experience and agency of those who, like myself, actually use prostheses without feeling "posthuman" and who, moreover, are often startled to read of all the hidden powers their prostheses apparently exercise both in the world and in the imaginations of cultural theorists. Indeed, most of the scholars who embrace the prosthetic metaphor far too quickly mobilize their fascination with artificial and "posthuman" extensions of "the body" in the service of a rhetoric (and, in some cases, a poetics) that is always located *elsewhere*—displacing and generalizing the prosthetic before exploring it first on its own quite extraordinarily complex, literal (and logical) ground. As Jain points out in her critique, "So many authors use it as an introductory point—a general premise underpinning their work about the ways in which technoscience and bodies interact," and thus the "metaphors of prosthetic extension are presented as if they were equivalent in some way, from typewriters to automobiles, hearing aids to silicone

11. Chris Hablas and Steven Mentor, "The Cyborg Body Politic and the New World Order," in *Prosthetic Territories: Politics and Hypertechnologies*, ed. Gabriel Brahm Jr. and Mark Driscoll (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 244–45.

12. Diane M. Nelson, "Stumped Identities: Body Image, Bodies Politic, and the *Mujer Maya* as Prosthetic," *Cultural Anthropology* 16, no. 3 (Aug. 2001): 314–53; and Melissa W. Wright, "Desire and the Prosthetics of Supervision: A Case of Maquiladora Flexibility," *Cultural Anthropology* 16, no. 3 (Aug. 2001): 354–73.

13. Diane M. Nelson, "Phantom Limbs and Invisible Hands: Bodies, Prosthetics, and Late Capitalist Identifications," *Cultural Anthropology* 16, no. 3 (Aug. 2001): 303–13.

implants. . . . Both the prosthesis and the body are generalized in a form that denies how bodies can and do ‘take up’ technologies of all kinds.”¹⁴

There is, then, a certain scandal to this metaphorical displacement and generalization—not because my (or anyone else’s) literal and specific experience of prosthesis is sacrosanct or because the metaphor obliterates the political atrocities of mass amputations by landmines in Cambodia or by civil war in Sierra Leone.¹⁵ Rather, the scandal of the metaphor is that it has become a fetishized and “unfleshed-out” catchword that functions vaguely as the ungrounded and “floating signifier” for a broad and variegated critical discourse on technoculture that includes little of these prosthetic realities. That is, the metaphor (and imagination) is too often less expansive than it is reductive, and its figuration is less complex and dynamic in aspect and function than the object and relations from whence it was—dare I say—amputated. As Steven Kurzman (himself an amputee) summarizes in the aforementioned special issue of *Cultural Anthropology*:

Rather than develop a metaphor based on ethnographic material about artificial limbs or other prosthetic devices (e.g., breast implants, dental implants, joint implants, and so on), [scholars] develop a theoretical model to explain a problem arising out of a completely different topic and then *retroactively* define it in the world of amputation and artificial limbs. . . . Prosthesis simultaneously occupies the space of artificial limbs, metaphor, and discursive framework. The metaphor becomes unsituated and an instance of totalizing theory, managing to be both everywhere and nowhere simultaneously.¹⁶

In this regard it is useful to think more specifically, if briefly, about the *function* of metaphor. To be fair to all of us who use metaphor (and who doesn’t?), we must acknowledge that metaphor is, by tropological nature, a *displacement*: a nominative term is displaced from its mundane (hence literal, nonfigural) context and placed, precisely, elsewhere so as to illuminate some other context through its *refiguration*—that is, by highlighting certain relations of structural or functional resemblance that might not be noticed without the transportation of a foreign object into an otherwise naturalized scene, an analogy is constituted. However, as Paul Ricoeur notes (quoting Pierre Fontanier), it is important to emphasize that metaphor “does not . . . refer to objects”; rather, “it consists ‘in presenting one idea under the sign of

14. Jain, “Prosthetic Imagination,” 33, 39.

15. For a moving and specific discussion of mass amputation in Sierra Leone as a political counter to the slogan “The future is in your hands!” see George Packer, “The Children of Freetown,” *New Yorker*, Jan. 13, 2003, 50–61.

16. Steven L. Kurzman, “Presence and Prosthesis: A Response to Nelson and Wright,” *Cultural Anthropology* 16, no. 3 (Aug. 2001): 374–87. Subsequent references will be cited in the text.

another that is more striking or better known.” (57).¹⁷ Thus, primarily based on the relation of *ideas* rather than *objects*, and on structural and functional resemblances rather than physical similarities, metaphorical usage does not owe any necessary allegiance to the literal object—such as a prosthesis—that generated it. Nonetheless, it does owe necessary allegiance to a “common opinion” about the object and context that needs to sufficiently acknowledge the resemblance in order to “get” the analogy. As Ricoeur sums up: “[R]esemblance is principally a relationship between ideas, between generally held beliefs”—and thus, not only does analogy operate between ideas of structure and function rather than between objects as such, but the “idea itself is to be understood not ‘from the point of view of the object seen by the spirit’ but ‘from the point of view of the spirit that sees’” (57–58).¹⁸

It is not surprising, then, that from the point of view of the “spirited” individuals who use prostheses in the most literal (rather than literary) sense, there are some major problems with the prosthetic metaphor as it is seen (and used) by those whose point of view is positioned elsewhere, in some theoretical rather than practiced—and practical—space. In this regard (and following on the work done by Jain) Kurzman emphasizes not only the short shrift given to actually substantiating the theoretical use of the metaphor (that is, justifying the analogy through careful comparison and contrast of specific structures and functions), but he also emphasizes two major and consequential reversals and reductions that have attended its current theoretical usage that do not correspond to the common opinion of most of us who actually use prostheses.

First, despite the fact that the metaphor emerges from an apparent—and critical—interrogation that is meant to disrupt the traditional notion of the body as whole, unlike Donna Haraway’s nonhierarchical and hybrid cyborg, the metaphor of the prosthetic and its technological interface with the body is predicated on a naturalized sense of the body’s previous and privileged “wholeness.”¹⁹ Furthermore, this corporeal wholeness tends to be constituted in purely *objective* and *visible* terms; body “parts” are seen (from an “observer’s” point of view) as missing or limited and some “thing” other (or some “other” thing) is substituted or added on to take their place. What is elided by this predication (and point of view) are the phenomenological—and quite different—structural, functional, and aesthetic terms of those who successfully *incorporate* and *subjectively live* the prosthetic and sense themselves neither as lacking something nor as walking around with some “thing” that

17. Ricoeur is quoting from Pierre Fontanier, *Les Figures du discours* (1830; reprint, Paris: Flammarion, 1968), 99.

18. Interior quotation is from Fontanier, *Les Figures du discours*, 41.

19. Donna Haraway, “Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s,” *Socialist Review* 80 (1985): 65–107.

is added on to their bodies. Rather, in most situations, the prosthetic as lived in use is usually *transparent*; that is, it is as “absent” (to use Drew Leder’s term) as is the rest of our body when we’re focused outward to the world and successfully engaged in the various projects of our daily life.²⁰ Ideally incorporated not “into” or “on” but “as” the subject, the prosthetic becomes an object only when there’s a mechanical or social problem that pushes it obtrusively into the foreground of one’s consciousness—much in the manner in which a blister on our heel takes on an objective presence that is something other even though it is our own bodily fluid and stretched skin that constitute it. It is, thus, not the existence or use of a prosthetic that determines whether one feels one’s body disrupted. Indeed, in common use, as Kurzman writes, “[a]rtificial limbs do not *disrupt* amputees’ bodies, but rather reinforce our publicly perceived normalcy and humanity. . . . [A]rtificial limbs and prostheses only disrupt . . . what is commonly considered to be the naturally whole and abled Body” (380–81).

Second, Kurzman points to the way in which the theoretical use of the prosthetic metaphor tends to transfer *agency* (albeit not subjectivity, as with the cyborg) from human actors to human artifacts. Paradoxically, this transfer of agency indicates a certain technofetishism on the part of the theorist—however closeted and often antithetical to the overt critique of certain aspects of technoculture for which the metaphor was mobilized. As an effect of the prosthetic’s amputation and displacement from its mundane context, the animate and volitional human beings who use prosthetic technology disappear into the background—passive, if not completely invisible—and the prosthetic is seen to have a will and life of its own. Thus we move from technofetishism to *technoanimism*. For example, Alison Landsberg, in “Prosthetic Memory,” cites an Edison film, made as early as 1908, called *The Thieving Hand*, in which an armless beggar is provided with a prosthetic arm that once belonged to a thief and, against his will—but not the arm’s—starts stealing.²¹ A similar agency is cinematically granted to the prosthetic arm belonging to *Dr. Strangelove* (Stanley Kubrick, 1964)—and here we might note that, in terms of body parts, more arms and hands (which in fantasy often slip and slide between the severed limb and the prosthetic) have been granted agency by the cinema than legs. (Perhaps, and I speculate, this is because, having an opposable thumb, a hand has essentially a broader and more dramatic range of acting skills.)²²

According to this seductive (and culturally recurrent) fantasy of the

20. Drew Leder, *The Absent Body* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

21. Landsberg, “Prosthetic Memory,” 175.

22. Freud, himself possessed of an oral prosthetic, writes in “The Uncanny” of phantasies of “dismembered limbs, a severed head, a hand cut off at the wrist . . . feet which dance by themselves,” these chilling and “unheimlich” because “they prove capable of independent activ-

uncanny and willful life of limbs and objects, not only can my prosthetic leg go dancing without me, but it also can “will” me to join it in what, in effect, is a nightmarish *danse macabre*. And, here, in the context of both technofetishism and technoanimism, I cannot help but recall my beloved *The Red Shoes* (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1948). Antedating both my own encounter with a prosthetic leg and our current culture of “high-technophilia” (which might regard shoes as a fetish but certainly not a technology), the film, based on a Hans Christian Andersen story, concerns a young ballerina, torn between love and art, who gets her big break in a ballet in which she plays a woman who longs for a pair of red slippers that, when she finally gets to put them on, force her to dance until she dies from exhaustion. Such transfer of human agency to our technologies allows our artifacts to come back with a vengeance. Thus, in amused response to reading a theoretical essay on the prosthetic rife with technoanimism, Kurzman imagines his “modest collection of below-knee prosthetic legs” (kept in a box in his basement) developing “a collective consciousness of oppression,” when they realize that he had “been using them to complete [his] identity,” and “march[ing] upstairs to have a word with [him] about it” (380).

In effect, the current metaphorical displacement of the prosthetic into other contexts because of its analogical usefulness in pointing out certain (if vaguely specified) structural and functional resemblances between ideas also—and mistakenly—displaces agency from human to artifact and operates, as Kurzman puts it, as a “silencing dynamic of *disavowal*.” Contemporary scholars (and many artists as well) are unwitting technophiles who, despite their critiques of global technoculture, too often “represent prosthesis and phantom limbs as agents, and amputees are present only as stumps and phantoms, which metonymically embody our lack of presence and subjectivity. Amputees . . . become ‘the ground’: the invisible, silent basis of the metaphor” (383).²³

Kurzman’s use of the term *metonymy* here seems to me critical to our understanding not only of the negative reaction that many prosthetic users have to the current “prosthetic imagination” but also of the specific figural differences and consequent relational meanings and functions that “the prosthetic” discursively serves. Metonymy is a figural operation quite different in function, effect, and meaning from metaphor (even as it is often

ity.” See Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” in *The Pelican Freud Library, Volume 14: Art and Literature*, trans. James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 366.

23. In this regard I would note that I have a small etching on my wall at home called “Break a Leg,” which was given to me by a close friend. Referring to a theatrical phrase perversely meaning “Good luck,” the etching shows an onstage chorus line of disembodied legs and is, for me, a delightful figuration of my own early preoccupation with my prosthetic and the general fantasy of the transference of agency—through metonymy—from subjects to objects.

imprecisely subsumed by it). It is even more significantly quite different from *synecdoche*, with which it appears almost—and problematically—symmetrical. These differences not only often discursively slip and slide into each other in ways that are confusing, but they also form the expressive and dynamic ground of the varying, confused, and ambivalent ways in which prostheses are seen in their relation to the human beings who use them.

In this regard Ricoeur (again glossing Fontanier) is particularly helpful. He not only differentiates the figural operations of the three species of tropes—metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche—by their respective relations of *resemblance*, relations of *correspondence* (or *correlation*), and relations of *connection* but goes on to explore these relations and their consequences in more detail. Earlier I pointed out that predicated on relations of resemblance, metaphor operates to construct an analogy, presenting “one idea under the sign of another,” primarily through highlighting similarities between the structural or functional aspects of objects rather than between the literal objects as such. Hence the prosthetic as a metaphor easily—and often—takes on adjectival form, characterizing and qualifying other nouns rather than serving a noun function itself: “prosthetic memory,” “prosthetic territories,” and so forth. Unlike metaphor, however, metonymy and synecdoche *do* primarily refer to objects—albeit quite differently. Constructing relations of correspondence or correlation, metonymy “brings together two objects each of which constitutes ‘*an absolutely separate whole.*’ This is why metonymy divides up in turn according to the variety of relationships that satisfy the general condition of correspondence: relationship of cause to effect, instrument to purpose, container to content, thing to its location, sign to signification, physical to moral, model to thing.”²⁴ (Here, in relation to the prosthetic, we can see this variety of relationships played out across the relevant literature as well as in the culture at large. For example, as Kurzman notes, the way in which agency is transferred from the amputee to the prosthetic is clearly metonymic in character; the cause-effect relation between two “absolutely separate wholes”—a human and an artifact—is exaggerated and becomes not an ensemble but the seemingly complete transference of force or influence from one species of object or event to another.)

Synecdoche, unlike metonymy, constructs relations of connection through which “two objects ‘*form an ensemble, a physical or metaphysical whole, the existence or idea of one being included in the existence or idea of another*’”; this relationship of connection, Ricoeur writes, like metonymy, also divides up into a variety of subordinate but constitutive relations: “relations of part to

24. Ricoeur, *Rule of Metaphor*, 56 (interior quotation is from Fontanier, *Les Figures du discours*, 79; emphasis added).

whole, material to thing, of one to many, of species to genus, of abstract to concrete, of species to individual.²⁵ What is particularly important not only to an understanding of tropes but also to the troubled—and troubling—figural usage of the prosthetic is that, however symmetrical the functions of metonymy and synecdoche may appear, metonymic correspondence and synecdochic connection are radically different and “designate two relationships as distinct as *exclusion* (‘absolutely separate whole’) and *inclusion* (‘included in . . .’).”²⁶ In relation to Jain and Kurzman’s critiques—and to the perceptual and discursive conflict between “the point of view of the object seen by the spirit” and “the point of view of the spirit that sees”—the metonymic discourse of scholars describing the prosthetic *objectively* as an absolutely different species from the body is exclusionary and is at odds with the synecdochic discourse of amputees who describe their prosthetic *subjectively* as of the same “species” as the body that has incorporated, and therefore included, it. Thus, there is significant figural movement from metonymy to synecdoche, from *the* prosthetic viewed abstractly to *my* prosthetic leaning up against the wall near my bed in the morning to *my leg*, which works with the other one and enables me to walk. And here, I would suggest, it is worth pausing to note how the notion of my “other” leg functions in the previous sentence: that is, my “real” leg is suddenly become the “other.” But this is a false—and hence justly confusing—opposition, as well as a telling reversal of figure and ground. My “real” leg and my “prosthetic” leg are not usually lived as two absolutely different and separate things since they function as an ensemble and are each a part of my body participating in the whole movement that gets me from here to there; thus, they are *organically* related in practice (if not in material) and are, to a great degree, *reversible* each with the other (my leg can stand in a part-to-whole synecdochic relationship with my body and vice-versa). This is to say (to refer back to Ricoeur and Fontanier) that, as I live them subjectively (and ambiguously), my two objective legs “form an ensemble, a physical [and] metaphysical whole, the existence [and] idea of one being included in the existence [and] idea of another.”

Nonetheless, to be fair in regard to the tropological tendency to see the prosthetic (and sometimes to live it) in metonymic relation to the body, it is important to note here that the inclusiveness of synecdochic connection is not always as complete in existence as it is utopian in desire. Robert Rawdon Wilson writes: “Any consideration of prostheses has to take into account their potential failure and, even, the conditions under which they might go wrong or turn against their users. The consciousness of machines always includes

25. Ibid. (interior quotation is from Fontanier, *Les Figures du discours*, 87).

26. Ibid.

... a dimension of fear. There is also fear's most intimate radical, an element of potential disappointment: the prosthesis may not work, or may work inadequately, or may entail unwanted consequences."²⁷ Although I really never feel like my prosthetic leg (or, for that matter, my eyeglasses when they're dirty) possesses the agency or subjectivity to "turn against" me, I will admit that it does have the capacity to become opaque, to turn into a hermeneutic object that I have to pay attention to and interpret and do something about (other than transparently walk with it). That is, my leg is transformed metonymically at times to another (inhuman) species of thing—the prosthetic resisting its formerly organic function in an ensemble of action directed elsewhere. In these moments it becomes an absolute other. This can happen suddenly—as when, losing a certain amount of suction in the socket that holds my leg in place, I feel (quite literally) a bit detached from the leg and have to press the valve on its side to recreate a vacuum. Or, as is more often the case, it can happen gradually—as when, over a long and hot day of walking, a combination of sweat and the pressure of the edge of the socket against my flesh begins to chafe and, if I don't "do" something about it, causes an abrasion.

The point is that, like the turns and effects of language in use, my experience—and view—of my leg (indeed, of the rest of my body) is not only *dynamic* and *situated* but also *ambiguous* and *graded*. That is, whether and to what degree I live (and describe) my prosthetic metaphorically, metonymically, or synecdochically is dependent on the nature of my engagements with others (how they see or avoid it or talk about it abstractly, or if I worry whether I can keep pace with them), with my environment (when I'm in unfamiliar territory the question is always "How far can I walk on it?"), with my mood (how physically attractive or frumpy do I feel overall and what part of myself will I single out for praise or blame?), and my project (how do I write about "my leg" or "it" within the context of cultural studies?). In sum, what Jain and Kurzman and I find problematic about the tropology of the prosthetic is, first, its vagueness, if not inaccuracy, as a metaphor meant to foreground the similarity of its structures and functions with various other ideas and institutional practices—and, second, its objectifying and often stultifying tendency to privilege and essentialize metonymic and oppositional relations that separate body and prosthetic, thus neglecting or disavowing not only the synecdochic relations that posit the cooperation and connective union of body and prosthetic in world-directed tasks but also the complex and dynamic ambiguity of all these possible existential and tropological relations as they are situated and lived.

27. Wilson, "Cyber(body)parts," 242.

II

Let me now turn, as earlier promised, to focus on a few specific prosthetic legs—first my own rather mundane one and then the much more flamboyant ones of double below-the-knee (“BK”) amputee Aimee Mullins, a successful model and record-breaking paralympian sprinter, who has subsequently gone on to celebrity as a motivational speaker, a writer, one of *People* magazine’s “50 Most Beautiful People” in 1999, and, most recently, the leading lady of *Cremaster 3* (2002), the latest in artist Matthew Barney’s series of art-house films filled with “impressive prosthetics and special effects.”²⁸ As you will see, this move to the specific and material does not leave the realm of tropology but, rather, animates it—and the “human-technology interface”—with the complexity, ambiguity, and desire revealed not only in “discourse” but also by “real bodies” living both real and imaginative lives.

Here, then, I want to stay grounded in (rather than displaced from) the materially, historically, and culturally situated premises of “the prosthetic”—even as “the prosthetic” also engages an experiential and discursive realm larger than that of its merely literal materiality, situation, and logic. As will become particularly evident—and dramatic—in the case of Aimee Mullins’s legs, such grounding of (and taking the scare quotes off) the prosthetic does not disavow figuration (which, in any case, cannot be avoided); rather, metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche are put in the service of illuminating the nature and experience of our prostheses instead of the prosthetic serving to illuminate something else (and elsewhere). Furthermore, even in my own mundane instance, focusing on the specificity of the prosthetic in its primary context functions also to highlight the contingent and uncanny play of its (and my) tropological and existential possibilities. That is, the prosthetic’s many inconsistencies in use and its combination of elements that are theoretically paradoxical yet creatively functional not only account for the fascination it holds for others but also open up imagination and analysis to an expanded range of both action and description.

Thus, beginning with my own situation, I want to take the general and vague trope of “technology as prosthesis” that Jain and Kurzman criticize and *reverse* it—turning it back and regrounding it in its mundane context, where, like my prosthetic leg, it stands objectively in common opinion as the general and vague trope of “prosthesis as technology.” This reversal, however, neither rejects the supposed purpose of the initial metaphor, which, according to Jain’s description, “attempts to describe the joining of materials, naturalizations, excorporations, and semiotic transfer that also go[es] far

28. Rebecca Mead, “Opening Night: An Art-House Epic,” *New Yorker*, May 13, 2002, 35.

beyond the medical definition of ‘replacement of a missing part’—nor does it do away with figuration. Rather, viewing the prosthesis as technology allows me to stake out (and stand) my ground in the *materiality* of the prosthetic and its incorporation—and, in the process, to playfully reconnect such figurative descriptions as “standing one’s ground” with their quite literal “underpinnings.”

In the summer of 1993, as the result of a recurrent soft-tissue cancer in my thigh, my left leg—after three operations, literally as well as metaphorically, “a drag”—was amputated high above the knee. For six months or so, while my flesh was still healing and I was engaged in strenuous preliminary rehabilitation, I got about using crutches (and here we might wonder not only how—but also if—crutches “hold up” in today’s high-tech prosthetic imagination). Finally, however, my body was ready to go through the arduous plaster casting, fiberglass molding, and microfitting of a prosthetic leg so that I could begin to learn to walk again—a fairly lengthy and complex process that imbricated both intensive mechanical adjustment and physical practice. There were all sorts of physical things I had to learn to do consciously in quick sequence or, worse, simultaneously: kick the prosthetic leg forward to ground the heel, tighten my butt, pull my residual limb back in the socket and weight the prosthetic leg to lock the knee, take a step with my “own” leg and unweight the prosthetic leg as I did so, tighten my stomach and pull up tall to kick the prosthetic forward, and begin again. This, nonetheless, took a great deal less time than I feared it would, given my middle-age, general physical clumsiness, and my almost willful lack of intimacy with my own body. Although it took much longer for me to develop a smoothly cadenced gait, I was functionally walking in a little over a month.

A prosthetic leg has many components and involves dynamic mechanical and physical processes, as well as a descriptive vocabulary all its own. To date and beginning with my very first prosthetic, as an above-the-knee (“AK”) amputee I have had four different sockets—these molded of fiberglass and “thermo-flex” plastic to conform, over time, to the changing shape of my stump. The first socket was secured to my body tenuously through a combination of suspension belt and multilayered cotton “socks” of different thickness, which were added or subtracted depending on my fluid retention, the weather, and my slowly changing shape. The sockets that followed about a year later, however, were secured snugly through the suction I referred to earlier. Now I put the leg on by pulling my flesh into the socket with a “pulling sock” and then screw a valve into a threaded plastic hole embedded in the fiberglass, depressing it so that all the air escapes and my stump and the socket mold themselves each to the other. I have also had three different metal knees made out of aluminum and titanium, all of which were attached to a small wooden block, itself bonded to the socket. The first was a mechanical knee with an interior safety “brake” that could be set to freeze

at a certain angle so as to stabilize me in “midfall” inflexion, the second a double-axis hydraulic knee that I didn’t like because its reaction time seemed to lag behind my increasingly accomplished and fluid movements, and the third my current single-axis hydraulic knee whose extension and inflexion move transparently (at least most of the time) in isomorphic concert with my own bodily rhythms.

Over time there have also been two different lightweight metal leg rods that, replacing my tibia and fibula, run from the knee down into the foot—the first a dull silvery aluminum rather like the stuff of my crutches, and the second a glowing chartreuse green titanium that I sometimes think a shame to hide. (Before the cosmetic cover was added, I remember an eleven-year-old boy coming over to me in admiration and envy, crowing “Cool . . . Terminator!”) Ultimately, these metal rods, like the rest of the leg and thigh, were covered with sculpted foam that my prosthetist lovingly shaped to complement, albeit not exactly match, my fleshy leg. (The prosthetic thigh is a bit thinner than my real thigh since it’s not as malleable as flesh is in relation to clothing.) And then I’ve also had two feet although I’ve only needed one at a time—both of hard rubber composition with an interior spring that allows me to “roll over” and shift my weight from heel to ball even without an ankle joint, both the same model “Seattle Foot.” (Prosthetics often have place names like the “Oklahoma Socket,” the “Boston Elbow,” the “Utah Arm.”) Given my replacement and accumulation over time of all these prosthetic parts, I now have a complete spare leg in the depths of my closet behind some winter coats I have no need for in California and, somewhere in the trunk of my car, there’s an extra socket (put there and never taken out after I got a new lighter-weight one). Finally, along with the crutches that I use in the early morning before I shower or late at night when I wake up to get a drink of water or go to the bathroom, I have about six or seven metal, plastic, and wooden canes. Because my remaining femur is extremely short—little more than two inches in length—I need the cane for stability; it basically counters the slight torquing and consequent “wobble” of the pliable mass of flesh within my socket and thus helps ground my walk (but, again, we might ask if canes count in today’s prosthetic imagination).

I’ve paid as much as US\$79.95 for the best of my canes (they can run into hundreds of dollars when they have silver handles shaped as the heads of hunting dogs so as to disguise physical need as aristocratic attitude), but I really do not know precisely how many thousands of dollars my prosthetic legs cost. Since I am one of a fortunate few who belong to a health maintenance organization (HMO) that covers such expenses and sends me no bills, I have been spared contemplation of the enormous and quality-of-life-threatening sums of money spent on producing, purchasing, and maintain-

ing my prostheses.²⁹ Nonetheless, my research tells me that it is likely that my full (and rather ordinary) “AK” leg cost no less than US\$10,000–\$15,000, since a top-of-the-line carbon fiber “BK” prosthesis used for sports competition (with a special Flex-Foot its inventor also calls the “Cheetah Foot”) costs at least US\$20,000 per leg. Should I wish it (which I don’t), I could request that my HMO approve the purchase and fitting of the latest Bock “C-leg”—one in which microprocessors, strain gauges, angle detectors, hydraulics, and electronic valves “recreate the stability and step of a normal leg” and, as the *New York Times* reports, was a “lifesaver” for Curtis Grimsley, who used the leg “to walk down from the 70th floor of the World Trade Center on September 11th.”³⁰ On the other hand (or leg?), the HMO might refuse me—not only because the “C-leg” costs US\$40,000–\$50,000 but also because I’m a woman of a certain age who is generally perceived as not needing to be so “well equipped” as someone who is younger (and male).

Indeed, like the movement it enables, prosthetic technology is highly dynamic and always literally incorporating (in both the bodily and business sense) the newest materials and technology available. Nonetheless, it is worth noting (as does Dr. Richard A. Sherman in a booklet written for amputees): “Just like any other machine, [prostheses] get out of whack and break with time and use. They need to be kept up properly and tuned up. The newer devices have computers, muscle tension and motion sensors, computer-controlled joints, tiny motors, etc. You can expect them to give you and your prosthetist more problems and have more ‘down time’ than relatively simple mechanical prostheses.”³¹ As it is, I have to see my prosthetist at least once a year: the mechanisms need checking and cleaning and my cosmetic foam cover always needs some repair or “fluffing up.”

I hope, by now, that you—the reader—have been technologized and quantified into a stupor by what is a very narrow and “objective” register of meaning, the bland (or at least straight-faced) enumeration, detailing, and pricing of my prosthetic parts (whether on my body or in the closet) intended to ground and lend some “unsexy” material weight to a contemporary prosthetic imagination that privileges—and, like the eleven-year-old boy quoted above, is too often thrilled by—the exotic (indeed, perhaps

29. Kurzman, in “Presence and Prosthesis,” also discusses these issues—considering, in particular, how the materials and design of his leg are “based on the same military technology which has blown the limbs off so many other young men”; how he has benefited from “the post-Cold War explosion of increasingly engineered sports equipment and prostheses”; and how the man who built his leg “struggles to hold onto his small business in a field rapidly becoming vertically integrated and corporatized” (382).

30. Ian Austen, “A Leg with a Mind of Its Own,” *New York Times*, Jan. 3, 2002, D1.

31. Richard A. Sherman, appendix to *Phantom Pain* (New York: Plenum, 1996), 231.

erotic) *idea* rather than the mundane *reality* of my intimate relations with “high” technology. (Hence my wonderment about the prosthetic status of my “low-tech” crutches or canes.) Missing here (albeit suggested) is a description of the variety of phenomenological, social, and institutional relations I engage that have been partially transformed by my prosthetic: my consciousness, for example, altered at times by a heightened awareness not only of such things as the availability of “handicapped” access and parking but also of the way in which city streets, although still the same objective size, have subjectively expanded in space and contracted in time so that responding to traffic lights now as I cross the street creates a heightened sense of peril and anxiety I never felt before my amputation.

Missing, too, is the way in which learning to walk and incorporate a prosthetic leg has made me more—not less—intimate with the operation and power of my body: I now know where my muscles are and am physically more present to myself. I also enjoy what for me (previously a really bookish person) always seems my newfound physical strength, and I have discovered my center of gravity (which, in turn, has transformed my entire comportment in ways that include but also exceed my objective physical bearing). And, then, too, there are the encounters I’ve had with others that my prosthetic leg enabled—for example, a support group I attended at the request of my prosthetist (who had just started it and wanted to show me off in my short skirt and one-inch heels as a success story). There I met the most extraordinary individuals who might not otherwise have crossed my path: an older quadriplegic man who, for years, had been locked away by his parents and now, with some assistance, was living on his own for the first time; a whining, self-pitying woman who had lost one of her legs “BK” to diabetic gangrene and obviously “got off” on being in a position to tearfully order her husband to respond to her beck and call; a furious young woman, just graduated from college, whose legs were crushed in a car accident and whose boyfriend had just broken up with her but who went on (still furious), with two “AK” prosthetics, to become a Special Olympics athlete. And, of course, there was my prosthetist—who knows my aging body and my ageless will perhaps more intimately and approvingly than has any other man in my life.

My objective description of the prosthetic as technology also doesn’t begin to touch on the great pride I’ve felt in my physical accomplishments or the great delight I take both in the way my prosthetic leg can pass as real and the desire I have to show it off. This paradoxical delight and desire have led to a strangely unselfconscious and exuberant exhibitionism that always catches me by surprise. As Kurzman points out: “In a social context, artificial limbs are ideally invisible in order to facilitate mimicry of nonamputees and passing as able-bodied,” yet many “amputees are proud of their ability to walk well and pass, and often disclose because one’s ability to pass is most remarkable when people are aware of it. . . . Prostheses do become visible, but often

under amputees' terms of pass and trespass" (379). Indeed, I often find myself revealing as a marvel what the prosthetic leg is cosmetically supposed to hide (that I have a prosthetic leg), and, even more often, I tend to talk about—and demonstrate—the coordinated and amazing process of walking that we all don't normally think about but that the prosthetic leg is able to foreground and dramatize both to myself and for others.

These paradoxical desires and delights become particularly dramatic in relation to Aimee Mullins—both her legs and their “figuration” (discursive and literal). Consider, for example, the following passages from an article on Mullins by Amy Goldwasser that appeared in 1998 in an issue of *I.D.: The International Design Magazine*:

Men devote themselves to Aimee Mullins' legs. Two men, in particular, have made it their business to know every millimeter of the expanse that runs from Mullins' knees down to her heels. One of these men can tell you precisely how many foot-pounds of torque she stores and releases with every running stride. The other can speak authoritatively about the spacing of hair follicles on her shins and the width of her Achilles tendons. Then there is a third man, who is a glass-blower. “He wants to make glass legs for me. Isn't that amazing?” Mullins says, genuinely awed by the poetic offer. “He said, ‘Cinderella had a glass slipper, I could give you glass legs.’”

In a modern literal twist to the old tale, it's not the beautiful heroine's hand but her legs that have inspired such courtly attention. And the kingdom at stake spans fewer than four feet, the lower-leg prosthetics, left and right, that Aimee Mullins wears. Mullins, 22, was born without fibula bones in her shins. Both of her legs were amputated below the knee at age one, a decision her parents made when doctors told them that otherwise she'd be confined to a wheelchair. On what Mullins refers to as her “sprinting legs,” she is an elite athlete who holds world class records in her class in the 100- and 200-meter dash and long jump. On her “pretty legs,” she is the only amputee in the country who looks magazine-model ideal in miniskirt and strappy sandals. If design can be seen as the quest for human solutions, then the challenge of creating legs to meet Mullins' biomechanical and beauty needs is an irresistible one to engineer and artist alike.³²

What we have here is certainly the “high technology” of practical prosthetics. However, even more apparent—and to jaw-dropping degree—is the particular and contemporary “technological high” that comes not only from imagining but also, in Aimee's case, from realizing prosthetics tropologically. For example, Van Phillips, who designed Mullins's “sprinting legs,” says of the Sprint-Flex III foot that is the legs' most prominent component: “I like to call it the Cheetah Foot because if you look at the hindquarters of the cheetah, the fastest animal there is, it's basically a C-shape” (Goldwasser, 48). And

32. Amy Goldwasser, “Wonder Woman,” *I. D.: International Design Magazine*, May 1998, 48.

then there is Mullins's own description of her "pretty legs": "They're absolutely gorgeous. Very long, delicate, slim legs. Like a Barbie's. Literally, that's exactly how it is." Even though Barbie dolls are anatomically impossible (the breasts too big and the legs too slim to support the torso), Mullins finds "the doll ideal is liberating rather than limiting"; her "cosmetic prostheses make her a leggy 5'8"," and she has an "arch that demands two-inch heels" (Goldwasser, 49). And this "liberation" is experienced not only by Mullins alone but also by Bob Watts, the prosthetist who materialized her desire for "Barbie legs." He tells us, "These are sort of my fantasy legs. With a single amputee, it's easier to get an artificial leg to look like the sound leg. But when you're making two legs, it's twice as much work. But there's twice as much freedom, because there's also no reason why you can't make them absolutely identical and ideal. Aimee offered me an opportunity to produce the perfect female leg" (Goldwasser, 49).

The mind boggles—not only at the complicit male and female gender fantasies literally materialized here but also at the complex and paradoxical desires uncannily articulated through and by the prosthetic. Cheetah legs? On the one hand (or is it leg?), this materialization is all about the desire for the superhuman power and prowess afforded by highly specialized technology; on the other, its highly specialized technological enhancement of human motion and speed in sprinting paradoxically foregrounds the human costs of such technologically achieved and focused animal power. Thus, what is gained on one side is lost on the other. Mullins finds sprinting easy, and she finds "it's standing still that's hard." As the article points out, "One limitation of legs that move like the fastest animal on earth: the fastest animal on earth is more stable than Mullins when not in motion." Thus, in photo shoots featuring her as an athlete, Mullins tells Goldwasser: "The photographer has to hold me and kind of prop me in position before I fall over" (49).

And then there are those fabulous glass legs. Unrealized in 1998 (but not, as we will see, in 2002), they form the basis for a grandiose Cinderella story in which a romantic prince looks for an ideal woman with just the right legs (or lack of them) so he can outdo previous narrative heroes and their glass slippers with something more and bigger. But the prince here is also a prosthetist—revealing both his and the imagined prosthetic's confused substrate of desire and fear. That is, the very physical and social transparency that prosthetists wish to achieve and amputees to experience with their artificial legs entails in such an extreme figuration slippage not only in the aesthetics of transparency, delicacy, and thus "femininity" but also in the awful fragility of glass.

Except for the glass legs, the tropes articulated here discursively ("Cheetah foot" and "Barbie legs") are also materialized *literally*—but, materially realized, as legs, they maintain their figurative status as tropes nonetheless. That is, like language used figuratively, they are literally "bent out of shape"

both in context and material form. Furthermore, as realized figures, they not only literalize both male and female gender fantasies but also confuse such categories as human and animal or animate and inanimate in precisely the ironic way that Donna Haraway's cyborg was originally meant to do. This confusion is embraced quite matter-of-factly by Mullins, who, recalling a technology and design conference she attended, tells us:

The offers I got after speaking . . . were from animatronics designers and aerospace engineers who are building lightweight but strong materials, and artisans—like the guy who works for Disney and creates the skin for the dinosaurs so that it doesn't rip when their necks move. . . . These ideas need to be applied to prosthetics. . . . With all this new technology, why can't you design a leg that looks—and acts—like a leg? I want to be at the forefront of these possibilities. The guy designing the next generation of theme parks. The engineers. The glass-blower. I want everyone to come to me with their ideas. (Goldwasser, 51)

Aimee Mullins—at least in this article in 1998—is entirely sincere but hardly naïve. That is, however ironically paradoxical and politically incorrect, for Mullins's practical purposes, the prosthetic fantasies articulated here are all potentially liberating: indeed, Aimee Mullins's "Cheetah legs" have allowed her to set world sprinting records, and her "Barbie legs" have allowed her a successful career as a fashion model.³³

III

There is something truly uncanny about the literalization of desire—whether prosthetic or discursive. We find it utterly strange when figures of speech and writing suddenly take material form, yet, at the same time, we find this strangeness utterly familiar because we wished such existential substantiations through the transubstantiations of thought and language. Thus, it was both uncannily strange and familiarly "right on" when, quite by accident and within two weeks' time, I suddenly encountered both "Barbie" and Aimee Mullins in two extraordinarily suggestive prosthetic scenarios—both discursive and both very real. Here we find not only prosthetic figuration literally and materially realized but also the literal and material prosthetic reversed on itself reflexively to become figurally the trope of a trope. First, listening to the radio, I learned that Ruth Handler, Barbie's creator, had died—the news obituary flatly recounting how, after achieving corporate success at

33. It is worth noting that, as a model, Mullins does not always use her "Barbie legs" or opt for "passing." See, e.g., a fashion advertisement for *haute couture* clothing, photographed by Nick Knight, that appeared in *The Guardian*, Aug. 29, 1998; Mullins, purposefully doll-like in her seated pose, is revealed with two distinctly "mannequin-like" lower legs, the knee joints apparent, their condition rather worn, adding to Mullins's abandoned doll-like appearance.

Mattel Toys, she was ousted from its leadership for “covering over” the company’s “losses” but then, a survivor of breast cancer, had gone on to establish a successful company that manufactured “prosthetic breasts.” Impossibly breasted Barbie on those unsupportable legs, cosmetically “covering over losses,” a hidden mastectomy, prosthetic breasts—this admixture and further reversal of the literal and figurative, the projective and the introjective, reflexively refers back to earlier figurations and makes metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche seem, by comparison, figurally straightforward.

And, then, a week later, I read that Aimee Mullins had finally gotten her glass legs—and more. Browsing through a current issue of the *New Yorker*, I came across a short piece on the New York “art-house” opening of artist Matthew Barney’s latest addition to his epic *Cremaster* cycle. Suddenly, there was Aimee:

Hardly less daring was the gown worn to the première by the movie’s leading lady, Aimee Mullins: a beige, floor-length number with a deeply plunging backline skimming buttocks that could star in “StairMaster 3.” Mullins, who is a double amputee, plays a number of roles in the film, including one in which she wears a backless dress over a pair of translucent high-heeled legs, and another in which she is changed into a cheetah woman, stalking her prey—Barney, in a pink tartan kilt and pink feathered busby—on hind legs that end not in human feet but in feline paws.³⁴

This literalized figuration goes far beyond the narrower compass and function of the usual prosthetic imagination—whether that of the cultural theorist or that of a prosthetic user like me. Indeed, I can barely keep pace with Aimee Mullins’s legs here. Figuratively, they won’t stand still. Not only are there the “glass legs” (made, however, of clear polyethylene), now literalized to function figurally in a movie. But there are also the “Cheetah legs,” the literal prosthetic Cheetah foot now figurally extended to incorporate and transform the whole woman. And, further, there is leading lady Mullins off-screen at the première “teetering slightly” in strappy sandals, because, she explains to the reporter, “these legs have, like, Barbie feet, and the heels of the shoes are an inch too short.”³⁵ Indeed, in Barney’s film she also has legs fitted with shoes that slice potatoes and, as a giant’s wife, “legs cast out of dirt and a big brass toe,” and another set of transparent legs “ending in man-of-war tentacles.”³⁶ Again, we are far beyond simple irony here, far beyond metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche. Indeed, we are both discursively and “really” in the tropological realm of *metalepsis*: the “trope of a trope.” This is

34. Mead, “Opening Night,” 35.

35. *Ibid.*

36. Nancy Spector, “Aimee Mullins,” in *Matthew Barney: The Cremaster Cycle* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2003), n.p.

not simply repetition at a metalevel. Rather, as Harold Bloom (glossing tropes and the “psychic defenses” that inform them in his *A Map of Misreading*) writes: “We can define metalepsis as . . . the metonymic substitution of a word for a word *already* figurative. More broadly, a metalepsis or transumption is a scheme, frequently allusive, that refers . . . back to any previous figurative scheme. The related defenses are clearly introjection, the incorporation of an object or instinct so as to overcome it, *and* projection, the outward attribution of prohibited instincts or objects onto an other.”³⁷ Here, with Aimee Mullins’s legs (both onscreen and off) we have both—and simultaneously—incorporation and projection, an overcoming and a resistance, an unstoppable “difference” that is not about negation but about the alterity of “becoming.” Aimee Mullins’s legs in all their variety challenge simple figuration and fixity. Here the literal and the figural do not stand on oppositional ground, and the real and the discursive together dance to Aimee Mullins’s tune—and choreography.

As for me, despite my awe and admiration for Mullins and the complexity of her life and projects, I have no desire to keep pace with her. I tend to locate my difference and variety elsewhere than my legs and just want to get on with things both mundane and extraordinary. Indeed, I remember long ago attending that first meeting of the support group at which my prosthetist proudly showed a video of amputees (without Cheetah legs) racing in the Special Olympics. As I sat there, I watched the people around me—and knew that all they wanted, as I did, was to be able to walk at work, to the store, and maybe on a treadmill at the gym. In sum, I’ve no desire for the “latest” in either literal or figural body parts. All I want is a leg to stand on, a limb I can go out on—so I can get about my world with a minimum of prosthetic thought.

37. Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 74. Unfortunately, although I think it well worth doing, there is not room enough here to take “the prosthetic” as figure through all the tropes and attendant psychic defenses that Bloom lays out in a resonant—and relevant—argument and diagram (69–74, 84).

Inscribing Ethical Space

Ten Propositions on Death, Representation, and Documentary

*At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh or fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is.*

—T. S. ELIOT, “Burnt Norton”

*Sudden violent death is now a fact of our imaginative existence, crowding out the
serene metaphors.* —LAWRENCE LANGER, *The Age of Atrocity*

Always concerned with the subversive capacity of cinema to show us what we may not wish to see, critic Amos Vogel has frequently commented on the medium’s tendency to avert its eyes before the sight of actual death. He writes: “Now that sex is available to us in hard-core porno films, death remains the one last taboo in cinema. However ubiquitous death is—we all ultimately suffer from it—it calls into question the social order and its value systems; it attacks our mad scramble for power, our simplistic rationalism and our unacknowledged, child-like belief in immortality.”¹ Death, Vogel suggests, possesses a “ferocious reality” that exceeds attempts to repress it or culturally contain it. Indeed, semiologically speaking, we can say that death presents a special problem in—and to—representation.

What follows is best identified as a semiotic phenomenology of death as it is represented and made significant for us through the medium and tropes of nonfictional documentary film.² Such a phenomenology of representa-

1. Amos Vogel, “Grim Death,” *Film Comment* 16, no. 2 (Mar.–Apr. 1980): 78.

2. A semiotic phenomenology sees being and representation as coemergent, both differentiated and yet united in the reversibility (or “chiasmus”) of perception and expression in the making of meaning and communication. For further elaboration see Richard L. Lanigan, *Speaking and Semiology: Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenological Theory of Existential Communication* (The Hague: Mouton, 1972); and Richard L. Lanigan, “Semiotic Phenomenology: A Theory of Human Communication Praxis,” *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 10 (1982): 62–73. See also my own *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

tion attempts to describe, thematize, and interpret death as it appears on the screen and is experienced by us as indexically real rather than iconically or symbolically fictive. Given that representation and our experience of it and the world are the object of its scrutiny (and, indeed, the means of its description), such a phenomenology is necessarily culturally and historically informed; it is not transcendently removed from the cultural and historical situation in which it was carried out. What I observe here about our understanding of death, both in the culture and on the screen, is always subject to qualification by culture and history in their various transformations. Thus, my aim is less to arrive at universal, “essential,” and proscriptive categories than to address the “thickness” of one particular mode of visual representation as it richly and radically entails a crucial aspect of human existence and our present attitudes in the sight of it. To that end, after a general historical situation of death and its representation in the context of Western culture, I will pose ten propositions as a way to focus on and semiotically describe some of the problematic relations that exist between death and its cinematic representation in nonfiction film. Finally, thematizing and interpreting these relations will lead to an exploration of the highly charged ethical stances that existentially (but always also culturally and historically) ground certain codes of documentary vision in its specular engagement with death and dying—and, so visibly charged, also charge the film spectator with ethical responsibility for her or his own acts of viewing.

HISTORICIZING DEATH AND REPRESENTATION

Let us first consider the particular threat that death presents to representation in our culture. Initially a social and public event, what is today uncomfortably called “natural” death has over time become an antisocial and private experience—all the more shocking when we are confronted with the sight of it. At the same time, we are more familiar with the public sight of accidental or violent death, death thus seen less in the natural order of things than as an aberrant, if frequent and highly charged, dramatic event. The particularity of death’s current force and social meaning has been succinctly historicized in Philippe Ariès’s *Western Attitudes toward Death*, which takes us from the Middle Ages to the relative present, highlighting how the social significance of death and dying has radically changed over the centuries.³ Ariès thus charts a course from the public space of the medieval bedchamber and a natural, “domesticated,” and socially speakable event to the privatized space of the individual bedroom, where—from the sixteenth through the

3. Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. Patricia M. Ranum (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974). Subsequent references will be cited in the text.

eighteenth century—the parallel paroxysms of sex and death condense to form a major iconography, one that stresses the “undomesticated” and “irrational” behavior of the body as culturally disruptive. He tells us:

Like the sexual act, death was henceforth increasingly thought of as a transgression which tears man from his daily life, from rational society, . . . in order to make him undergo a paroxysm, plunging him into an irrational, violent, and beautiful world. Like the sexual act, death for the Marquis de Sade is a break, a rupture. The idea of rupture is something completely new. Until this point the stress had been on the familiarity with death and with the dead. This familiarity had not been affected, even for the rich and the mighty, by the upsurge of individualism beginning in the twelfth century. Death had become a more important event; more thought had to be given to it. But it had become neither frightening nor obsessive. It had remained familiar and tamed. But from now on it would be thought of as a break. This notion of a break was born and developed in the world of erotic phantasms. It then passed into the world of real and acted-out events. (57–58)

This rupture between death and daily social life, this connection of death to the irrational, the convulsive, the erotic, the sexual, the decadent, and the private is furthered by the sublimations and repressions of nineteenth-century Victorian culture that find their displaced expression in various forms of romanticism. Morbid, hysterical, and eroticized fascination with the *idea* of death emerges. Death becomes linked not only to the erotic but also to the exotic and decadent. It is marked as beautiful and thrilling by virtue of its opening onto a foreign and forbidden space that is not constrained by Victorian social restrictions. Indeed, the nineteenth century *displaces* Eros in Thanatos—not only in the iconography of romantic and gothic literature and visual art but also in excessive social representations of death. Ariès points to the period’s elaborate “funeral processions, mourning clothes, the spread of cemeteries and their surface areas, visits and pilgrimages to tombs, the cult of memory” (106). Nonetheless, despite this elaborate system of displacement, this eroticization of dying and this gothic approach to the dead, nineteenth-century Western culture was still familiar with and regularly exposed to the process and event of death as the gradual outcome of disease, old age, and bodily decay. Family members generally died at home, deathbed visits and vigils were still common, and the public’s knowledge of accidental and violent death (however increased by industrialization and urbanization) was balanced by its more common and intimate experience of death as an event it could call natural.

Experiences and attitudes changed in the twentieth century. Encounters with natural death became less common. Natural death thus became less natural—on the one hand, less part of daily life and, on the other, more

attributable to “foreign” causes that had exotic medical names. Increasingly medicalized, institutionalized, and technologized, natural death was displaced not in elaborate and erotic representation but in objective physical space. The common event of death through disease or old age was moved from its common site in the home and bedroom to a regulated hospital room and then the mortuary, where the dying and the dead could be overseen by professionals and overlooked by family and community. Removed from sight and common experience, from a site integral with cultural activity, natural death in our culture became, Ariès tells us, a “technical phenomenon”: one “dissected, cut to bits by a series of little steps, which finally makes it impossible to know which step was the real death, the one in which consciousness was lost, or the one in which breathing stopped” (88–89). If impossible to prevent, natural death became possible to efface.

Given the disappearance of natural death from the public sphere and an increasing public emphasis on sexuality, twentieth-century Western culture rejected what Ariès calls the nineteenth century’s “eloquent decor of death” (106). Breaking with the necrophilic excesses of romanticism and the sexual prudery of the Victorians, and opting for the social goal of a prosaic “collective happiness,” twentieth-century (and now twenty-first-century) culture found (and finds) excessively poetic or aristocratic expressions of “melancholy nostalgia” embarrassing, if not downright repugnant and undemocratic (93–94). Such excess is generally seen as self-indulgent rather than socially functional—unless it is tinged with irony, or it is ceremonial and performed en masse and in the service of the state or other major cultural institution. (A fairly recent and, to some, discomfiting instance of such excessive display was the response to the death of Princess Diana; here the displacement of Eros into Thanatos was played out publicly and ceremonially, not only in “melancholy nostalgia” for both a lost aristocrat and “the people’s princess” but also in a mass-mediated melodrama that, both erotic and maternal, found its resolution in violent death and the inaugural installation of, as Ariès put it, “the cult of memory.”)

Although we may still observe ceremonial conventions surrounding the death of public figures, there seems no cultural need for excessive rituals surrounding natural death when its process and event in the private sphere are displaced from public sight. Thus, as Ariès concludes (paralleling Vogel’s observations), “Death has become a taboo . . . and . . . in the twentieth century it has replaced sex as the principal forbidden subject.” Citing social anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer’s influential 1955 article “The Pornography of Death,” Ariès writes: “The more society was liberated from the Victorian constraints concerning sex, the more it rejected things having to do with death. Along with the interdict appears the transgression: the mixture of eroticism and death so sought after from the sixteenth to the eighteenth cen-

ture reappears in our sadistic literature and in violent death in our daily life” (93).⁴

The point to be emphasized here is that by removing the event of natural death from common—and public—sight so that it has become exotic and strange, and by diminishing, making shameful, and rejecting the excessive and explicit displacements of natural death found in the social representations of the nineteenth century, contemporary Western culture has effectively made natural death a taboo subject for public discourse and severely limited the conditions for its representation. Removing natural death from public space and discourse leaves only *accidental* and *violent* death in public sites and conversation. And, with the emphasis on accident and violence, thus emerges what Gorer has called the “pornography of death”—that is, representation obsessed with and limited to the sensational activity of a sensible body-object abstracted from the latter’s simultaneous existence as an intentional and sensate body-subject. Pointing to the factors that led to this pornographic curiosity about death and an obsession with its bodily inscriptions, Gorer, writing in the 1950s, tells us:

During the last half-century public health measures and improved preventive medicine have made natural death among the younger members of the population much more uncommon than it had been in earlier periods, so that a death in the family, save in the fullness of time, became a relatively uncommon incident in home life; and, simultaneously, violent death increased in a manner unparalleled in human history. Wars and revolutions, concentration camps, and gang feuds were the most publicized of the causes for these violent deaths; but the diffusion of the automobile, with its constant and unnoticed toll of fatal accidents, may well have been the most influential in bringing the possibility of violent death into the expectations of law-abiding people in time of peace. While natural death became more and more smothered in prudery, violent death has played an ever-growing part in the fantasies offered to mass audiences—detective stories, thrillers, Westerns, war stories, spy stories, science fiction, and eventually horror comics.⁵

It hardly needs saying that our exposure to violent death—and its detailed pornographic inscriptions made visible on the body and in representation—has increased since Gorer wrote his essay in 1955. Assassinations; snipings; mass, serial, and celebrity murders; civil unrest and violence; terrorism; around-the-clock televisual coverage of a variety of catastrophic accidents;

4. An apposite example of such “sadistic literature”—purposefully so in its “mixture of eroticism and death”—is J. G. Ballard’s *Crash*, the subject of a previous chapter in this volume. Movies in this vein are, of course, commonplace in the American context.

5. Geoffrey Gorer, “The Pornography of Death,” *Death: Current Perspectives*, ed. Edwin S. Shneidman (Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield, 1976), 75.

and, by now, almost incidental murders and suicides—all have brought death increasingly into public sight and marked its significant representation as accidental and/or violent. In addition, an increased cultural faith in the infinite efficacy of new technologies as they are mobilized by medicine, the biological sciences, and fitness industries to preserve and extend the human body into perpetual health and perpetual youth has further marginalized “natural” death from disease or old age as “unnatural.” Indeed, both disease and bodily decay are now seen as an affront to nature (the latter naturalized through and through by the technological). Which is to say that death is more comprehensible in the current cultural moment when it occurs for a young or hard body—or as the sudden consequence of external forces rather than the gradual consequence of internal processes. Thus, as Lawrence Langer points out in *The Age of Atrocity*, death in our current culture is generally regarded not as a natural human end but, rather, as “a sudden and discontinuous experience,” as always “inappropriate,” as an “atrocity.”⁶ Furthermore, in a paradoxical way (given its apprehension as always shocking), accidental and violent death and its bodily paroxysms have also become increasingly naturalized. Indeed, in both our televisual and cinematic fictions, “sudden,” “discontinuous,” “violent,” “inappropriate,” and “atrocious” deaths have become the norm. Safely contained by narrative, often represented in hyperbolic forms and structures, they titillate and offer a mediated view that softens the chaotic randomness and ferocious threat they present in the real world in which we live. Furthermore, even in the fiction film, it is the rare death that is represented as traditionally natural. In our documentary films the representation (or, in phenomenological terms, what is perceived as the presentation) of death is even rarer. Indexical in code and function, documentaries tend to observe the social taboos surrounding real death and generally avoid explicit (that is, visible) screen reference to it.⁷

6. Lawrence L. Langer, *The Age of Atrocity: Death in Modern Literature* (Boston: Beacon, 1978), xii–xiii. (The epigraph to this essay appears on p. 6.) Subsequent references will be cited in the text.

7. Since this essay was initially published in 1984, the social taboos on representing real death in documentary films have been purposefully transgressed in concert with increasing political activism (that has involved cinema) around the AIDS epidemic. Thus, although they are not widespread, there are more films than there used to be that document dying and death. A contemporary example of a feature documentary that found national theatrical distribution is *Silverlake Life: The View from Here* (Peter Friedman, 1993), in which filmmaker Tom Joslin and his lover Mark Massi, both diagnosed with AIDS, kept a video diary of the progression of Mark’s illness and his eventual death. In the present context it is worth noting also that the political activism surrounding AIDS (and the films dealing with it) have consistently attempted to demedicalize and de-technologize the illness, the process of dying, and death so that these cannot be quarantined as “institutional” problems.

THE SEMIOLOGY OF DEATH

In our present culture, then, we create and have access to delimited and overdetermined representations of death. A taboo subject, it titillates us in our fictions as a “pornography” that objectifies and enacts violent mortifications of the human body while, in its quotidian process and event, it remains unnatural and unnamable in both our social relations and those indexical forms of representation that point to them. That is, even in those representations that do speak and “name” death, there is a tendency to avoid showing its presumed actual moment onscreen. As one commentator points out in relation to *On Our Own Terms: Moyers on Dying* (Bill Moyers, 2000), a documentary television series that deals with terminally ill patients, their families, and their doctors explicitly struggling and coming to terms—personal, moral, and legal—with death: “Because of the intrusiveness inherent in the genre, it comes as almost a shock to realize we *don’t* see the actual moment of death. That reminds us that these are real people and not actors, actual rather than staged stories. It also testifies to the persistent taboo that we feel around death itself, even on a show dedicated to shattering the taboo.”⁸ If, indeed, as Vogel suggests, the “ferocious reality” of death (particularly “natural” death) in our present culture threatens our “social order and its value systems,” thus rendering it a taboo subject, then that “ferocious reality” also radically calls into question our culture’s semiological systems. That is, the event of death as it is perceived in our present culture points to and interrogates the very limits of representation in all its forms—including, of course, the cinematic and televisual.

Certainly, death is not the only “ferocious reality” to make the camera avert its gaze or despair of representing the existential reality of both human and social being. Vogel points out in *Film as a Subversive Art* that “the periodic transformation of matter from one state into another continues to evoke all the superstitious alarms and taboos of pre-history.”⁹ These superstitions and taboos, many of them cross-cultural, all have to do with the ultimately uncontrollable and therefore mysterious and (often) frightening *semiosis of the body*. Difficult to contain in cultural vision, such acts of human bodily transformation include excretion, sexual union, and birth, as well as death. Furthermore, the visual taboos surrounding these bodily transformations that challenge both the unity and security of the subject often extend to particular bodily signs that indexically point to and foreground the essential mystery of bodily being and nonbeing. For example, always in some way treated as sacred—whether through the observance of ritual or ritual nonobservance—

8. John Lantos, “How to Live as We Are Dying,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Sep. 8, 2000, B18.

9. Vogel, *Film as a Subversive Art*, 263.

both the deformed live body and the inanimate human corpse serve as radical signs of the “matter” of human being as out of human control. The body thus serves as the primary indexical sign of what Langer calls “the universal dilemma of dealing with one’s ‘creatureliness’—of living critically and self-consciously while so vulnerable to the physical cruelties of men, nature, and science” (63).

Nonetheless, of all transformations of the lived body in our culture, the event of death seems to pose a particularly strong threat to representation. Indeed, it seems unrepresentable. Birth, by contrast, does not seem unrepresentable. Although it also involves a bodily transformation that interrogates conventional systems of representation with its radical originality, unlike death it affirmatively signifies the entrance into conventional culture, into social order and value systems, into a representable world and a world of representation. Birth, for us (and possibly for all cultures), is the sign to begin all signs. Death, however, is a sign that ends all signs. In a secular and scientized culture such as ours, it is perceived as the last, the ultimate, act of semiosis. It is always original, unconventional, and shocking, its event always simultaneously representing both the last gasp of sign production and the end of representation. Thus, although birth and death are each processes and representations of liminal moments of bodily transformation and both threaten the stability of cultural codes and conventions with their radical originality, in our present culture death is the more subversive transformation of the two.

Hence, we come to my ten propositions about death and its current—and specifically—cinematic and televisual representation in the documentary mode. (Here I will not address the conundrum of digital—or digitized—death, which calls for an essay of its own.) Each proposition is certainly open to argument and thus is offered less as an essential insight than as a “proposal”—a focal point for thought about the significance and signification of death in our cinematic and televisual culture (as well as across cultural boundaries). Indeed, all the propositions are historically and culturally limited in their claims even though they are couched in assertive language.

1. *The representation of the event of death is an indexical sign of that which is always in excess of representation and beyond the limits of coding and culture: Death confounds all codes.* That is, we do not ever “see” death on the screen nor understand its visible stasis or contours. Instead, we see the activity and remains of the event of *dying*. Whereas being can be visibly represented in its inscription of intentional behavior (the “having of being” animated concretely in action that is articulated in a visible world), nonbeing is not visible. It lies over the threshold of visibility and representation. Thus, it can only be pointed toward, the terminus of its indexical sign forever offscreen, forever out of sight. Here Roland Barthes is apposite (echoing, as well, previous discussion here of death’s sublimation and pacification through fiction):

[T]rauma is just what suspends language and blocks signification. Of course, certain normally traumatic situations can be apprehended in a photographic process of signification; but this is precisely because they are indicated through a rhetorical code which distances them, sublimates them, pacifies them. Strictly traumatic photographs are rare, the trauma is entirely dependent on the certainty that the scene has really occurred: *the photographer had to be there* (this is the mythical definition of denotation); but this granted (which, to tell the truth, is already a connotation), the traumatic photograph (fires, shipwrecks, catastrophes, violent deaths) is the one about which there is nothing to say: the shock photo is by structure non-signifying; no value, no knowledge, at the limit no verbal categorization can have any hold over the process instituting its signification.¹⁰

Death also exceeds cinematic representation and escapes comprehension for other semiotic and phenomenological reasons in our highly technologized culture. In the contemporary context death has come to be inscribed and understood as an objective “technical phenomenon” of the body rather than as a subjective lived-body experience. Even as our own bodies tend to flinch and feel the possibilities of the mortification of our own flesh in the presence of some cinematically represented and sudden assault on another’s body, what Ariès says of death in our current culture holds generally true nonetheless—and it finds its parallel in the indexical representation of death in the cinema. That is, the structure of what Ariès sees as the contemporary dissection of death into a series of “little steps” that “finally make it impossible to know which step was the real death” is paralleled by the initial recording of death by the film moving through camera and projector in twenty-four “little steps” per second and, finally, in always disappointing post hoc attempts to “find” and “see” the *exact* moment of death in nonfiction films through a close inspection of every frame recording the event. Such spatial and temporal dissection echoes several of Zeno’s paradoxes that, in dissecting space and movement into their component “objective” parts, undo the experience and achievements of both—and, in relation to the present discussion, this dissection “undoes” what was merely the illusion of the representation of death to leave us with the continuing mystery and unrepresentability of its actual fact.¹¹

10. Roland Barthes, “The Photographic Message,” in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), 19.

11. Reference here is to Zeno of Elea (fifth century BC) and—as known to us primarily through Aristotle—his four paradoxes involving the objective nature of space and motion (which, of course, also entail both time and stasis). Two of these paradoxes are pertinent to the present discussion: the “racetrack paradox” and the “arrow paradox.” The former has to do with the logical impossibility of a runner ever reaching his or her destination since the runner must get to the midpoint, then the midpoint of the midpoint, ad infinitum—thus never achieving the endpoint. The latter has to do with the fact that at any moment in time, an airborne arrow occu-

An exemplary “proof” of this excess of death over its indexical cinematic representation, as well as of its contemporary and technological dissection, was the fascination (and disappointment) generated by the Abraham Zapruder film of John Kennedy’s assassination. Played again and again, slowed down, stopped frame by frame, the momentum of death escapes each static moment of its representation and frustrates our vision and thus our insight. Rituals of repetition and stop motion, of closer and closer scrutiny, yield only greater and greater mystification. What the images reveal is not the fact or truth of death but the fact or truth of representation—and its limits. Indeed, in *Report* (1967) experimental filmmaker Bruce Conner loops the Zapruder footage and, through repetition and slow and stop motion, comments ironically on (among other things) the impossibility of our ever being able to “really see” the “moment” of Kennedy’s death.

This excess of death over visibility and representation is felt most acutely in our encounter with images that are primarily indexical and have known relations to our extracinematic personal and social lives. Usually represented by signs that, although verisimilarly indexical, function primarily on iconic and symbolic levels, death in fiction film does not generally move us to seek out a visibility that we feel—in seeing it—it lacks. Even without the slow motion inspections of death made paradigmatic by Sam Peckinpah in *The Wild Bunch* (1969), *fictive death is experienced as visible within representation*. That is, referring primarily and significantly only to their characters, representations of death in fiction film tend to satisfy us—indeed, in some instances, to sate us or overwhelm us so that we cover our eyes rather than, as with the Zapruder film, strain to see. Thus, whereas death is generally experienced in fiction films as representable and often excessively visible, in nonfiction or documentary films it is experienced as confounding representation and exceeding visibility.

2. *It is the visible mortification of—or violence to—the intentional, responsive, and representable lived body that stands as the index of dying, and it is the visible cessation of that body’s intentional and responsive behavior that stands as the symbol of death.* Dying and death, particularly in documentary film, cannot be represented and made visible on the screen with an exactitude experienced as

pies only a “point” in space and thus cannot be in motion since a point does not have what is necessary to motion: duration; thus the arrow does not move (and, indeed, nothing does). The implications for the present discussion are, in relation to the first paradox, that the representation of death proves that it never actually happens, and thus we can’t see it (all we see is dying); and, in relation to the second, that the representation of dying is impossible because every moment of the representation is itself motionless and without duration, and the temporality that makes the distinction between human life and human mortality meaningful does not exist. For a brief gloss on these and the other two paradoxes see *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Robert Audi (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 865–66.

“fullness.” The transformation of a being into nonbeing, its location at what T. S. Eliot in “Burnt Norton” describes as the “still point of the turning world” where being is “neither flesh nor fleshless” and eludes us, is only perceptible by way of contrast with what is representable.¹² That is, death can only be represented in a visible and vigorous contrast between two states of the physical body: the body as *lived body*, intentional and animated—and the body as *corpse*, a thing of flesh unintended, inanimate, static.

In this regard, although generally taken as an indexical sign of death (that is, existentially connected to and symptomatic of the cessation of existential being), the corpse is also understood in its particularity as a symbolic sign of the “dead.” That is, conventionally the corpse signifies, first, the deterioration of materially embodied being into absolute “thing-ness” and then into absolute “no-thing-ness”—both experientially unknown (and unknowable) states of “being.” This is not to say that we do not respond physically, emotionally, and cognitively to the sight of what is believed to be a real corpse on the screen but rather that we respond to it always as other than we are and as an object. Indeed, the horror of the corpse is precisely that it is not perceived as a subject—even as its objectivity confronts us with and reminds us of the limits and end of human subjectivity. In an extremely moving essay, “The Sacral Power of Death in Contemporary Experience,” William May tells us:

The flesh is more than instrumental to control and more than sensitive, it is also revelatory. A man reveals himself to his neighbor in and through the living flesh. He is one with his countenance, gestures, and the physical details of his speech. As some have put it, he not only has a body, he is his body. Part of the terror of death, then, is that it threatens him with a loss of his revelatory power. The dreadfulness of the corpse lies in its claim to be the body of the person, while it is wholly unrevealing of the person. What was once so expressive of the human soul has suddenly become a mask.¹³

The corpse, then, exists with paradoxical semiotic force. It is a significant bodily sign of the body that no longer has the iconic power to intentionally signify itself as lived. Instead, the corpse engages our sympathy as an indexical object existentially connected to a subject who was once an intentional and responsive “being,” and it generates our horror as a symbolic object bereft of subjectivity and responsiveness that stands for a condition we cannot existentially know and yet to which we must succumb.

12. T. S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton,” in *Four Quartets* (New York: Harvest Books/Harcourt Brace, 1943), 15.

13. William F. May, “The Sacral Power of Death,” in *Death in American Experience*, ed. Arien Mack (New York: Schocken, 1973), 116. Interior reference to not only “having” a body but also “being” a body is to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), 150.

As an object, the corpse is alienated from human being. It may have once been a subject, but it is not now a subject. Thus, as John Fraser points out in *Violence in the Arts*, “the very thing that cries out for the deepest sympathy serves in some measure to inhibit that sympathy, namely the conversion of the sufferers into ‘monsters.’”¹⁴ Our sympathy for the subject who once was is undermined by our alienation from the object that is. We are not dead and cannot imagine what it would be like to “be” so (that is, to “not be”). The corpse, then, becomes a horrific yet sacred taboo object. We are fascinated by it and fearful of looking at it, filled with what Vogel suggests is “the thrilling guilt of the voyeur/transgressor (to see what one has no right to see), coupled with the fear of punishment. How delicious when it does not come and the forbidden . . . image can continue to be viewed.”¹⁵

In nonfictional cinema the corpse visibly provides the material and physical premises for visual and metaphysical reflection on being and not-being, between the lived-body subject and the inanimate and implacable body-object. The corpse as a body-object is physically passive, semiotically impassive. It can be offered to a devouring scrutiny or embalmed with the richest symbolism. It can be used, offering no resistance to the willful viewer—either filmmaker or spectator. However, as Fraser tells us, “In general, passivity does not invite empathy. What does invite it . . . is anything that permits one to see the other as an agent. . . . [T]wo of the most important factors making for empathy are a sense of the individual as engaged in work, and a sense of the physicality of the body.”¹⁶ Although the corpse is the most physical of bodies, it is so because it is *just* a physical body. It does not “work”; it is not lived. As a physical body, it can be inscribed by decay in an activity of transformation that signifies the passage between some “thing” and “no-thing.” But as just a physical body, the corpse cannot be inscribed by death in an activity of transformation that signifies the passage between being and not-being, between the responsive being of a body-subject and the passive existence of a materially embodied object. The inactive and unresponsive corpse, then, does not necessarily quicken us in our own lived bodies to an apprehension of dying and death so much as does the active inscription of the process of mortification on another lived body. This need to signify the active transformation that death visits on the responsive, physical, lived body in a representation that visibly contrasts two extreme states of existence leads to a third proposition.

3. *The most effective cinematic signifier of death in our present culture is violent action inscribing signs of mortification on the visibly lived body.* This proposition is perhaps the most controversial thus far. Although it is meant as descrip-

14. John Fraser, *Violence in the Arts* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 59.

15. Vogel, *Film as a Subversive Art*, 201.

16. Fraser, *Violence in the Arts*, 61.

tive rather than prescriptive, it still moves us to some sort of ethical response. That is, if we abhor violence and its rupture of both the social and fleshly fabric of culture and individual human lives, it is difficult to acknowledge that violence is currently the most effective signifier of death in visual representation. However, as discussed earlier, the primary relationship we have to death in our present culture is one marked by our lack of familiarity with the relatively gradual process of what used to be seen as natural death and increased familiarity with the abrupt and now natural unnaturalness of sudden and violent death. Given contemporary social relations to the event of death (the overwhelming visible presence and representation of death as externally and violently caused and the “structuring absence” and invisibility of natural death both in our lives and our representations), it should not be surprising that violent mortification of the lived body is the most effective *sign-vehicle* by which to signify the transformation of being to nonbeing.¹⁷ The *sign-functions* of violence are aptly described by Langer:

In an age of private violence and public slaughter, which threatens to make atrocity socially respectable, inappropriate death has become an issue which we can no longer consider an aberration from the normal rhythms of experience. Sudden violent death is now a fact of our imaginative existence, crowding out the serene metaphors. . . . More recently the mushroom cloud has been displaced in our national consciousness by a personal act of aggression gradually approaching the status of metaphor—assassination. (6)

Consider how, in our cinematic culture, violence gives death a perceptible form and signifies its ultimate violation of the lived body.¹⁸ The objectively visible, most often externally caused, and violent end to animate and

17. Although the term *sign-vehicle* can be seen as equivalent to the term *signifier*, which would be more familiar to most scholars, it is companion to the term *sign-function*, which is not equivalent to either the familiar terms *signified* or *sign* and is used to clarify and highlight specific components that correlate to constitute signs by Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 48–57. The sign-vehicle is the expressive “stuff” that conveys significant meaning content into the world; furthermore, a single sign-vehicle usually “conveys many intertwined contents” and in itself constitutes a “text whose content is a multileveled discourse” (57). According to Eco, “properly speaking there are not signs, but only sign-functions.” “A sign-function is realized when two *functives* (expression and content) enter into a mutual correlation”; but, as Eco points out, “the same functive can also enter into another correlation, thus becoming a different functive and therefore giving rise to a new sign-function. Thus signs are the provisional result of coding rules which establish *transitory* correlations of elements” (49).

18. One of the earliest essays I published (long before I knew what phenomenology is) was on the significant cinematic shift in the 1970s from a fairly reticent treatment of violence to its graphic inspection and the correspondence of this with changes in the American cultural experience and exposure to violence in daily life. See Vivian Sobchack, “The Violent Dance: A Personal Memoir of Death in the Movies,” *Journal of Popular Film* 3 (winter 1974): 2–14; the essay—under the same title—has been reprinted and expanded to consider the cinematic treatment

intentional activity is particularly, personally, and viscerally shocking seen on the screen—for the film medium, in its inherently kinetic and unfolding presentation of moving representations, is life-giving, life-sustaining, and life-affirming. Thus, the violent cessation of movement and animation in a lived-body subject visibly and spatially emphasizes the temporal contrast between animate and inanimate being—between the living and the dead. It visually transforms the cinematic present into a visible past tense, and an embodied subject into a body-object. This contrast and transformation suggests a fourth proposition.

4. *The most effective cinematic representation of death in our present culture is inscribed on the lived body in action that is abrupt.* Ironically, although we have little to actually do with “natural death” in contemporary culture, the *idea* of natural death is comforting insofar as it is perceived as gradual and even possibly easeful. For example, the notion (and hope) of dying “in one’s sleep” significantly returns us to the bedchamber and a “domesticated” death, one not necessarily associated with pain or bodily humiliation. This idea of a domesticated and gradual death, however, is also nostalgic and subversive in relation to our culture’s myth of *process as progress* and has led to the spatial (and social) displacement of lived bodies undergoing the visibly “unprogressive” *process of decay*. As Ariès notes, by the late Middle Ages, decomposition of the body had become the sign of human failure and finitude; in our time, that failure (and mortal finitude) has become transformed into something personally shameful (39–46).

Except in the case of the sudden and fatal heart attack or stroke (described in the vernacular as “dropping dead”), we do not customarily think of natural death in the binary terms that violence inscribes. Indeed, the perceptible qualities of natural death mark neither the sudden end to the body as lived nor a single dramatically significant moment of bodily transformation. Thus, the slow and almost imperceptible transformation of a lived body into a corpse, of the animate into the inanimate, does not signify our more usual contemporary experience and idea of death as a “break” or “rupture.” Instead, natural death sets up and fulfills its own expectations over a perceived *durée* (hence, the now unfamiliar notion of a “death watch” or “wait”). And, in regard to its visual representation, this *durée* could be said to exist in temporal equivalence to the present-tense process of the film medium, marking little or no contrast between movement and stillness, between presence as an embodied being and a merely present body. Visualized as a gradual rather than abrupt process, then, the transformation of animate body-subject into inanimate body-object does not so much represent

of violence in the present day in *Screening Violence*, ed. Stephen Prince (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 110–24.

death as it represents *the living of the process of dying*. Thus, referring to Michael Roemer's *Dying* (a 1976 documentary that, over time, follows three people dying of various forms of cancer and conducts interviews with the widow of a fourth), a reviewer writes: "Theirs is a lesson about living," or, "Shock it will, not because it is painful to watch but because it isn't. . . . [I]t is an unabashed plea for death as ritual."¹⁹ These comments echo Ernest Becker, who, in *The Denial of Death*, points out that "disease and dying are still living processes in which one is engaged."²⁰

Abruptness does not allow for the temporal experiences of process and ritual, the analgesic of form and formalities. The abrupt transformation of the animated body into an inanimate corpse denies formal reason and connotes the "irrationality," "arbitrariness," and "unfairness" of death. Indeed, abruptness itself structures in part what we perceive as violence, and it may well be that, in our present culture, both abruptness and violence best articulate death so that its binary marking of existence and nonexistence can be felt viscerally and personally by those who view its signs. It might be said, then, that the cinematic representation and *durée* of dying as a gradual process effectively functions to signify a *third-person death*—whereas the abrupt and binary representation of death through a violently sudden bodily transformation signifies a *first-person death* that, because it always appears untimely, can be appreciated, at least to some extent, as potentially mine. In this regard Simone de Beauvoir, in *A Very Easy Death*, writes: "There is no such thing as a natural death. . . . All men must die: but for every man his death is an accident and, even if he knows it and consents to it, an unjustifiable violation."²¹ Martin Heidegger, too, points to a disavowal of our own "Being-towards-death" that always displaces it onto "someone" or "sometime" else. He writes, "One knows about the certainty of death and yet 'is' not authentically certain of one's own. . . . Death is deferred to 'sometime later,' and this is done by invoking the so-call[ed] 'general opinion.'"²²

Beauvoir's and Heidegger's existential assertions are couched in universal terms, yet, of course, they are also situated historically and socially in twentieth-century experience, one dominated by images of massive discontinuity and upheaval. More particularly, Robert Jay Lifton locates the contemporary emergence of general attitudes toward death as an accident and a violation

19. David Dempsey, "The Dying Speak for Themselves on a TV Special," *New York Times*, Apr. 25, 1976, sec. 2, p. 29. The description also is apposite to the films *Silverlake Life* and *On Our Own Terms* mentioned above.

20. Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1973), 104.

21. Simone de Beauvoir, *A Very Easy Death*, trans. Patrick O'Brien (New York: Warner, 1973), 123.

22. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper, 1962), 302.

in the social discontinuities and upheavals caused by the great wars we have experienced since the early part of the twentieth century. He tells us, "Without a cultural context in which life has continuity and boundaries, death seems premature whenever it comes. Whatever the age and circumstances, it is always 'untimely.'"²³ Thus, abruptness, particularly as it is correlated with violence, most effectively serves to signify the phenomenological sense of death in our time. As Langer puts it: "Atrocity, with its emphasis on the grotesqueness of abrupt and violent death, intensifies man's latent apprehension that dying is an unmanageable event; it erodes culture's carefully nurtured positions for withstanding this threat, and leaves man with the options of terror or awareness" (64). Linked as it is with atrocity, violence, and abruptness, it seems hardly surprising that, in today's culture, death has replaced sex as a visual taboo.

The subversive action death performs on and in culture and visual representation, its excess and its primary articulation as abrupt and mortifying violence on a lived-body subject, in part explains the particular ethical problems its event poses for nonfiction cinema. If death is kept from cultural sight except when it violently breaks into a public site, how is a visual medium to deal with its representation without breaking a cultural taboo? As Langer suggests: "Men are reluctant to speak about death because 'words have a primitive equivalence with the underlying reality to which they allude.' To speak about real death, therefore, as opposed to death in the abstract, 'puts us in the role of someone who violates a taboo'" (14–15).²⁴ In fictional cinema, the representation of death, however graphic, is experienced as abstract—that is, hypothetical or "irreal"; it is a character who dies and not the actor who plays him. The nonfictional representation of death in the documentary, however, is experienced as real—even when it is not as graphically displayed as it often is in fiction film.²⁵ Expressed primarily in the limited tropes and obsessions that Gorer identifies as pornographic, the excessive visual attention lavished on violent death in the fiction film is thus culturally tolerated—if often socially criticized. Conversely, documentary film is

23. Robert Jay Lifton and Eric Olson, *Living and Dying* (New York: Praeger, 1974), 28.

24. Langer quotes here from Avery Weisman, *On Dying and Denying: A Psychiatric Study of Terminality* (New York: Behavioral Press, 1972), 16, 26.

25. There are, of course, some very fine distinctions to be made here in terms of what differentiates the documentary and fiction film experience, particularly insofar as spectators either posit or "bracket" the existential status of what they see represented on the screen based on their extracinematic personal and cultural knowledge and experience. Jean-Pierre Meunier, in *Les structures de l'expérience filmique: l'identification filmique* (Louvain: Librairie Universitaire, 1969), presents a phenomenological model for thinking through such differentiation. In this regard I both explicate and elaborate Meunier's model in "Toward a Phenomenology of Nonfictional Film Experience," in *Collecting Visible Evidence*, ed. Michael Renov and Jane Gaines (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 241–54.

marked by an excessive visual avoidance of death, and when death is represented in a nonfictional context, its representation seems to demand ethical justification (often generalized as the “public’s right to know”). In sum, when death is represented as fictive rather than real, when its signs are structured and stressed so as to function iconically and symbolically, the spectator understands that only the *simulacrum* of a visual taboo has been violated. When death is represented as real, however, when its signs are structured and inflected so as to function indexically, a visual taboo has been violated, and the representation must find various ways to justify the violation.

Fiction film, then, only plays with—and as—visual taboo, not only containing death in a range of formal and ritual simulations but also often boldly viewing it with unethical and prurient interest, as if, thus simulated, it really “doesn’t count.” The fiction film audience generally responds in kind. That is, however “grossed out” by death’s excessive particulars, viewers tend to be less ethically squeamish about looking at fictional death and also less stringent in their judgment of the nature of the film’s curiosity about and gaze on the violence and mortification that transforms the lived body-subject into the objective matter of a corpse. Documentary, however, tends not to “play” in the fields of simulation.²⁶ Rather, when it comes to the visually taboo event of death, in most instances the genre constitutes its dread and violent images of the dying and the dead within what visibly appears as the camera’s “accidental” vision or in the visible evidence of the personal risk taken to capture the images by the filmmakers. Visibly represented as caught nearly “unawares,” or facing his or her own mortality, the camera and filmmaker are less vulnerable to possible charges of prurience or unethical behavior by an audience who morally judges their represented gaze at death in terms of its moral responsiveness to a social world shared not only by the filmmaker and audience but also by the memorialized dead. Perhaps this reluctance to face such ethical judgment explains why, according to Vogel, “there are so few film records of individuals dying of natural causes; it is rather war deaths or executions that have been caught on film. Even these are rarely shown except on ceremonial occasions at which an audience gathers in guilt, remorse, or solemn, ineffectual vows never to forget.”²⁷

As we have seen, what is here called “natural death” is the least natural and commonplace in the public sight of contemporary culture. Thus, we are less able to deal with it cinematically and televisually. Its very temporality is threatening and presents ethical problems. That is, gradual, natural death

26. On “simulation” in documentaries (particularly in contemporary documentaries such as Errol Morris’s *The Thin Blue Line* [1988]) see Linda Williams, “Mirror without Memories: Truth, History, and the New Documentary,” in *Film Quarterly: Forty Years—A Selection*, ed. Brian Henderson and Ann Martin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 308–28.

27. Vogel, *Film as a Subversive Art*, 266.

allows time and space for the ill-mannered stare to develop and objectify the dying. The filmmaker's ethical relation to the event of death, the function of his or her look, is open to slow scrutiny by the spectator. Thus, as the filmmaker watches the dying, we watch the filmmaker watching and judge the nature and quality of his or her interest. Less potentially problematic, the abruptness of, for example, a war death or an assassination leaves no time or space for the stare, either the filmmaker's or our own. Conversely, the incredibly painful anticipatory gaze that waits for and records a formal execution is, however horrific, always partially sanctioned by its political service, either for or against the executioners. These observations about the ethical nature and quality of the filmmaker's gaze at dying and death inform not only all my remaining propositions but also the concluding section of this essay.

5. *In the cinema the visible representation of vision inscribes sight not only in an image but also as moral insight.* This is to say that vision visibly inscribes its own investments in the world in a concrete situation—or site. That investment and situation can be seen in the particularity of its produced images and in their implication in a social world that could be said to “incite” cinematic vision's visual activity.²⁸ In the indexical representations of documentary the very act of vision that makes the representation of death possible is itself subject to ethical scrutiny. As mentioned previously, that vision must visibly respond in some way to the fact that it has broken a visual taboo and looked at death. It must justify its cultural transgression as not only responsive but also responsible and must make the justification itself visible. Thus, although perhaps spontaneously responsive to contingent situations in which death occurs before its eyes, the visual behavior made visible in documented visions of death has come to inscribe itself in relatively conventional ways so as to justify itself. It has, to a certain extent, become codified—commuting, as codes do, an existential confrontation with an excessive event into a morally framed vision that marks and contains not only a visible death but also the visible physical situation and ethical stance of the filmmaker.

Signs of the filmmaker's situation and stance (quite literally, “attitude”) are, for example, inscribed in and visibly represented by the camera's stability or movement in relation to the situation that it perceives, in the framing of the object of its vision, in the distance that separates it from the event, in the persistence or reluctance of its gaze in the face of a horrific, chaotic, unjust, or personally dangerous event. As we have already seen, death always forcefully exceeds and subverts its indexical representation—so much so that we can never actually see it. Rather, it is the act of visually dealing with

28. This significant homonymic play was inspired by Larry Crawford, “Looking, Film, Painting: The Trickster's In Site/In Sight/Insight/Incite,” *Wide Angle* 5, no. 3 (1983): 64–69.

death's exorbitance by means of human and technological vision that documentary cinema most visibly documents, most effectively represents. Thus, those visual "sign vehicles" that function to make death seemingly visible on the screen most significantly signify the manner in which the immediate viewer—the filmmaker with camera—physically mediates his or her own confrontation with death: the way s/he ethically inhabits a social world, visually responds in and to it, and charges it with an ethical meaning visible to others. As well, such sign vehicles are the means by which the mediate viewer—the spectator of the film—immediately and ethically inhabits the theater and visually responds in it. (Do we shrink in our seats or lean forward toward the screen? Do we cover our eyes or peek through our fingers? Do we stare at the vision before us or watch from the corners of our eyes? Do we sit there deciding to act on what we've seen once we're outside of the theater, or do we shrink a bit, knowing we will do nothing but watch what is presently before us?)

6. *Before the nonfictional screen event of an unsimulated death, the very act of looking at the film is ethically charged, and this act is itself an object of ethical judgment.* That is, the viewer is—and is held—ethically responsible for his or her visible visual response. The cinematic signs of the act of viewing death provide the visible grounds on which the spectator judges not only the filmmaker's ethical behavior in response to death but also his or her own ethical response to the visible visual activity represented on the screen—both its content and its form. At minimum two viewers are ethically implicated in their relations with the viewed event, both the filmmaker viewing the event of death through the camera and the spectator viewing the film that makes that death visible. Thus, responsibility for the representation of death by means of the inscribed vision of cinema lies with both filmmaker and spectator—and in the ethical relationship constituted between the vision of each.

In the presence of real death (and its representation) the codification of visual behavior, as that behavior acts to circumscribe the sight of death and bear (bare) its traces, allows both filmmaker and spectator to overcome, or at least to circumvent, the transgression of what in our present culture is a visual taboo. Such codification allows both filmmaker and spectator to view death's "ferocious reality," if not from a comfortable position then from a normatively ethical one. Such codification inscribes in the film text what Roger Poole, in relation to photography, has called an "ethical space": the visible site that represents and signifies the viewer's subjective, lived, and moral relationship with the viewed.²⁹ Thus, even though documentary film most often represents death in visual activity initiated less by conscious moral concerns than by the technical necessity and specific existential contingen-

29. Roger Poole, *Towards Deep Subjectivity* (London: Penguin, 1972).

cies of the profilmic event in which the death occurs, this activity has nonetheless become codified and used conventionally to visibly inscribe the text within the contours of what would normatively be considered an ethical vision of some kind. In its visibility this activity of representing death thus constitutes a *moral conduct*: the conventionally agreed-upon manner and means by which a visually taboo, excessive, and essentially unrepresentable event can be viewed, contained, pointed to, and opened to a scrutiny that is, to varying degree, culturally sanctioned.

It seems important at this point to revisit the difference between documentary and fictional representations of death. I have already made some distinctions between the sign-functions of both genres; documentary is primarily indexical, fiction primarily iconic and symbolic. I have also suggested that the criteria for ethical vision in the face of death in fiction are not as stringent as they are for documentary. This is not to say that a fictional vision of death does not also have to meet at least a certain minimum set of ethical criteria to gain some level of cultural sanction. But there does appear to be more ethical “wiggle room” in the iconic and symbolic space of the “imagined” unreal than in the indexical space of the “referred to” real. Thus, physical mortification of the lived body, violence, and death are much the stuff of which fiction is visually made. Fictive death draws the camera to its representation. Fiction films inspect death in detail, with the casual observation of realism, with undisguised prurient interest, or with formal reverence (the latter ritualized in slow motion or stately camera and montage rhythms). Indeed, for cultural reasons previously discussed, death in our fiction films has become a commonplace—rather than taboo—visual event. However, the emotions we feel as viewers in the face of it, the values we put at risk in looking at it, the ethical significance we find in our encounter with it differ in kind as well as degree from the way we respond to death in the documentary.

These differences are problematized by the film that generated this essay: Jean Renoir’s humanist, and realist, —*Rules of the Game* (1939). There are two instances of death in the film, and although both are seemingly homogenized by their equivalent mode of cinematic representation and their mutual containment within the boundaries of a single narrative, one death differs radically from the other. The first to die in the film is a rabbit. The second is a human character. I have chosen my words carefully here so as to emphasize that the rabbit is not perceived by us solely as a character in the narrative. Rather, it is a real rabbit that we see die in the service of the narrative and *for* the fiction. The human character who dies, however, does so only *in* the fiction. Thus, insofar as we are talking about a classic film, even though they eventually survived the actor, both his character and the narrative were immediately survived by him. We cannot, however, say the same of the rabbit.

What is important to note here is that the knowledge that informs our dis-

inction between the fate—and fatality—of the rabbit and character is both *extracinematic* and *intertextual*. On the one hand, the cinema-specific codes of representation are the same for both the real rabbit and unreal character, and each of their deaths serves a similar and interrelated function in the narrative. Nonetheless, despite these cinema-specific codes (for Renoir, a rigorous realism), a distinction is made between them. Indeed, the textual moment of the rabbit's death gains its particular force from an extracinematic and intertextual cultural knowledge that contextualizes and exceeds the representation's sign-function in the narrative. This brings us to the next proposition.

7. *The intertextuality provided by personal experience and cultural knowledge contextualizes and informs any textual representation of death.* That is, a sign-function is only purposefully functional within a text insofar as it is not challenged or subverted or put into idiosyncratic service by extratextual knowledge. Watching *Rules of the Game*, we know that it is easier to kill a rabbit than to teach it to play dead. We also know it is easier to teach a man to play dead (that is, to act) than to kill him. What is meant by *easier* in the ethical context of our culture and the economic context of cinema is “faster,” “cheaper,” and “less morally problematic.” Rabbits are slow learners, bad actors, and their lives generally thought of as expendable. A filmmaker will not be sent to jail for killing even the cutest rabbit, but he may very well lose his life for killing even the worst actor. However, in this context it is interesting to note how our extratextual knowledge has historically changed (at least to some degree) our relation to injury and mortification in the cinema. Now, in addition to a moral imperative that forbids killing actors, there is legislation guarding against injuring and/or killing animals merely for the sake of a fiction—and films graphically attest to compliance. Thus, today one's ethical, if not bodily, response to watching an animal's injury or death onscreen has been appreciably altered; we may still flinch as we watch a horse fall in midgallop, but we probably feel a good deal less guilty than we once did for watching it.

Nonetheless, given general knowledge of *Rules of the Game* as an “old” (for those of us in film studies, a “classic”) film, cultural knowledge and ethical considerations contextualize both the rabbit's and the character's deaths and, in the case of the former, momentarily fracture the classical coherence of the film's narrative representation, introducing the offscreen and unrepresented space in which the viewer lives, acts, and makes distinctions as an ethical social being. Thus, watching *Rules of the Game*, we know—above and beyond cinematic codes—that the murder of the young aviator André Jurieu is merely represented, whereas the rabbit's death is not only represented but also presented. Dying only in the fiction, the senselessness and shock generated by the earnest young man's death make narrative sense and satisfy, rather than surprise and subvert, narrative expectations. His death is not merely contained by the codes governing the narrative but is, in fact, consti-

tuted and determined by them. The rabbit's death, however, exceeds the narrative codes that communicate it. It ruptures and interrogates the boundaries (and license) of fictional representation and has a "ferocious reality" that the character's death does not. Indeed, it is taken as an indexical sign in an otherwise iconic/symbolic representation. That is, it functions to point beyond its function as a narrative representation to an extratextual and animate referent, executed not only *by* but also *for* the representation. The rabbit's death violently, abruptly, punctuates fictional space with documentary space. Non-fictional or documentary space is thus of a different order than fictional space that confines itself to the screen or, at most, extends offscreen into an unseen yet still imagined world. Its constitution is dependent on an extracinematic knowledge that contextualizes and may transform the sign-functions of the representation within a social world and an ethical framework.

This, indeed, is a dependency made particularly problematic by the titillating ambiguity of the "snuff" film, in which human bodily mortification and death are purposefully staged for the camera but done so in the name of the real. The snuff film supposedly teases the viewer as to its undecidable ontological status. On the one hand, what is perceived is an indexical staging and representation of actual mutilation and murder. (Indeed, given the documentary realism, a narrative may have to be constructed by the viewer to explain why the victim—usually said to be a woman—is even at the scene: that is, how she must have been seduced into thinking she was just going to "act" in a fiction.) On the other hand, it is almost impossible to believe that the filmmakers would challenge—in seemingly plain and indexical sight—one of culture's most powerful interdicts. Thus, the viewer is aware that the film is in all likelihood (but not definitively) a fiction, a probable (but not certain) cinematic "joke"—for, if the film is really nonfiction, then not only the filmmakers but also we, the viewers for whom the film was made, are complicit in an act of murder. Although I have not met anyone who has actually seen a snuff film involving the death of a human being (and would they admit to it if they had, given the ethical conundrum it presents?), the idea of the genre still circulates. And this is, I think, because—even as an idea—it foregrounds the shaky extracinematic grounds on which we usually and securely take up cinematic representation as the kind of representation it is. Thus, even in thought, what is almost more horrifying than the supposedly real death staged for us on the screen is the recognition that all we can really depend on to tell us whether that death is real or fictional is our glaringly limited (and certainly not definitive) extracinematic knowledge and experience. The apocryphal experience of the snuff film not only tests the ground between documentary and fictional space but also tests us, and watching it (even in thought), we probably squirm as much for ourselves as for its hapless victim. This brings us to the final three propositions.

8. *Documentary space is indexically constituted as the perceived conjunction of the*

viewer's lifeworld and the visible space represented in the text, and it is activated by the viewer's gaze at the filmmaker's gaze, both subjectively judged as ethical action. To whatever degree it may be conventionally constructed, given that the constitution of documentary space is finally dependent not merely on a film's codes of textual representation but also on the viewer's extratextual knowledge and judgment, the viewer (both as filmmaker and spectator) bears particular subjective responsibility for the action marked by—and in—his or her vision. Thus, even the vision that “transparently” or “neutrally” inscribes its action as “objective” is subjectively judged by the spectator on its ethical appropriateness in the context of the event at which it gazes.

9. *Documentary space is constituted and inscribed as ethical space: it stands as the objectively visible evidence of subjective visual responsiveness and responsibility toward a world shared with other human subjects.* The textual vision inscribed in and as documentary space is never seen as a space alternative or transcendental to the viewer's lifeworld and its values. That is, this textual vision and its activity reflexively point to a lived body occupying concrete space and shaping it with others in concrete social relations that describe a moral structure.³⁰ Such vision is both subjectively situated and objectively visible to the ethical scrutiny and judgment of other embodied and intentional viewing subjects who are, to use Alfred Schutz's terms, historical “consociates,” “contemporaries,” “predecessors,” and “successors” of the film spectator.³¹

10. *Although death itself confounds and exceeds its indexical representation in documentary space, the filmmaker's and viewer's ethical behavior does not.* Whether by necessity, accident, or design, the documentary filmmaker represents—and thus encodes—his or her act of vision as a sign of an ethical stance toward the actual event of death s/he witnesses. Given its taboo status, how may the filmmaker visually confront this event and visibly represent it so that the rep-

30. I call this reflexively discovered viewing (but not necessarily viewed) body the “film's body.” This is a way of emphasizing the material and situated premises, as well as the perceptive and expressive functions, of cinematic vision; the term is not meant to be taken as an anthropomorphization of the cinematic apparatus, although—in conjunction with the humans who use this apparatus to perceive and express their own vision but in a different and technologically enhanced mode—it could be taken as quasi-anthropomorphic much as the filmmaker (specifically as such) could be taken as quasi-mechanical. For full elaboration see my *The Address of the Eye*.

31. Alfred Schutz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, trans. George Walsk and Frederick Lehnert (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1967), 163–214. “Consociates” are those others in the social world of whom we have direct experience, and “contemporaries” are those others who share our social world whom we do not know directly or specifically but who coexist with us, sharing our worldly space and time; our own actions emerge in relation to and always have a possible effect on both. “Predecessors” and “successors” are those others whose duration in no way overlaps with our own and whom we can only know indirectly as “past” or “future” but who have once partaken or will of our worldly space and who incalculably affect our present time.

resentation is perceived as morally justifiable in its gaze at what is normatively regarded as forbidden? It seems that in almost all cases the solution to this ethical problem is an inscription of the filmmaker's visual activity that visibly indicates that the filmmaker is in no way party to—and thus not responsible for—the death at which s/he gazes. (Again, in its lack of any such inscription, the ethical problem of the snuff film is relevant here.) Furthermore, the representation must visibly indicate that its visual activity in no way *substitutes* for a possible intervention in the event—that is, it must indicate that watching and recording the event of death is not more important than preventing it. Or, alternatively, it must indicate that the very fact of the representation of a particular death is somehow *more socially important* than the death of the individual who suffers it.

DOCUMENTARY AND THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE ETHICAL GAZE

To meet either of these two conditions that attest to the ethical behavior of the filmmaker who encounters and films the event of death, we can see five forms of visual activity emerge across a wide range of documentary films and raw nonfictional footage. Each is constituted as human behavior visibly encoded in the representation to signify the particular embodied situation of the filmmaker and thus his or her capacity to affect the events before the camera lens. In their cinematic engagement with and representation of the event of death, these five visual forms of ethical behavior can be thematized phenomenologically as what I will call the *accidental gaze*, the *helpless gaze*, the *endangered gaze*, the *interventional gaze*, and the *humane gaze*. In addition, there is a sixth visual form that is more ethically ambiguous and suspect than the others; presenting problems of ethical judgment to both filmmaker and spectator alike (particularly insofar as their situations and allegiances may waver or differ), this more ambiguous form of visual behavior can be called the *professional gaze*.³²

Inscribed as the least ethically suspect in its encounter with the event of death, the *accidental gaze* is cinematically coded in markers of technical and physical *unpreparedness*. The film gives us visual evidence that death was *not* the filmmaker's initial object of scrutiny, that it happened in front of the camera suddenly, randomly, and unexpectedly, surprising the filmmaker's vision and disallowing any possibility of the filmmaker's intervention or complicity. Such lack of preparation for the encounter is signified by the camera's *unselective vision* in relation to the death, by its conceptual and often literal "oversight" of the event. That is, the filmmaker and camera are not

32. Bill Nichols has taken up and used these variations of the documentary gaze to talk about documentary ethics in his *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

intending toward or focused on the fatal event occurring before them since their intentional interest is clearly located elsewhere. Examples of the accidental gaze include, at one extreme, the previously mentioned amateur Zapruder footage of the Dallas motorcade in which JFK was assassinated and, at the other extreme, a highly crafted documentary like *Gimme Shelter* (David Maysles, Albert Maysles, and Charlotte Zwerin, 1970), which “unwittingly” filmed a murder at a Rolling Stones concert in Altamont, California. In the latter film, although the death is “seen” by the camera, at first the filmmakers—and later the spectator—literally have no insight into the event. That is, they don’t know where to look in the huge crowd for the fatal spot because they don’t know someone is being killed and are attending to the larger scene of the rock concert. Indeed, even informed in advance as to what we will see on the screen, as spectators watching the crowd we still don’t really “see” the event occurring before our—and the camera’s—eyes. Indeed, we don’t see the killing (although it’s literally there in the *mise-en-scène*) until the filmmakers inspect their own footage on the screen and *after the fact* to find the death for themselves, for the Rolling Stones, and for us. Whatever their differences, then, the breaking of visual taboo is cinematically inscribed as *unintentional* in both the Zapruder footage and *Gimme Shelter*.

Indeed, the wonder and fascination generated by such films and their accidental gaze is that a death happens in plain sight yet is somehow not seen and that it was attended to by the camera (however diffuse its attention) although not intended by the filmmaker. Awareness of this disparity of attention and the gap that occurs between visual comprehension of the object of one’s interest and the rest of one’s visual field creates a compelling desire to stop-frame the film so as to see the death more intentionally and attentively *now* that we are aware of it—as if, now that we know *where* in the visual field to look, such stop-framing would somehow make its representation clearer, its signification more precise. This, in fact, is what has been done both with the Zapruder footage and in *Gimme Shelter*. Nonetheless, although viewing and reviewing the film in both instances increases our focus and direction, it never finally overcomes the accidental oversight of the immediate visual encounter with mortality (and the excess of the death over its representation).

The *helpless gaze* at the event of death is cinematically coded in markers of technical and physical *distance* from it. The distance may be great—in which case physical intervention on the part of the filmmaker is visibly perceived to have been impossible. In other instances, particularly when the death entails the ritual of a legal execution, the filmmaker may be technically and physically closer to the event but is legislatively distanced and prevented from intervening. Distance, and the helplessness it confers, is signified not only by the long shot but also by the frequent use of telephoto and zoom lenses. As the intentional object of the filmmaker, the event of death is

brought closer in view and attention but not in physical proximity. Furthermore, although the helpless gaze is often stable (that is, technically attached to a tripod so that the frame is not marked by physical agitation), it usually does not maintain the cool fixity of a mechanical stare but rather covers the figured space and/or shifts its attention: panning as if to seek visual escape, zooming out as well as in toward the event, contextualizing the event of death in a space marked out to absolve the gazer from the responsibility of active intervention. (This visual movement and discomfort are to be distinguished from characteristics of both the humane gaze and the ethically ambiguous professional gaze, both of which will be described shortly.)

The *endangered gaze*, as differentiated from the helpless gaze, is cinematically coded in terms not of distance but of *proximity* to events of violence and death. It is inscribed by signs that indexically and reflexively point to the mortal danger faced by the filmmaker in a particular and contingent situation, indicating a physical presence behind the camera and at the scene. The representation is marked by the relative instability of its framing—the camera shaken, for example, by nearby explosions or handheld while being carried over rough terrain (pointing, of course, to the body that holds it, to a vulnerable human operator). Endangered vision is frequently seen as obstructed, which marks its need for protection and inscribes a fragile yet concerned relation to the horrors of mortality that it visibly grasps. Parts of vehicles and buildings, foliage, rubble, and the like partially hide the mortal objects of vision but also indexically point to and reveal the filmmaker as the mortal subject of vision. Thus, looking at death with an endangered gaze visibly constitutes itself as an intersubjective and ethical trade-off: the filmmaker pays for the transgression of breaking a visual taboo by visibly risking his or her own life to represent the proximate death of another.

In *Theory of the Film* Béla Balázs discusses what I am here calling the endangered gaze in relation to war documentaries and cameramen killed during their filming:

This fate of the creative artist is . . . a new phenomenon in cultural history and is specific to film art. . . . This presentation of reality by means of motion pictures differs essentially from all other modes of presentation in that the reality being presented is not yet completed; it is itself still in the making while the presentation is being prepared. . . . The cameraman is himself in the dangerous situation we see in his shot and is by no means certain that he will survive the birth of his picture. Until the strip has been run to its end we cannot know whether it will be completed at all. It is this tangible being-present that gives the documentary the peculiar tension no other art can produce.³³

33. Béla Balázs, *Theory of the Film: Character and Growth of a New Art*, trans. Edith Bone (New York: Dover, 1970), 170–71.

So long as it is visibly encoded in the film, this risk of personal peril ethically absolves the filmmaker of purposefully seeking out and gazing at the death of others through the camera.

The rarest, and usually the most poignant, ethical representation of a visual encounter with death is the *interventional gaze*. Moving beyond endangerment, it literally comes out of hiding; its vision is *confrontational*. It is more than visually active in its engagement with the event at which it looks. It is often marked by the urgent physical activity of the camera, and often the filmmaker's voice—usually repressed or suppressed—adds spatial and physical dimension to the inscription of bodily presence and involvement. In its extreme instance, such as in a sequence in Patricio Guzmán's *The Battle of Chile* (1976), the interventional gaze ends up representing not only the death of another, but also its own. Balázs is most eloquent and insightful in his description of a similarly extreme instance of the interventional gaze as it appears in a sequence in a French war documentary:

It darkens and the camera wobbles. It is like an eye glazing in death. The director did not cut out this "spoil" bit—it shows where the camera was overturned and the cameraman killed, while the automatic mechanism ran on. . . . Yes, it is a new form of consciousness that was born out of the union of man and "camera." For as long as these men do not lose consciousness, their eye looks through the lens and reports and renders conscious their situation. . . . The internal processes of presence of mind and observation are here projected outwards into the bodily action of operating the camera. . . . The psychological process is inverted—the cameraman does not shoot as long as he is conscious—he is conscious as long as he is shooting.³⁴

Thus, although in this instance we do not ever see the camera operator's body, we nonetheless see the waning of his attention and consciousness. Here the visible image is inscribed with the loss of the human intentional behavior that informs it, the very image of vision becoming random, diffuse, and unconscious in relation to the world and its objects. The interventional gaze is the endangered gaze at its reflexive extremity.

The act of looking at and filming death may also be performed with a *humane gaze*. Marked by its *extended duration*, the humane gaze resembles a "stare"—a fixed look that tends to objectify that at which it gazes—except for the fact that it *visibly and significantly encodes in the image its own subjective responsiveness to what it sees*. Thus, dependent on the nature and context of the event of death at which it looks, the humane stare usually takes one or the other of two visual forms. In one form it may *fix itself in shock and disbelief*, its gaze hypnotized by the horror it observes. Atrocity usually generates this response as exemplified in the famous footage of a South Vietnamese officer execut-

34. Ibid., 171–72.

ing a suspected North Vietnamese terrorist in the middle of a Saigon street. In a sense the frozen quality of the stare, the bodily paralysis and inertia it represents in relation to both the camera and the filmmaker, suggests the ethical recognition that there is no tolerable point of view from which to gaze at such a death yet that such horror must be witnessed and attested to.

Under other circumstances a second form of the extended humane gaze emerges. Here the gaze may *settle in* rather than fix itself—engaging itself directly with the direct gaze of its dying human subject, who looks back, inscribing intimacy with as well as respect and sympathy for those who die in its vision. The relatively rare documenting of gradual death usually generates this response and is exemplified in such films as *Dying* and *Silverlake Life* where the filmmaker's gaze is "invited."³⁵ Thus, there is visual and visible interaction between the dying subject and the filmmaker. Which is to say that there is, at the least, an agreed-upon *complicity with* and, at the most, *love between* the filmmaker and the dying subject who has allowed the former to watch and unblinkingly record the subject's death. Dying in such an instance is stared at humanely, and the act of looking and filming is sanctioned as "a ritual organized by the dying person himself," who presides over it and knows its "protocol" (Ariès, 11).

In both instances of the humane gaze, however, the image is inscribed by the mark of a relatively steady camera, placed in a generally measured distance from its visual object, and by relatively smooth technical and physical activity. (Steadiness and smoothness depend on a technical expertise that breaks down to the degree that the filmmaker is an amateur or is in emotional extremity.) When zooms occur, they are controlled. Vision is purposefully framed and clearly focused. Insofar as they indicate planning and technical preparation, all of these are signs of *permission to be there*. However, what seems most of interest about the humane gaze is that its identification as such is extremely dependent on the nature of the death before it. That is, the spectator's judgment about the gaze's humanity is determined by the magnitude or quality of the event that prompts it. Shock, paralysis, and disbelief cannot be ascribed to the filmmaker's every fixed gaze. It cannot, for example, be attributed to the television news cameraman's stare that fixedly watched a young man ignite a match and set himself on fire to protest unemployment. Although the young man's death was certainly horrific, it was humanly comprehensible, and, more significant, the filmmaker might have prevented it. To be inscribed and read as humane, the frozen and hypnotized gaze of the camera must be generated by events and acts that are incredibly inhumane and incomprehensible and that correspond to an eth-

35. It should be noted, however, that the event of death in *Silverlake Life* ends up not being recorded—less by design than by accident.

ical person's disbelief at being confronted with and seeing the horror not only of what is existentially possible but also of what is actually happening. In this situation representation is transfixed and at a loss in the presence of such an excessive, impossible, but actual referent.

In the ascription of humanity to the gaze that inspects a gradual death, however, the event must be seen as inviting and even welcoming human interest. In the inscription of such a gaze the possibility of planned exploitation of human beings, of ghoulishness, of cold voyeurism is belied by the dying subject's openness to the probity of the gaze, by a collaboration with its interest, by a frequent address to the gazer that inscribes the offscreen presence and intimate acceptance of the filmmaker. In a positive regression from the social conditions of death in the twentieth century as glossed by Ariès and others, the bedchamber here becomes again a space for public ceremony, a space organized, in part, by the dying subject. Under the dying person's direction the filmmaker's gaze becomes ethically simplified (if also existentially difficult). Death occurs before—and in—the humane gaze “in a ceremonial manner, yes, but with no theatrics, with no great show of emotion” (Ariès, 12–13).

These are the inscriptions of documentary vision signified as ethical in the face of death, an event that charges the act of looking at it with ethical significance. There is, however, yet another visual form that addresses death, one that problematically straddles the already relatively ambiguous border that separates ethical from unethical visual activity. This problematic form is what we understand to be the *professional gaze*. As suggested previously, it is always in the service of two masters, each with differing, but equally arguable, ethical claims on the filmmaker's vision. An article in *TV Guide* popularizes the issue on its title page. Headed by the announcement “Reporters’ Dilemma,” bold letters ask, “SAVE A LIFE OR GET THE STORY?” A smaller insert sums up: “The camera’s whirring . . . someone’s in trouble . . . and TV journalists must decide where their duty lies.”³⁶ Referring to the aforementioned self-immolation of a young man protesting unemployment who has, in fact, “invited” the press to watch his death, the article goes on to ask the crucial ethical question that is posed by—and in—the footage of such an event: “When the values of good journalism and humanitarianism collide, what should a journalist do?”³⁷

The entire piece, somewhat sensationally but also appropriately, presents the voices of nonfiction filmmakers and their employers in ambiguous but revealing debate that can be thematized as one about ethical responsibility to the human moment and its subject or to the forging of historical con-

36. Howard Polskin, “Save a Life or Get the Story?” *TV Guide*, July 23, 1983, 4.

37. *Ibid.*, 5.

sciousness for a greater number of people and in relation to a greater span of time. One filmmaker (indeed, the one whose abovementioned Vietnam footage contributed significantly to altering American perceptions about the nature of the war) discloses his “professional” philosophy: “I always disregarded the events that I was covering. I was there just to record events, not to think about them.” Another says: “You have to remove your feelings as a human being when you’re shooting something gruesome. You have to psych yourself up to cover the news and turn off your personal feelings.” Alternatively, an ABC official suggests, albeit with caution: “Journalists are observers, not participants. But where life is at stake, there may be an exception.” Another journalist is much stronger: “I have always maintained that the journalist owes his duty to humanity. When there’s a conflict between being a journalist and a human being, I’ll always hope I’ll be a human being. It’s a grave error for reporters to set themselves aside from humanity.”³⁸

If it is visibly inscribed at all then (that is, the camera not abandoned completely or turned to the service of the interventional gaze described earlier), the professional gaze is marked by ethical ambiguity, by technical and *machinelike competence* in the face of an event that seems to call for further and more humane response. “You don’t show your tripod when you’re a professional,” says news producer Fred Friendly. “By being a good Samaritan, we get in the way of our lenses. It makes it impossible for us to do our job well. We blur the image of the job we’re trying to do: explain complex issues.”³⁹ The concern for getting a clear and unobstructed image, and the belief that it is possible to strip the representation of human bias, perspective, and ethical investment so that it is truly “objective,” indelibly mark the inscriptions of the professional gaze with their own problematic ethical perspective in the face of both human mortality and the visual taboos surrounding it.

In sum, the existential and social event of death in our culture poses an ethical question to vision and challenges representation. In filming the event of death, what eventually gets on the screen and is judged by those of us who view it in the audience is the visible constitution and inscription of an “ethical space” that subtends both filmmaker and spectator alike. It is a space that takes on the contours of the actual events that occur within it and the actions that make it cinematically visible. It is both a space of immediate encounter and mediated action. Here I have focused primarily on the radical origins, embodied articulations, and cinematic inscriptions of this space. I have not, however, addressed its secondary articulations—namely, those entailed in the *editorial* practices of filmmaking that take the original representations of violence and death and further contain them in what may be called a sec-

38. Ibid., 6.

39. Ibid., 8.

ondary and “reflective” (rather than immediately reflexive) ethical vision. A few comments on this kind of representation would seem to be in order, at the very least to suggest the additional complexity and dimension of the issues in question.

Certainly, the least shaped and structured films that make the event of death visible are experienced as the most immediate and shocking. That is, compared to more structured films, they appear as a more directly visceral, unprepared, and nonintellectual confrontation with the abrupt violence that currently signifies human mortality in our culture. These films are often not even considered films as such but are seen to exist in some “raw” and “realer” (that is, more indexical) state as “raw footage” or as “documents” rather than documentaries. Examples are the Zapruder footage of Kennedy’s assassination and the news footage of the Vietnamese man being shot in the head. To quote W. H. Auden, “These are events which arouse such simple and obvious emotions, . . . poetic comment is impossible.”⁴⁰ Although this may be an exaggeration or, more precisely, need more specific elaboration, we do tend to experience single-shot and raw, unedited footage as representing the event of death more immediately: as unshaped and uncooked (to use a pertinent metaphor from structuralism). The reflections of ritual art do not intervene. Once, however, that footage is incorporated into a shaped film, or even merely juxtaposed with other footage (as on a television news broadcast), although the intellectual impact of the death may be enhanced and its significance enlarged with rational or poetic meaning, such shaping will also be in some ways always also reductive.

Thus, while the raw footage of the Vietnamese street execution in Peter Davis’s *Hearts and Minds* (1974) gains an ironic dimension as it is juxtaposed with other images, it also loses some of its essential and violent unspeakability and partially submits to the containments of a form that forces it to speak something specific, something expressible and less momentous. The most shaped and structured films about death tend to be poetic elegies: they end up speaking less of the unspeakability of the specific deaths they contain than, in general, of death’s unspeakability and the limits of representation. They aestheticize the space in which the raw footage of death is enshrined, using pauses and fades to black and dissolves that constitute moments of commemorative “visual silence.” Moving us less viscerally and directly than the raw footage (which is *not* to say that we do not have visceral responses to them), these more formal films move us emotionally and ethically by removing us from a sense of contact with the deaths we see. Thus, death becomes the object of mediated contemplation in such powerful and poetic docu-

40. W. H. Auden quoted in William Stott, *Documentary Expression in Thirties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 13.

mentaries as Georges Franju's *The Blood of the Beasts* (1949) and Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog* (1956). The contemplation of death in these films is ritually formalized as a moral consideration of the mortal conditions of the body, of the fragility of life, of the end of representation that death represents.

The conjunction of death, representation, and documentary film foregrounds what is true of all vision as it engages a world and others. Certainly, this is because death in our culture is among the least expressible and least malleable of subjects available to a filmmaker. Any intentional camera angle or camera movement or editorial juxtaposition will comment on what is essentially a moment of unspeakable transformation and will inscribe it in an act of human vision that makes visible an ethical insight. As Roger Poole forcefully points out: "There can be no flaccid action, no action which is not immediately imbued with an ethical ballast, filled in from our point of view in the world of perspectives. . . . Acts in space are embodied intentions."⁴¹ Thus, the event of death may finally exceed and confound all indexical representation and documentary codes, but it also generates the most visible and ethically charged acts of visual representation.

41. Poole, *Towards Deep Subjectivity*, 6.

The Charge of the Real

Embodied Knowledge and Cinematic Consciousness

I find people's reactions to "real" death and "movie" death fascinating.

—HASKELL WEXLER

The integration of documentary footage into fiction films often causes something of a stir in the popular press. Although the practice dates back to the very beginnings of cinema, what has attracted current attention to it and raised the issue of media ethics is the particular manner in which new digital technologies have transformed this practice by supposedly making such integration so seamless as to undermine the public's ability to differentiate fact from fiction, the real from the imaginary or "irreal."¹ Thus, the media hype: first around the digital wonders of *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994), which inserted its eponymous hero into news footage of and conversation with various real historical personages; and then around the ethics of *Contact* (Robert Zemeckis, 1997), which lifted footage from a televised news conference of President Clinton enthusing over NASA's very real announcement that it might have found microscopic signs of life in a Martian meteorite so as to authenticate the film's science-fictional discovery of intelligent life in the universe.

1. I would like to stress here the difference between the *not real* and the *irreal*. Whereas the former is clearly contrasted to our cultural and historical sense of what constitutes the real (as in a patently "impossible," "fantastic," or even "implausible" fiction), the irreal is not contradictory to the real but, rather, contrary to it. Which is to say that the irreal is not judged *against* the real. In our relations to the irreal we do not first posit real existence so as to then make a judgment about the reality of what we see; instead, the real is "bracketed" and put off to the side as a noncriterion of the work's meaning, coherence, or plausibility. For elaboration on this distinction see Jean-Pierre Meunier, *Les structures de l'expérience filmique* (Louvain: Librairie Universitaire, 1969); Meunier's brief phenomenology of our cinematic engagements with the home movie (or *film-souvenir*), the documentary, and the fiction film informs much of what follows here and is introduced and glossed in my essay "Toward a Phenomenology of Nonfictional Experience," in *Collecting Visible Evidence*, ed. Michael Renov and Jane Gaines (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 241–54.

The irony, of course, is that, in both instances, film viewers were hardly confused or fooled. Indeed, *Forrest Gump* depended for much of its humor on our ability to see through its apparently seamless confusions of historical fiction and historical document—that is, to differentiate each logical type of representation so as to delight in their comic fusions and marvel at the film’s technical achievement.² *Contact* also provoked this differentiation, albeit in a manner that deflated rather than heightened its drama. Striving for verisimilitude and credibility to ground its science-fictional premise, the film badly miscalculated the effect of using the Clinton footage—less because of the ethical issues it subsequently raised (Clinton was “borrowed” without being asked) than because Clinton’s news conference was still relatively fresh in the public’s memory when the film was released. Thus, rather than transparently authenticating the narrative’s fictional status, the footage undermined and broke our engagement with the narrative’s irreality by repositing within it a more familiar realm of existence—namely, that realm we live as real. When I saw *Forrest Gump*, nearly everyone in the theater smiled or laughed at the digitally achieved admixtures of real and unreal figures and events and saw them as part of the game that was the film’s outrageous historical revisionism. When I saw *Contact*, however, at the point of the Clinton news conference nearly everyone in the theater who had been intent on the screen and immersed in the narrative seemed suddenly to remove themselves to their seats, where they rustled and murmured at being so abruptly cast back into the immediate historical present. In both instances, despite the unprecedented seamless stitching together of fictional and documentary images, most viewers were clearly able to tell the difference between them. Indeed, after the release of *Contact*, listening to numerous sound bites from debates in which reporters stood up in ethical outrage to protect the supposedly confounded and stupid public (from which, apparently, they were exempt), I found myself wondering just who was fooling whom.³

2. It is worth emphasizing that this differentiation of two logical types of representation are not dependent on textual signifiers of their difference but rather on the spectator’s extratextual and cultural knowledge and consequent relation to the images on the screen. Echoing Meunier’s phenomenology of cinematic identification, this is to say that what differentiates one logical type (real news footage) from the other (irreal but verisimilar fiction) is the viewer’s relationship to the image and its contents and not solely cinematic cues.

3. There is a certain hysteria evident in both popular and academic writing about people (usually never the writer) not being able to tell manipulated images from unmanipulated ones. Although this is a discursive concern that dates from Plato onward in various guises, it has been revitalized by digitization, which homogenizes all input as binary code. Nonetheless, Peter Lunenfeld reminds us in “Digital Photography: The Dubitative Image,” in *Snap to Grid: A User’s Guide to Digital Arts, Media, and Cultures* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000): “The ways in which digital technologies break down whatever remains of our inherited faith in the indexical relationship between the photograph and its object are of obvious importance to the epistemology and politics of an image-saturated culture. This overwhelming attention to the dubitative, to

Although the current question of cinematic ethics has been raised in response to the medium's increasing ability to seamlessly integrate the unreal and real, we might well ask to what extent the irreality of the fiction film has always been both complicit with and subverted—not only by documentary footage but also, in its more diffuse appearances, by the real. And, given that fiction and documentary, as supposedly *different* logical types *as genres*, are both reducible to the *same* logical type *as cinematic images*, to what extent—and how—can those of us in the audience tell the difference between them? Certainly, these questions are hardly new to either film theory or practice. Classical film theory gives us not only André Bazin's seminal discussion of the ontology of the photographic image, its physical responsiveness to light and to the world's objects indexically grounding the whole of cinema in real existence, but also Siegfried Kracauer's *Theory of Film*, which argues that the cinema, even in its fictional mode, "redeems" the world's physical reality.⁴ And film practice gives us not only *Forrest Gump* but also *Forgotten Silver* (Costa Botes and Peter Jackson, 1995), a fictional narrative that, perhaps as much for its obscure subject matter as for its documentary style, was widely taken up as nonfiction. Made in New Zealand and supposedly documenting the discovery of a "lost" early national filmmaker named Colin McKenzie, the film fooled not only a good many foreign viewers but also a significant number of New Zealanders—this despite interior cues that suggested its "mockumentary" status. The most subtle of these was dependent on the spectator's knowledge of certain early photographic processes and the most blatant dependent on a general knowledge of film history. (One woman interviewee is identified as "Alexandra Nevsky"—likely, if not surely, to be a fabulous rather than real person.) *Forgotten Silver* provoked something of a scandal when knowledge of its fictional status became widespread, public anger exacerbated, perhaps, by the fact that the film had mobilized a national pride then deflated by revelation of the "deception."⁵

Ultimately, these questions of cinematic trickery point in a direction that looks less to the cinema as a *phenomenal object* than as a *phenomenological experience*. Thus, in what follows, I want to explore some diverse and variable

questions of fraud and forgery, though, tends to obscure the developments in another area of discourse around photography. The breakdown of the indexical relationship between the photograph and its referent, and the concurrent obliteration of photography's assumed truth value, have had the same impact as the destruction of the aura occasioned by the advent of photography itself" (62–63).

4. André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," in *What Is Cinema?* trans. Hugh Gray, vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 9–22; Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960).

5. For discussion of the film's indigenous reception see Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight, "Mocking Silver: Re-inventing the documentary project (or, Grierson Lies Bleeding)," in *Continuum: The Australian Journal of Media & Culture* 11, no. 1 (1997): 67–82.

experiences in which we engage the cinema as both fiction and documentary—very often in relation to the same film and often regardless of those institutional regulations of spectatorship that would cue and fix our engagement with what we see on the screen.⁶ In particular, and as a dramatic way to focus these issues, I want to emphasize here the fiction film's intersections with documentary—and its quite common arousal (purposeful or not) of what we might call the viewer's "documentary consciousness": a particular mode of embodied and ethical spectatorship that informs and transforms the space of the unreal into the space of the real.

Grounding this inquiry, however, is what seems an inaugural paradox—one that emerges explicitly in my opening remarks. On the one hand, I've said that despite the seamless conjunctions of cinematic fiction and documented fact, we usually know the difference between the two as they exist and interact in the same film. On the other hand, I've also suggested that, insofar as all cinematic objects are equivalently composed of images and sounds be they fictional or factual, there is no necessary difference between the two at all. Certainly, we cannot resolve this paradox if we only look to the film as an objective text. Rather, its resolution lies in our recognition that the designations *fiction* and *documentary* name not merely objective and abstracted cinematic *things* distinguished and characterized historically by particular textual features but name also—and perhaps more significantly—distinctive *subjective relations* to a variety of cinematic objects, whatever their textual features. In sum, what the generic terms *fiction* and *documentary* designate are an experienced difference in our mode of consciousness, our attention toward and our valuation of the cinematic objects we engage.

Let me begin first with a brief gloss on those traditional generic discriminations (more stable in theory than in actual experience) that would ground an inquiry into the intersection of fiction film with documentary in the presumption of each as a *discrete* representational form. Historically, the fiction film has engaged the documentary through a variety of institutionalized practices that explicitly play with the relationship between the two forms and thus point to rather than obliterate their difference.

One such practice is the already-mentioned *inclusion of documentary footage* within the fiction film: in *Contact* such inclusion was disruptive of the fiction, but we could also point to a fictional work like *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (Philip Kaufman, 1988), where documentary footage seemed integral to (albeit stylistically differentiated from) the fiction, grounding its urgencies

6. For an extremely useful discussion emphasizing the institutional constraints that affect the spectator's hierarchical ordering of textual features, production of meaning, and affective positioning see Roger Odin, "For a Semio-Pragmatics of Film," trans. Claudine Tournaire, in *The Film Spectator: From Sign to Mind*, ed. Warren Buckland (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1995), 213–26. I am grateful to Jim Moran for bringing this text to my attention.

in the historical reality of the 1968 Soviet invasion of Prague rather than disrupting or challenging the irreality of its romantic drama. Whether this would be the effect for someone much more familiar with the particulars of that invasion as well as with the historical images of its cinematic documentation raises a major question related to issues I will explore further; however, insofar as a viewer recognized the film's documentary footage in its relative specificity—as did American spectators watching the Clinton footage in *Contact*—it is more than possible her or his reaction would be a break with or retreat from the irreality of the fiction. In this regard, there is also the case of *JFK* (Oliver Stone, 1991), in which the documentary footage of both Kennedy's assassination and the jailhouse shooting of Jack Ruby were mobilized with fictional drama into what was an impassioned rhetorical argument that generated great controversy. As Linda Williams puts it, documentary footage was put to the service of what some might call "a grand paranoid fiction."⁷

Another—and more recent—variant on the inclusion of nonfictional footage in a fiction film so as to authenticate its irreal premises has been the use of *earlier film footage of the actor who plays the film's fictional character*: for example, the use of an actor's home movies when s/he was a child. In this regard, and complicating the ontological status of the image as document or fiction even further, some fiction films authenticate the life of a given character by incorporating earlier footage from an actor's *previous* fictions (in which the actor actually played a *different* character but is recognizable and identical to him- or herself as a real person who has changed over time). An example is *The Limey* (Steven Soderbergh, 1999), in which we see clips of its middle-aged character, acted by Terence Stamp, when Stamp was more than thirty years younger and featured in Ken Loach's *Poor Cow* (1967) as a completely different character. What is fascinating here is the ambiguous and quite powerful status of the included footage, which functions as *both* fiction and nonfiction.⁸

The fiction film also has a history of *compositing irreal fictional characters and real historical figures* into the same narrative space so as to blur (but again not obliterate) the line between two ontologically different modes of existence while, in fact, constructing hermeneutic play between two different sets of epistemological criteria. In this regard, seamlessly placing its central char-

7. Linda Williams, "Mirrors without Memories: Truth, History, and the New Documentary," in *Film Quarterly: Forty Years—A Selection*, ed. Brian Henderson and Ann Martin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 311. The controversy about use of the documentary footage here was less about mixing fact and fiction than about the nature of Stone's argument itself.

8. A wonderful novel that plays with this confusion and passage through time of both the same real actor and his or her different fictional characters is David Thomson's *Suspects* (New York: Vintage, 1985).

acter at the schoolhouse door with George Wallace, at an anti-Vietnam War rally, and into conversation with Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon, *Forrest Gump* may be the most technically advanced example (at least at the time I'm writing this).⁹ Nonetheless, both *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941) and *Zelig* (Woody Allen, 1983) did this sort of thing much earlier and just as effectively in terms of compositing the unreal and the real to advance and complicate the verisimilitude of their narratives as well as the viewer's hermeneutic enjoyment.

Fiction film has also regularly practiced the *appropriation of conventional documentary stylistic conventions* to both comic and dramatic effect: these include voice-over narration; the presence of ersatz interviewers both on- and offscreen; direct address to camera and audience by onscreen characters; interior use of visual materials that are considered "documents," such as photographs and raw film footage; and handheld cameras that often enact "mis-takes" of attention that, in a fiction, would usually be relegated to the cutting room floor. One well-known example of such stylistic appropriation in the comic mode is *This Is Spinal Tap* (Rob Reiner, 1984), a film that parodies the "rockumentary" and presumes its audiences will understand and delight in its fictional play and exaggeration of the music and concert documentary's textual features. *Husbands and Wives* (Woody Allen, 1992), however, uses documentary style to more serious effect; it serves both as an efficient way to elide and distill dramatic time and event and as an overt distancing device that allows interruption of and commentary on its fictional drama. Nonetheless, despite its formal announcements and enactments of its nonfictional status, *Husbands and Wives* is hardly mistaken by most viewers for a documentary (except at certain moments, of which more later, when such a mistake by the viewer is not a mis-take at all). Indeed, despite their respective differences, both these examples presuppose a competent spectator necessarily able to generically and stylistically *differentiate* between documentary and fiction film so as to sufficiently enjoy the precision of *Spinal Tap's* parody or to sufficiently appreciate the strategy in *Husbands and Wives* of constructing ironic contradictions between its characters as they reveal themselves in dramatic action and as they reflect upon themselves for the edification of a narratively projected documentary film audience.

The fiction film has also borrowed from the documentary in yet another—and extremely popular—way that does not necessitate using documentary footage, compositing fictional with documentary images, or appropriating documentary conventions to constitute an existential con-

9. On the implications of digital imaging technologies and their "reality" effects see Stephen Prince, "True Lies: Perceptual Realism, Digital Images, and Film Theory," in *Film Quarterly: Forty Years—A Selection*, ed. Brian Henderson and Ann Martin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 392–411.

nection to the temporal continuum that is, for spectators, their real historical world. Fiction films regularly *cast cultural celebrities as “themselves.”* The presence of celebrities in the narrative (whether as movie star, news reporter, talk show host, or political figure) supposedly authenticates the fiction as “real” at the very same time they are patently (and sometimes badly) speaking dialogue apposite only to its irreality. As a genre, science fiction films of the 1950s, to authenticate the diegetic fantasy, had a convention of casting actual radio and television news celebrities to report on the global progress of the encroaching menace to the planet. In this, *Contact* was just following a fairly traditional generic practice—except it did not “cast” the real Clinton and have him speak unreal dialogue but used him unawares and appropriated an actual speech he gave on a narratively related topic. (Zemeckis tells an interviewer, “Clinton gave his Mars rock speech and I swear to God it was like it was scripted for this movie. When he said the line ‘We will continue to listen closely to what it has to say,’ I almost died. I stood there with my mouth hanging open.”)¹⁰ As mentioned previously, this nearly contemporaneous inclusion appeared to backfire, however, undermining the fantasy with too much real-world specificity, as well as raising questions about media ethics.

A more common and successful instance of casting “real celebrities” (themselves an oxymoronic “composite” of fictional and documentary images) is *Dave* (Ivan Reitman, 1993), a mild political comedy based on impersonation and the confusion between authentic behavior and performance. This obviously unreal (if verisimilar) narrative about a presidential look-alike who has to perform as the “real thing” (a double role played by Kevin Kline) features a goodly number of cameo appearances by “real celebrities” who double the fun of “impersonation” by authenticating it. The roster includes talk show hosts Jay Leno and Larry King; the bickering televisual McLaughlin Group; politicians such as Tip O’Neill; an array of well-known reporters, including Helen Thomas and Nina Totenberg; and, in one of the film’s funniest scenes, filmmaker Oliver Stone attempting unsuccessfully to convince others of a political conspiracy involving the president in an identity switch. Indeed, *Dave’s* gentle satire depends on a certain existential ballast to ground its fragile irreality—the real celebrities used not implicitly to verify or authenticate the fiction but rather used explicitly to preserve the fiction by making the real complicit with it (rather than the other way round). Thus, again, the audience was neither confused nor fooled as to who, in the film, were real celebrities appearing as themselves and who were real celebrities playing unreal characters (in this case Klein and Sigourney Weaver).

For the most part, then, we do seem to know the difference between fiction

10. Benjamin Svetkey, “Making *Contact*,” *Entertainment Weekly*, July 18, 1997, 24–27.

and documentary, and when both come together in the same film, we enjoy their con-fusion or are jarred by their contact in what emerges as an experienced (if not always intended) *heterogeneity of representation*. Indeed, those conventional or institutionalized generic discriminations made between fiction and documentary film in their respective forms and contents (albeit not in their cinematic substance) allow both filmmakers and spectators a rich and complex play with their admixture. Furthermore, through their practice, such discriminations also overtly acknowledge (and congratulate) the mutual “communicative competence” of both filmmakers and spectators,¹¹ who make the epistemological distinctions necessary to usually arrive at a given film’s appropriate—that is, institutionally sanctioned—cinematic status and meaning.¹²

Thus, it is relatively rare when *distinctions between fiction and documentary are purposefully and “really” confused* in the film object itself and the two representational forms so complexly interwoven that they confound the spectator’s capacity to discriminate precisely between them, resulting in a rich, if unsettling, epistemological ambiguity. Here the confusion of fiction and fact isn’t constituted as a self-congratulatory hermeneutic game in which the players know the rules from the start; indeed, the rules themselves are challenged—albeit not changed. Certainly, it is this unsettling epistemological ambiguity that not only structures but also constitutes the titillation, ethical outrage, and moral charge generated by the undecidable status as document or fiction of the “snuff” film, which concretizes in the most vital and visceral way the conundrum of representation qua representation, of “not being able to tell” what the ontological status of an abstracted cinematic image “really is.”

In a few instances the aforementioned mockumentaries are also constructed in such a manner that they are not easily (and, for some, not at all) identifiable as such. As Arild Fetveit has put it, a “fake documentary” such as *Forgotten Silver* “invites its audience to discover its falseness,” first using con-

11. On “communicative competence” see Jürgen Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon, 1979). For discussion of this competence as it relates to film spectatorship see my own *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 6–8.

12. Odin, “For a Semio-Pragmatics of Film,” discusses this notion of sanction central to the institution of cinema as a socially symbolic network. For example (and I will deal with this further), he writes: “Boredom will be the sanction pronounced by someone going to see a documentary in the frame of mind of someone going to see a fiction film. Inversely, someone going to see a fiction film in the frame of mind of the reader-actant of a documentary would probably be considered ‘insane,’ for he would be accused of confusing different levels of reality. It can be seen that the sanction may apply to the film itself, if its treatment of the material is unacceptable to the institution within which it is meant to operate, or the reader-actant, if he infringes the institutional determinations that are imposed on him” (220).

ventional textual features and the spectator's lack of contextual knowledge about the subject matter to engage the spectator within a documentary hermeneutic. It then proceeds—through small challenges to its own veracity—to make its documentary status less clear and increasingly suspect, ultimately shifting the spectator's hermeneutic approach to one more consonant with fiction.¹³ Nonetheless, given the viewer's contextual knowledge, or lack of it, and his or her particular investments in believing what is on the screen, that invitation to discover the film's falsity may not be recognized or accepted. Indeed, here in the United States I recall several postings on an electronic list for film scholars concerning *Forgotten Silver*, the first revealing a poster's initial excitement at seeing this film about an important New Zealand film pioneer he'd never heard of before. However, after a number of responses that both indicated and warranted the film's mockumentary status, he publicly announced his very real embarrassment at having been completely fooled. In New Zealand, however, belief in the veracity of the film was not a function of viewers not having sufficient contextual knowledge to doubt it but, rather, a function of the desire to bolster national pride and major participation in the making of "film history."

A much more complex example of the fiction film's "problematic" appropriation of and confusion with documentary is Haskell Wexler's provocative *Medium Cool* (1969). Narratively focusing on a television cameraman who must make choices between professional voyeurism or personal participation in both his unreal narrative life and the real social upheaval that surrounded the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago, *Medium Cool* both incorporates documentary footage of the convention and appropriates documentary style. However, it further complicates any clear distinction between the unreality of its fiction and the historical reality of its mise-en-scène by using footage of the film's actors (playing characters) shot during and at the convention and the events surrounding it. This, then, is a fiction that enacts much of its unreality at the real scene and in the real time of actual historical events.¹⁴

Indeed, other than a minimally structured narrative and a fairly conventional focus on certain key figures who, through that very focus are understood as characters, *Medium Cool* provides the viewer relatively few clues or textual determinants to secure the fiction precisely as such. Although it is true that even these few narrative features are sufficient for a competent

13. Arild Fetveit, "Mockumentary: Charting the Topography between Fiction and Documentary" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Cinema Studies, West Palm Beach, FL, Apr. 1999).

14. This is quite different and much more ambiguous than the quasi-documentary effect of those films that mobilize real historical actors *after the fact* of a historical event to *reenact* it for representation.

viewer to decide in favor of the film's overall status as a fiction, the epistemological nature of its parts is highly ambiguous. Indeed, Wexler points to this ambiguity as it exists not only *in* the film and its reception but also in the *historical context* of which making the film was a part. In the first instance he sounds a bit arrogant (if also accurate) when he tells an interviewer: "I feel confident enough to defy anyone, after they have seen *Medium Cool*, to discriminate between an actual happening and a rehearsed scene." In the second instance, pointing out that the script for the film was written and registered with the Writers' Guild well before the Democratic Convention and its surrounding events, he further describes the ambiguity the film generated offscreen: "In the making of *Medium Cool*, the FBI came to me and to Gulf and Western Corporation with the accusation that I had intentionally caused riots in the streets of Chicago for purposes of my film. It was necessary for me to sign affidavits saying that nothing that I photographed in Chicago, in relation to the riots, was staged by me."¹⁵ *Medium Cool's* particular and highly complex admixture of fiction and documentary is a rarity within the institutional circumscriptions of dominant cinematic praxis and social agreements that determine and fix the status and function of the cinematic object and its perceived relation to the extracinematic real. Indeed, *Medium Cool* unsettles these determinations, brings to the foreground an overt interrogation of these kinds of circumscriptions, and explicitly shows up their tenuous and provisional nature.

We are, in effect, thus led back to the worries (however simulated) expressed by the press in relation to cinematic (and now digital) legerdemain that would, through sleight of the eye, erase the boundaries that supposedly enable us to distinguish the unreal from the real. Yet, indeed, distinguish them is what we actually do almost all the time at the movies—although we do not always do it only according to those semiotic and institutionalized regulations of spectatorship that would fix our generic engagement with what we see on the screen. To the degree, however, that we raise such matters as documentary's interpolation into fictional texts or fiction's appropriation of documentary style, the differentiated experience of fiction and documentary as primarily grounded in objective, discrete, and conventional representational forms is *presupposed*—and it is just this presupposition that, it seems to me, our actual experience of taking up a film image as real or unreal puts into question.¹⁶

15. Renée Epstein, "An Interview with Haskell Wexler," *Sight and Sound* 45, no. 1 (winter 1975-76): 47.

16. I use the expression *taking up* rather than *understanding* to emphasize the active process of the spectator's engagement in the production of meaning. That is, the film image is never mere objective *data* but is always also the *capta* of an intentional *act*. *Taking up* is also to be distinguished from *making up*. Given that s/he is always an embodied social and historical being,

In what follows, then, I want to reconsider the distinctions we usually make between fiction and documentary film from a *pragmatic* and *phenomenological* perspective—that is, from a perspective that recognizes the dynamics and contingency of actual viewing experiences and from these experiences goes on to thematize and interpret some of the conditions under which the cinematic image may be “charged” for us with an *embodied* and *subjective* sense of what counts as the *existential* and *objective* “real.” Although this broader and less determinate reformulation still allows for the differences we experience in our engagement with a variety of cinematic representations, it also suggests a much more labile and dynamic engagement than generic categorization and formal analyses of film texts generally admit or allow. That is, it suggests that our engagement with and determination of film images as fictional or real may be experienced either preconsciously or consciously, idiosyncratically or conventionally, momentarily or for relatively sustained periods of time—and, furthermore, it suggests that whatever the textual incentives offered by the film, this engagement and determination depend always on the viewer’s existential knowledge of and social investments in the context of a lifeworld that exceeds and frames the text.

To illustrate this point in a fairly dramatic way, let me move to a concrete illustration I’ve used before: the death of a rabbit, which, for me, dramatically ruptured the fictional (if realist) space of Jean Renoir’s *Rules of the Game* (1939).¹⁷ Although the rabbit scene is like the Clinton news conference in its sudden demarcation of different orders of existential and cinematic space, my experience of such a rupture was a great deal more intense in *Rules of the Game*. This was because the Renoir film did not merely appropriate a real creature’s life for its fiction but also appropriated its death. Indeed, the onscreen death of Renoir’s rabbit haunts me still—neither because of any particular sentimental feelings I might have for small, furry, innocent creatures nor because of any conscious ethical concern I might have for the violation of animal rights by a film that, at the time, didn’t know any better. Rather, Renoir’s rabbit stays with me because it raised startling and basic questions about the difference between documentary and fiction even as they are objectively constituted on the same representational terrain. Thus, although long dead, the rabbit (at least for me) has not yet been laid to rest.

Let me rehearse the pertinent moments in the Renoir fiction. There are two death sequences in the film: the first, a lengthy hunting sequence in

the viewer is an *active* participant in making meaning, but that does not mean that s/he is completely *free* to make *any* meaning—as indicated by Odin when he speaks of various social sanctions on spectatorship (see n. 12 above).

17. See my “Inhabiting Ethical Space: 10 Propositions on Death, Representation, and Documentary,” *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 9, no. 4 (fall 1984): 283–300, revised for the present volume.

which the rabbit is shot and killed; the second, a shorter and plot-culminating sequence in which André Jurieu, a human character, is shot and killed. Objectively, both deaths occur in a stylistically coherent narrative that posits the complete autonomy of an irreal—if verisimilar—world.¹⁸ Both deaths are linked thematically. Not only is the aristocratic and cavalier cruelty of the hunt figured early in the film as parallel to the extramarital sport for which the naïve Jurieu is “fair game,” but also, after Jurieu is shot, one character explicitly describes to another how he was killed straight away and “rolled over like a rabbit.” On objective grounds then, one might expect that both deaths would be experienced by the competent viewer as occurring in the same diegetic world and as the *same logical types* of representation. One might also expect, by virtue of Jurieu’s humanity and the culminating place and function of his death in the narrative, that his death would be experienced as more shocking than the rabbit’s—or, since one could argue that the shock of his death is absorbed by our satisfaction at the death’s concretization and resolution of narrative elements, if not more shocking then at least more deeply felt.

For me, however, none of this was the case—nor has it been for most others who have been engaged by *Rules of the Game*. (Boredom and general disengagement from the film set up another experiential circumstance, to which I will return.) For me the rabbit’s onscreen death was—and still is—a good deal *more* shocking and disturbing than the death of the human character. And this, I would maintain, is because the rabbit’s death ruptures the autonomous and homogenous space of the fiction through which it briefly scampered. Indeed, its quivering death leap transformed fictional into documentary space, symbolic into indexical representation, my affective investments in the irreal and fictional into a documentary consciousness charged with a sense of the world, existence, bodily mortification and mortality, and all the rest of the real that is in excess of fiction.

Here I would point out that whereas I have referred to Jurieu as a *human character*, I have *not* referred to the rabbit as an *animal character*. It is likely that prior to the rabbit’s death I experienced the fauna beaten out of the forest for the hunt in some generalized and diffuse way as “quasi characters,” functioning in the service of the narrative and on the premises of the irreal world of the fiction. But if this is so, it follows that I also perceived them, to some degree, as never *completely* characters. Prior to the moment of the rabbit’s death, I had bracketed its real existential status—that is, put it, quite precisely, “out of play” and on the “sidelines” of my critical consciousness. At the moment of its death, however, the status of its existence abruptly came back

18. Indeed, Renoir’s “perpetual hobbyhorse” in relation to cinematic realism was precisely to create the “unity” of a narrative world. See Jean Renoir, *My Life and My Films*, trans. Norman Denny (London: Collins, 1974), 277.

into play for me and stopped the game of fiction. The mortal gravity of the filmed event transformed the irreality of fictional space into a different ontological order of representation—namely, into the reality of a documentary space suddenly charged with existential and ethical investment. Now, in no way would I deny that the spectator's fictional consciousness is also existentially and ethically informed at the movies—and, indeed, fiction films almost always dramatize and provide us a wide variety of ethical scenarios and subject positions that we, as viewers, vicariously inhabit to explore and test our own ethical values and possibilities.¹⁹ Nonetheless, except in extreme instances (and the rabbit's death is one such), we are not aware of being ethically accountable to—and for—the fictional situation in the same way or to the same degree that we are in a mode of documentary consciousness.

Like other verisimilar cinematic fictions, *Rules of the Game* presents us with a structure of representational cues that mark it sufficiently as what kind of film it is: there are characters, a plot, a narrative arc, privileged views of action, transparently conventional editorial practices such as cutting on action and matching sight-lines, shot/reverse-shot sequences, and so forth. But this sufficiency of kind is not necessity. That is, independent of representational cues but dependent on and charged with our embodied and acculturated knowledge of the extratextual world in which we live, as we watch this particular sequence in this particular film, most of us preconsciously “unbracket”—and “re-posit”—the rabbit's real existence. As the event occurs before us, we know the rabbit dies not only *in* but also *for* the fiction—in *excess* and *outside* of the irreal fictional world, in the space of the real, where death counts because it is irreversible. At the moment of its death, then, the rabbit loses its ambiguous status as a quasi character and becomes a real—and now definitively dead—once-living creature. Conversely, the human character Jurieu dies only *in* the irreal space of the fiction. His existence as an actual person is never posited by us—neither in his life nor in his death—because Jurieu, the character, exists nowhere else but in and for the fiction.²⁰

Such an extreme and sudden shift in our relation to an onscreen fiction

19. An excellent dissertation has been recently written on the great contribution that fiction films make to our ethical life. See Jane Megan Stadler, “Narrative Film and Ethical Life: The Projection of Possibilities” (PhD diss., Murdoch University, 2000).

20. Although, of course, his character's life might be continued in another fiction—most commonly, in horror-film sequels where there seems little compunction about raising characters from the dead. Nonetheless (with the exception of certain fan subcultures that extend the “life” of fictional characters in their own narratives), this nonpositing of a fictional character's existence is why we usually don't ask or expect serious answers to questions that delve too deeply into their backstory: Did Charles Foster Kane date much when he was a teenager? Such a question has no determinate answer within the fiction and no extratextual reference in the realm of the real. (Such questioning and delving into the extratextual—although not extracine-

is not all that exceptional even as it always seems shocking. Thus, filmmaker Haskell Wexler tells an interviewer:

I find people's reactions to "real" death and "movie" death fascinating. For example, in Jean-Luc Godard's *Weekend* [1967], perhaps twenty people are dramatically killed. But there is one scene in which the throat of a pig is cut. I have seen the film several times, and each time that scene appears, the audience gasps. They know that they are seeing an animal die. They know that, unlike the actors, when the director says, "Cut," the pig will not get up and walk away.²¹

In sum, however latently, we are aware that relative to the irreal cinematic events with which we are engaged, the human actor survives the death of his character. Thus, the character's death does not merit the same order of care we may suddenly feel for the rabbit's or pig's. It does not elicit the same level of subjective and physical shiver we feel as our very bodies "know" the existential difference between the character's and the rabbit's or pig's death. Furthermore, the character's death does not cause in us the diffuse sense of guilt we perhaps feel, as spectators of the spectacle, about our own small responsibility for the rabbit's and the pig's death. Which is to say that, however latently, we know and understand that an actor may die a thousand deaths, but this rabbit and this pig only one.

It is important to emphasize that the knowledge that informs these distinctions between the existential status and fate of both the actor and the rabbit is primarily extracinematic and extratextual—and it is this knowledge and the values entailed by it that allow us to remain engaged with the irreal-ity of fiction or pull us back into the world we inhabit as real not only because we are physically bound to it but also because we are ethically implicated in it. Furthermore, as I have suggested, this extratextual knowledge informs our cinematic experience generally and at a preconscious level—until, that is, it is explicitly raised to consciousness by something so specifically shocking and existentially particular as, in the case of the Renoir film, the death of a rabbit. Unlike Jurieu's death, the experiential moment of the rabbit's death gains its specific axiological charge of affects and values from an existential and cultural knowledge that exceeds—and contextualizes—the homogenizing devices of both cinematic and narrative representation. Indeed, the rabbit's death *challenges* these devices, not only pointing to but also opening into a perceived domain of the real, a documentary space where, in this instance, aesthetic values are suddenly diminished and ethical ones are greatly heightened.

matic—lives of characters is the grounding conceit of film critic and novelist David Thomson's *Suspects*, mentioned above.)

21. Epstein, "Interview with Haskell Wexler," 47.

In regard to this spatial transformation and shift in aesthetic and ethical values, it is worth considering, however, how cinematic history and genre qualify our responses and investments. Consider, for example, the effects of disclaimer crawls that now appear at the end of American films, informing us that no animals were mistreated during filming. (We know, however, that in a French film made in the 1930s, an animal was.) Our present knowledge that these disclaimers will be there “at the end” allow us to experience—with less ethical discomfort and concern—narrative scenes of an animal’s mistreatment or death as “enacted” abuse. And, in terms of genre, we might consider a fairly notorious counterexample to the transformation of space and shift in values at the death of Renoir’s fictional rabbit—this, in Michael Moore’s controversial documentary *Roger and Me* (1989). In the “Bunnies as Pets or Rabbits as Meat” sequence of that film, the killing of a rabbit is still a shocking moment when it happens in front of the camera, but it does *not* transform the ontological status of the cinematic space, the events that occur within it, or the dominant mode of ethical valuation that informs our judgment as spectators. This is because we have been, from the first, in the realm of the real and its moral charge of the image and thus, from the first, in a mode of documentary consciousness and judgment. Even as the rabbit’s death in *Roger and Me* shocks us—its existential finality darkening the generally light, if ironic, tone—its event does not cause a shift in our axiological attitude toward the filmmaker and the film. Hence, the ethical controversy surrounding this film—a documentary—was generated *not* by the death of a real rabbit, which might have lived on as a bunny were it not for the film, but by what was seen as Moore’s cavalier and “dishonest” alteration and manipulation of the temporal sequence of real events that had nothing to do with the rabbit but everything to do with his fictionalization of real events for dramatic purpose.²²

If we acknowledge the viewer’s extracinematic and extratextual knowledge (both socially conventional and personally idiosyncratic), and if we acknowledge the variable pressures this knowledge exerts on the viewer’s experience and valuation of a given cinematic object, then we might argue that there is no such “thing” as a documentary or fiction film. Or, perhaps more accurately, we might argue that what we call documentary or fiction films are *only* “things”—that is, the sedimented and *reified objects* of a much more dynamic and *mutable experience* that is not adequately described by such binary generic terms. This is *not* to say, however, that what constitutes a fiction or documentary film is determined solely by—and within—the experience of the individual spectator. The individual spectator is always also

22. For discussion of the ethical issues surrounding Moore’s film see Williams, “Mirrors without Memories,” 118–19.

immersed in history and in a culture in which there is general social consensus not only as to the ontological status (if not the interpretation) of what stands as profilmic reality but also as to the regulative hermeneutic “rules” that govern how one is to read and take up its representation. Thus, although an individual or small group of spectators could take up and experience *Forgotten Silver* as a documentary, their judgment of the film would be (and was) deemed “mis-taken” and gently corrected—that is, regulated—by a larger and more “knowledgeable” social body. It is important to realize, however, that this cultural reading of a “misreading” is achieved through a historical and conventional set of *regulative*—not *constitutive*—hermeneutic rules; the former open to ambiguity and challenge, the latter foundational and determining. Thus, *Forgotten Silver*’s documentary style cues the regulative rules for a certain interpretive framework but does not determine either the spectator’s interpretive strategy or the produced reading.²³

In sum, however weighted on the side of social consensus and convention, our actual viewing experiences are best described as containing *both* documentary and fictional moments co-constituted by a dynamic and labile spectatorial engagement with *all* film images. And although the nature of these moments may be cued, structured, and finally contained by conventional cinematic practices, ultimately it is our own extracinematic, cultural, and embodied experience and knowledge that governs how we first take up the images we see on the screen and what we make of them. It is just such knowledge that constitutes ethical care of a different sort in relation to each of the deaths in Renoir’s film. And it is this embodied knowledge and ethical care, not some objective stylistic change in the image or in the film’s narratological structure, that charge the image (and are charged by it) to momentarily rupture the autonomous coherence and unity of Renoir’s fictional world.

The knowledge and care that transform fictional space into existentially shared and ethically invested documentary space simultaneously transform the fictional consciousness of the viewer, in which existence is nonposited and unreal, into documentary consciousness, in which existence and a world are posited in all their specific gravity and shared consequence. Generally incommensurable in structure and investment, both fictional and documentary consciousness and space, then, can be constituted from the *same* cinematic material and emerge in the *same* film. Each, however, is of a *different* axiological order whose existence and value are determined as much—

23. Even in this still young digital era in which we see the beginnings of a major epistemic shift, photographic verisimilitude in the cinema in its indexical representation of the real is still perceived as foundational and *constitutive* of both documentary and fiction; here, then, we have a *historical episteme* that currently constitutes, governs, and *determines* (rather than merely regulates) our relation to *all* cinema (even in its “negative” instances, such as animated or abstract films).

if, indeed, not more—by social and contingent experience than by abstract codes or regulative rules of representation. For example, a few people I surveyed were not particularly shocked by the death of Renoir's rabbit. Although still somewhat affected by it, they did not feel that the quality of either the film's cinematic space or their attention was transformed during the hunting sequence. These same spectators, however, expressed overall *boredom* with the film and indicated that they had watched the whole of it in a general and diffuse state of detachment. Never engaged by, or at some point disengaged from, the irreal fictional world before them, existence was never bracketed or put out of play. Refusing both their own usual spectatorial transparency and the irreality of fictional characters and events on the screen, they were aware not only of their own existence in their seats but also of the existence of the real actors and the rabbit as such. Thus, much like the spectators of *Roger and Me*, even if they were somewhat shocked by the death of the rabbit, they were not shocked by a shift in their mode of consciousness or by the spatial transformation of fictional into documentary space—and this because, not engaged by the fiction, they remained in the space of the real from the start, or their eventual disinterest repositioned them there.²⁴

Indeed, all of us, at one time or another bored with and wandering from the fictional irreal, have found ourselves suddenly watching actors rather than characters, looking at sets and locations rather than inhabiting a narrative world, gazing at scenes and histrionics rather than participating in significant events and feeling intensified emotions. When we are alienated from or bored with our engagement in a fiction, we no longer bracket our sense of the real; our consciousness of our own lifeworld intrudes on the fictional world and restructures it. The result is that a supposedly fictional space is experienced—and evaluated—as documentary space. Conversely, in the instances when we suddenly feel the shock (most often merely the nudge) of the real, what has been our transparent and full engagement in an irreal fictional space is abruptly contextualized and ruptured by our latent extracine-matic and extratextual knowledge—whether our recognition that a rabbit or pig has really died before us or that the real Bill Clinton has been mobilized by and for an irreal fiction. In these moments the emotions we feel and judgments we make of the events we see become charged with and informed by our present investments in our own lifeworld.

Indeed, this transformation of fictional to documentary consciousness is a more common experience at the movies than we might think—to be sure, it is gentled by its very ordinary and less dramatic occurrence. Here let us

24. Boredom and disengagement *from* the narrative world are not equivalent to the kind of distance generated by reflection *on* the narrative world—the latter, a metalevel engagement with the irreal world onscreen. Thus, we can wonder what will happen next or recognize a thematic recurrence or ponder the meaning of a narrative action *within* fictional consciousness.

remember those moments in our engagement with the autonomous irreality of a realist fiction when our consciousness diverts its primary attention from the specific fictional characters and events to the film's more general referentiality to the existential world. For example, we might be following a specific fictional character as she walks on a crowded city street and be drawn, on occasion, to shift our attention from this "character" to those "people" surrounding her to wonder if they know they're in a movie. As we scrutinize their faces for signs of possible awareness of the camera filming them or of what suddenly becomes not the character but the actress acting in their midst, they no longer are generalized in status, no longer merely quasi characters necessary to the verisimilitude of the realist *mise-en-scène*. Rather, they become for us real people, ambiguous existential ciphers. That is, we recognize them as not completely given to us as is the narrative's heroine, who is fictional and who, if she is ambiguous, is so only as the character meant for us as viewers. These real people on the street, although caught up in the irreality of a fiction, are much more absent from us than is the character; we are aware of them going about the living of their own lives far in excess of the character's life and the film's world. For a moment, then, in the midst of a fiction, we find ourselves in a documentary. This quite common experience demonstrates that although documentary and fictional consciousness are *incommensurable*, they are *compossible* in any given film. Furthermore, it demonstrates that documentary and verisimilar fictional space are constituted from the same worldly "stuff"—the former giving existential ballast to the "realism" of the latter even as its specificity is usually bracketed and put out of play and on the sidelines of our consciousness.

Let me turn to a much more dramatic and highly charged example: the aforementioned Woody Allen's *Husbands and Wives*. It is, on the one hand, an obvious and perhaps trivial manifestation of how extracinematic knowledge transforms fictional into documentary space, yet, on the other hand, it is also quite complex in that its fiction explicitly appropriates and foregrounds documentary codes of representation as its structuring narratologic. When the film was released, much was made of "art imitating life"—Allen's real and highly publicized breakup with Mia Farrow, occurring coterminously with the marital breakup of the fictional characters Gabe (played by Allen) and Judy (played by Farrow). Here the viewer's extracinematic (although not necessarily extratextual) knowledge of the Allen-Farrow scandal, and of the fact that Allen wrote and directed the film in addition to acting in it, is hardly on the order of the diffuse but existentially powerful knowledge that informed the viewer of the rabbit's death in Renoir's film. Nor is it on the order of the diffuse and common knowledge of existence that often emerges to rupture the irreality of fiction when we wonder at onscreen passersby or recognize a restaurant at which we've once dined. Here, in *Husbands and Wives*, and in like response to the documentary footage of Bill Clin-

ton in *Contact*, our knowledge is initially more conscious than preconscious, more specific and focused than general and diffuse, more local than global, and more intertextual than personal. It is the kind of knowledge that also informed (albeit to much lesser degree) some viewers' experience of *Made in America* (Richard Benjamin, 1993), in which contemporaneous publicity about Whoopi Goldberg and Ted Danson's torrid offscreen romance transformed the fictional space of their characters' onscreen interracial kiss into a more compelling documentary space—inhabited not by the characters but by the actors who were perceived not as kissing “irreally” in a fiction but as kissing “for real.”

Indeed, one can look back over the history of cinema and its publicity mills and find many examples of such specific, local, and usually ephemeral, transformations of spectatorial consciousness and cinematic space—particularly in relation to stars. There were Greta Garbo and John Gilbert in three successive and scorching melodramatic screen romances—*Flesh and the Devil* (Clarence Brown, 1927), *Love* (Edmund Goulding, 1927), and *A Woman of Affairs* (Clarence Brown, 1928)—all of which, for contemporaneous viewers, “documented” an offscreen relationship widely and happily publicized by MGM. There were also Liz and Dick in *Cleopatra* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1963), the fictional spectacle of distant and overdressed ancient history matched—and mostly overcome—by the documentary excess of the stars' smoldering passion in our—and their—own present. One can also point to Warren Beatty and Annette Bening in *Love Affair* (Glenn Gordon Caron, 1994)—not merely engaged as characters in an updated remake of an old romantic fiction but, indeed, as actors displaying a documentary consumption. (Roger Ebert, for example, writes of the film's “teasing parallels with real life” and continues: “When Warren Beatty tells Annette Bening, ‘You know, I’ve never been faithful to anyone in my whole life,’ you have the strangest feeling these words might have passed between them on an earlier occasion.”)²⁵ In sum, it is quite clear (although relatively unconsidered) that Hollywood cinema has long played with and depended on the transformation of its fictional space into documentary space. That is, in a commercial rather than intellectual way, it has understood how the unreal can be charged by the real and how the voyeuristic pleasures of prurient interest can find both their satisfaction and their “alibi” within the general compass of a disguising fiction whose titillation is generated by its documentation of real rather than histrionic “goings on.” It is hardly surprising, then, that TriStar Pictures exploited the Woody/Mia scandal by opening the film on many more screens than was typical of a Woody Allen release—“hoping,” as one

25. Roger Ebert, review of *Love Affair*, dir. Glenn Gordon Caron, *Cinemania 1996*, CD-ROM (Microsoft, 1996).

review put it, “that mainstream audiences would feel compelled to see the film and *scour it for clues about the real-life drama* unfolding in the tabloids.”²⁶

So Woody/Gabe and Mia/Judy are, in many respects, old news. Nonetheless, like *Rules of the Game*, *Husbands and Wives* stands as a particularly relevant instance of foregrounding the dynamic and mutable relationship that exists between fiction and documentary within the context of a single film. What I find most fascinating about *Husbands and Wives*, however, is that although the film explicitly borrows on formal features associated with documentary practice, it is *not* the stylistically documentary moments that rupture its fiction or arouse the viewer’s documentary consciousness. Formally, the film is heavily marked by vertiginous, handheld, cinema vérité cinematography (about which many spectators complained), interviews that include off-screen questions to the character on camera, direct address of the camera by the characters, some voice-over narration, and a chronological temporal structure interrupted by commentary and choric asides. The film is also marked by well-known performers whose presence as “characters,” to great degree, overrides the film’s style to announce it as an unreal fiction. Thus, in relation to the whole, there were only a few moments or scenes in which I found myself watching Woody and Mia rather than Gabe and Judy—but these moments had relatively little or nothing to do with the film’s documentary style or, indeed, with any differentiation in its mode of representation. Rather, these moments emerged from an exacting specificity in the film’s dramatic content insofar as the latter was related to my extracinematic knowledge of the Woody/Mia scandal.

Consider an early scene filmed in the mode of classical realist fiction—not documentary—film style. During a bedtime conversation in which the couple discusses the sudden marital separation of close friends, Judy asks Gabe, “Do you ever hide things from me?” With those words she was suddenly transformed for most contemporaneous viewers into Farrow—and the space ethically charged with Allen’s (not Gabe’s) hesitant response, “Of course not.” Most of us in the audience *knew this response to be a lie insofar as Allen was concerned*—and our comprehension and judgment of his documented onscreen lie to Farrow far outweighed our interest in the fictional response of a character named Gabe (not Allen), *whose veracity we were not yet able to judge for lack of fictive information either about him or his marriage*. This was a brief moment of interchange in a longer and stylistically homogenized scene, but fictional space was nonetheless ruptured and restructured as a space of the real. Only continued action and a conversation of less charged content allowed most of us in the audience to refocus our attention, bracket

26. CineBooks’ Motion Picture Guide, review of *Husbands and Wives*, dir. Woody Allen, *Cinema 1996*, CD-ROM (Microsoft, 1996; emphasis added).

the existence of Woody and Mia in their historical situation, and reengage them as the irreal Gabe and Judy.

Some later and more pointed dialogue again ruptures the fiction when Gabe is being “interviewed” and directly addresses both the camera and an offscreen questioner. Asked about the breakup of his marriage and why he didn’t tell his wife what was going on much earlier, Gabe replies: “How could I be one hundred percent honest with Judy? I knew that I loved her and I didn’t want to hurt her. And so what am I gonna do? What am I gonna say? That I’m becoming infatuated with a twenty-year-old—that I see myself sleepwalking into a mess and I’ve learned nothing over the last thirty years?” It was, of course, not Gabe but Allen whom we saw saying this within the contemporaneous historical moment—and thus he says it in a documentary space constituted not *from* the film’s pretense of documentary construction but *in* the documentary consciousness of a historical spectator whose ethical judgment not only used the real to assess the fiction but also in-formed the fiction with a transformative “charge” that changed its ontological and axiological status. Indeed, throughout *Husbands and Wives* the fictional status of Gabe and Judy is charged with instability. And, hence, a reviewer can read the film—without quarrel—as Allen’s “*apologia* for the relationship he has entered into with Farrow’s adopted daughter.”²⁷

This, of course, suggests that our engagement with and co-constitution of cinematic fiction and documentary is always historical and provisional, prone as much to the vagaries and ephemera of contemporaneous real events, publicity, fashion, and idiosyncrasy as to our habituation to cinematic codes or to prevailing existential verities such as birth, death, bodily excretions, and the difficulty of teaching babies and animals to act in accordance with fictional desire. In the first instances the charge of the real will eventually pass; our proximity to past historical contexts distanced; our ethical interest less focused and less invested; our sense of responsibility for ethical judgment diffused. Consider, for example, *The China Syndrome* (James Bridges, 1979)—a thriller about a nuclear power plant accident. In a dramatic instance not of “art imitating life” but of “life imitating art,” twelve days after the film’s release an actual nuclear reactor accident and near meltdown occurred at Three Mile Island, near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Like the malfunctioning gauge indicator on an instrument panel that inaugurated the contingencies of the film’s central narrative, the contingent extracinematic conditions that contextualized the film’s fiction were stunning and transformative in their effect: the contemporaneous viewer’s highly invested existential care in these very real and consequential events suddenly—and

27. Roger Ebert, review of *Husbands and Wives*, dir. Woody Allen, *Cinemania 1996*, CD-ROM (Microsoft, 1996; emphasis added.)

widely—restructured the fiction within a documentary consciousness that called for the assumption of social responsibility. Obviously tapping into public anxiety about the peaceful use of atomic energy and bringing together two major stars (Jane Fonda and Jack Lemmon), *The China Syndrome* was extremely popular at its debut before the accident. However, its fictional situation—and hence its realism—was also immediately discredited by pronuclear constituencies. One Southern California Edison executive claimed the film “had no scientific credibility and is, in fact, ridiculous.” Nonetheless, after the real extracinematic crisis the increased popularity of the film “sparked a move to pull the plug on the nuclear-power industry.” We are told that “in the following months, several power plants were shut down as safety precautions, while plans to build others were scrapped.”²⁸

Today, however, most viewers who see the film on video have forgotten or never knew about the contingent coincidence of the film’s fictional text and its mirror-image historical context. Indeed, were I to show it in a film class, *The China Syndrome* is likely to have completely lost the charge of the real, engaging students only in the autonomous threats and thrills of the unreal in which their present existence and possible peril is put out of play. Which is to say that most of us no longer engage the Gilbert and Garbo kisses of *Flesh and the Devil* with documentary consciousness and that *Husbands and Wives* will remand itself to fiction as we ourselves lose sight of its charged cultural context. Although such historical provisionality in the co-constitution of cinematic consciousness and the ontological status of cinematic representation is certain, this provisionality is itself qualified by certain essential material conditions of embodied existence that persist in human experience: birth, death, bodily functions, and the general spontaneity of young babies and most animals. Hence my ongoing concern for the death of Renoir’s rabbit—and the likelihood that, despite the passage of time, it will outlast my concern for the travails of Woody and Mia.

In this regard my previous description of the restructuring of fictional into documentary consciousness and space by the charge of the real may be phenomenologically accurate, but it still does not go quite far enough. For while it may be easy to circumscribe the experiences of this transformation as they depend on local, highly publicized, and conscious knowledge such as that mobilized during *Husbands and Wives*, it is much more difficult to grasp and describe this transformation as it depends on the more global, diffuse, and preconscious existential knowledge belonging to every competent film viewer. However culturally and historically inflected, this is a deep and embodied knowledge that posits existence latently and in general—not of the unreal characters and events that constitute narrative and fictional worlds

28. Michael Sauter, “A Nuclear Reaction,” *Entertainment Weekly*, Mar. 20, 1998, 104.

but certainly of the real-world trees, sky, mountains, and rabbits that make them visible, give them substance, and thus substantiate them. This is that existential knowledge of the real that the viewer puts out of play and into the background of consciousness so as to co-constitute and enter into fictional space and play. Positing existence in general rather than specifically, diffusing it as the background—or *premise*—for the meaningfulness of the fiction, allows aesthetic judgment to emerge, to qualify, and often to dominate the nature and intensity of ethical judgment. As a consequence, the viewer is most often invested differently or to a different degree in the events of the fiction than she would be in those of her own lifeworld. Thus we might ask under what conditions—other than boredom and alienation—this existential knowledge turns from the latent and general to the manifest and specific and momentarily troubles or annihilates fictional space, effecting a change in the kind and quality of spectatorial judgment.

I want to address this issue through Terrence Malick's *Days of Heaven* (1978), a fiction rife with images and events that not only generally reference but also specifically figure the real and spontaneous "natural" environment in equivocal relation to human design and melodrama. Let me point to two sequences in particular: the first, a brief one in which we watch the time-lapsed and close-up germination of a wheat seedling; the second, a much longer and narratively critical sequence in which a plague of grasshoppers descends on a farm to consume the mature wheat fields, the insects' activity seen in long shots and extreme close-ups that document both their feeding on the wheat and their eventual immolation by fire. What seems to complicate my present argument is that these sequences, at least for me, do *not* rupture and transform fictional space and call forth in me a documentary consciousness. And this despite, in the one instance, what might be seen as the film's "scientific" and documentary gaze at the germinating seedling and, in the other, its presentation of visible images of what I know must be real wheat eaten by real grasshoppers that are eventually really burned alive before my eyes. Despite the quite specific existential reference of these images, my consciousness of them remains primarily fictional and the dominant quality of my investment in watching and judging the events before me is aesthetic and related to the unreal narrative and its characters and thematics. Thus, my extratextual knowledge remains bracketed and general—latently and diffusely providing a phenomenological sense of verisimilitude and "realism" to what I watch but never surfacing to challenge or undo its fictional irreality. The big question, of course, is why not?

Here, it is tempting to perversely lose myself in a discussion of the way in which *Days of Heaven*, as a particular film, constructs—through its stylistic choices—a dialectic between the unreal of its autonomous fiction and the real of the viewer's referenced environmental lifeworld, resolving the incommensurability of the real and unreal at the metalevel of a philosophical med-

itation on the relationship between the brute and random “being of nature” and the willful and unselfdisclosed “nature of being,” between ontology and epistemology, between “naturalism” and “melodrama.” But I will not succumb, for, interesting as such a discussion might be (and it would not undermine what I’m arguing here), it would deflect attention from the experiential questions I’ve raised in the present context. Why, when I know for certain it is real, does the wheat seedling in *Days of Heaven* germinate in a fictional and highly symbolic space? And why does a rabbit, but not a grasshopper, transform my consciousness and my engagement with fiction to die a documentary death?

In response, I want to explore further the notion of existential generalization introduced earlier. I have already suggested that, in bracketing existence so it is latent and put “out of play,” our fictional consciousness tends to *generalize* those particular existents like trees, rabbits, and grasshoppers that make up fiction’s autonomous and specific self-referential world but that—unlike characters—also exceed it. Which is to say that, in fictional experience, unless something happens to *specifically* particularize these existential entities as in some way singular, they will be engaged as what philosophers call *typical particulars*—a form of generalization in which a single entity is taken as exemplary of an entire class.²⁹ Thus, although they retain a diffuse existential “echo” (one that generally grounds and verifies the verisimilitude of the particular fiction), trees and rabbits and grasshoppers in fictional consciousness are not taken up by us in their individual and specific particularity as are fictional characters. Rather, we see them as “standing in” for the more general and typical ground of existence that constitutes the unreal world of realist fiction: namely, those material things and plants and creatures that in their very particularity typically make up the world we live outside the theater as real.³⁰ And this is how we engage them—until some textual or extratextual event in the cinematic experience foregrounds their specific, rather than typical, existential status for us and restructures the kind and quality of our investment in them.

29. For elaboration see the chapter “Generalizing” in Hubert G. Alexander, *The Language and Logic of Philosophy* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1972), 230–56. Of the “typical particular” Alexander writes: “A single object or event may be thought of as a generalization if it is considered as exemplifying a class. One would have to consider the individual to be a sort of prototype or model for the whole class, that is a *typical particular*. Thus a very ordinary chair, but a typical chair, might be called a generalized chair. In this case, however, the group idea is no longer explicitly present, and the meaning of ‘general’ is in effect transferred to its opposite, namely, to a particular” (233).

30. The operation of our latent documentary consciousness here bears some parallel to Walter Benjamin’s description of the “optical unconscious.” For a gloss relevant to the concerns of this essay see Miriam Hansen, “Benjamin, Cinema, and Experience: ‘The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology,’” *New German Critique* 40 (winter 1987): 179–224.

In *Days of Heaven*, then, I engaged the germinating seed and the plague of grasshoppers not in their existential and specific particularity but generally—in their typical particularity—although each sequence solicited, appealed to, and maintained my fictional consciousness in different ways. In the instance of the seed, employing an explicitly technological mode of vision (time-lapse cinematography), the film onscreen spatially and temporally abstracted the seed's germination from its situation in the world as I humanly live it. At the same time I, the viewer, took up the seedling's abstracted and minutely scrutinized particularity as typical of all seedlings and judged it a general—and, in this instance, aesthetically symbolic—gloss on the film's narrative and themes. That is, the time-lapse close-up not only signaled a general comprehension of the seedling's standing for a change of season and the coming of spring, but also—in the “unnatural” and aestheticized specificity of its temporal and spatial germination—it typified in its particularity the mysteries of nature, of life as a becoming. In effect, the seed germinated more than itself; it germinated a generalization and an aesthetic attitude in the fictional consciousness that took up its *typically* particular presence and meaning without positing its *uniquely* particular existence. For me, then, there was no rupture in fictional space (although, of course, there might have been were I a farmer or a botanist).³¹

In the grasshopper sequence, this kind of heightened abstraction and more consciously grasped generalization is not present. Nonetheless, I also engaged the grasshoppers in their typically particular generality—not just in swarms but even in close-ups of individual insects eating and dying. Indeed, I engaged them in much the same way that I initially engaged Renoir's rabbit and the other fauna beaten out of the forest for the hunt in *Rules of the Game*—until, that is, the moment when the rabbit lost its typical particularity in the specificity and uniqueness of its singular death. Yet I felt no such transformation from the general to the particular in my engagement with the grasshoppers, no rupture of my fictional consciousness and the cinematic space it beheld. The grasshoppers in *Days of Heaven* die also—quite horribly and quite particularly, en masse and individually, in long shot and in close-up. Why, then, do they maintain their generality and unreal fictional status for me in the moments of their very real and uniquely particular deaths? Again, the answer to this question is not to be found in the film but in the level of ethical investment that I have in the life and death of grass-

31. It is worth noting here that a similar time-lapsed representation of a germinating seed in a film initially taken up as a documentary would, in all likelihood, also function as a generalizing *typical particular*. That is, it would probably stand in for *all* wheat seedlings *as a class*. What might be quite different, however, is the axiological charge of the image in this more factual context. Here, aesthetic value would be probably lessened; that is, the seed might function as a generalization, but it would not have the symbolic richness of its presence in a fiction.

hoppers. In the extratextual world I inhabit, however real and uniquely particular its event, the death of a grasshopper is not likely to move me (or most others in my culture)—unless, that is, I were to feel it squish beneath my shoe. Here, however, my bodily response would be more indicative of aesthetic revulsion than of ethical care (more, that is, about me than the grasshopper). And thus the death of a grasshopper does not matter enough to mobilize my ethical judgment so as to rupture the space of fiction. (Of course, were I a farmer or an entomologist, I might well feel otherwise.)

But this, too, does not exhaust or completely put to rest the charge of the real that informs fiction and my differing responses to the rabbit and the grasshoppers in two quite different films. I have already suggested that the rabbit's death not only awakened my sense of ethical care—my *responsibility*, as it were—but also that it awakened my sense of my own body's *responsiveness*. That is, the rabbit's abrupt death leap inscribed itself on my body as a deep and empathetic recognition of my own material and mortal possibilities.³² Although I would argue that my own slight physical recoil as it was shot was not sufficient (or necessary) to transform fictional to documentary consciousness and space (after all, our bodies are very often also mobilized in sympathy with what happens to the bodies of characters in fiction), it was sufficient to create an ambivalent and transitional space between my sense of the unreal and real, an algorithmic moment between two possible modes of engagement when my consciousness might (but then, again, might not) restructure both itself and the value and meaning of the object or event that provoked it.

Thus, I was not quite honest when I said that the grasshoppers did not move me in *Days of Heaven*. There was, indeed, one brief moment in which they did—albeit not into ethical judgment and not into documentary con-

32. Here I am reminded of childhood, when our curiosity about the embodied nature of existence is at its most explicit and experimental and at its least ethically charged. A dominant image as I write this is not only of the beginning of Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch*, in which a group of children torture a scorpion, but also of some of my friends and I killing ants on a concrete driveway with the heat from a magnifying glass. Certainly, the exercise of our power was central to our cruelty. Although we were likely to cry if we saw a dead dog (or bunny), we were also fascinated in a major way by materiality and mortality. We felt no bodily sympathy with the ants—yet we might well have felt some deeper (and more horrifying) bodily empathy with them. That is, we understood their status as living creatures, and I remember thinking about and imagining their busy social world that we were destroying (all those efforts to move a crumb) and somehow recognizing some microcosmic similarity to my own in both its generality and particularity. Indeed, could we have been so intensely interested in killing them were we not aware at some level of an uncanny common mortal bond between us, were we not somehow deeply invested in repudiating and disavowing the horror of our common status as living creatures in what seemed an awful notion of infinite regress that had adults on the one perceptible end and ants on the other—and thus included us vulnerably “in” rather than powerfully “out” of the scene?

consciousness and space. At the very beginning of the plague sequence, the grasshoppers make their first significant appearance as a young girl prepares vegetables in a kitchen and, in an adjoining shot, a woman bathes her face from a basin. Each, in close-up, picks up an insect with her fingers and then quickly drops it. Both times, my own body, if only momentarily and only slightly, recoiled in my theater seat—not in existential sympathy with grasshopper bodies but with the aesthetic revulsion felt by human fingers. At that moment, the grasshoppers were no longer generalized as typical particulars but became specifically particular, real, and embodied as other. At that moment I ambivalently occupied a transitional space that connected me both to my own body and the real world in which I lived and to the unreal world of the fiction. Although the connection lent the fiction existential weight and gave it *substance*, it placed on me no compelling moral charge, no ethical responsibility for my own disgust, and thus did not fully rupture the fiction for me.

At its most potent, then, the charge of the real that moves us from fictional into documentary consciousness is always more than a generalized existential in-formation of the image or the mere “response-ability” of our actual bodies. The charge of the real always is also, if to varying degree, an *ethical charge*: one that calls forth not only response but also responsibility—not only aesthetic valuation but also ethical judgment. It engages our awareness not only of the existential consequences of representation but also of our own ethical implication in representation. It remands us reflexively to ourselves as embodied, culturally knowledgeable, and socially invested viewers. Thus, in those moments in which fictional space becomes charged with the real, the viewer is also so charged. The charge of the real comprehends both screen and viewer, restructuring their parallel worlds not only as coextensive but also as ethically implicated each in the other. As much as the documentary space that emerges to rupture the autonomy of a fiction onscreen always points offscreen to the embodied viewer’s concrete and intersubjective social world, it is always also a space co-constituted by and “pointed to” by the viewer whose consciousness re-cognizes and grasps that onscreen space as, in some invested way, contiguous with her or his own material, mortal, and moral being. In this documentary restructuring of a relationship to fictional screen images, the viewer takes on and bears particular subjective responsibility for the actions marked by—and in—her or his vision: responsibility for watching the action and, as justification for watching, responsibility for judging the action and for calling into account—and consciousness—the criteria for doing so.

Thus, I jump slightly with the rabbit and die a little of its death every time I see it being sacrificed for my narrative pleasure. Thus, I silently “tut-tut” at certain moments in *Husbands and Wives*. Thus, the grasshoppers die not for me but for a fiction (since I regard them as other and expendable and refuse

the significance and charge of their deaths even as I “know” their mortality). In sum, embodied and extratextual knowledge, posited and particularized existence, and personal ethical responsibility are *all* necessary to the full constitution of documentary consciousness on one side of the screen and documentary space on the other. Charged with the real (and the obligations it imposes), this space and the form of consciousness that structures its meaning are ever-present possibilities in *every* film experience—even when that experience begins and ends as a designated fiction.³³

33. I would like to extend my gratitude to Arild Fetveit for early and insightful commentary on this chapter.

The Passion of the Material

Toward a Phenomenology of Interobjectivity

Where are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh?
 —MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY, *The Visible and the Invisible*

Central to any understanding of the connection between ethics and aesthetics, the question of “the limit between the body and the world” is a question posed not only by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in *The Visible and the Invisible*¹ but also—and most vividly—by his less sanguine colleague, Jean-Paul Sartre, in his novel *Nausea*.² Whether put in terms that suggest existential ease or horror, awesome or awful encounters with inanimate “things,” inherence in the world or alienation from it, this question interrogates the *objectivity* of subjectively embodied and sensate being and how it is both like and unlike the sensible being of the world’s objective materiality. Indeed, as it is articulated by Merleau-Ponty on the common existential ground of both body and world that is the general medium or “element” of materiality he comes to call *flesh*, the question suggests that, in their material being, the subjective lived body and the objective world do not oppose each other but, on the contrary, are passionately intertwined. As Elena del Río summarizes:

Flesh designates the manner in which subject and object inhabit each other by participating in a common condition of embodied sense. . . . *Flesh* connotes the structure of reversibility whereby all things are at the same time active and passive, visual subjects and visible objects, the outside of the inside, the inside

This chapter is a major expansion of my “Die Materie und ihre Passion: Prolegomena zu einer Phänomenologie der Interobjektivität” [The Passion of the Material: Prolegomena to a Phenomenology of Interobjectivity], in *Ethik der Ästhetik* [The Ethics of Aesthetics], ed. and trans. Christoph Wulf, Dietmar Kamper, and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1994), 195–205.

1. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 138. Subsequent references will be cited in the text.

2. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Lloyd Alexander (New York: New Directions, 1964). Subsequent references will be cited in the text.

of the outside. . . . The concept of *flesh* is precisely what allows . . . a renewed notion of subjectivity, one which introduces *alterity* into the very definition of “selfsameness.”³

Commonly grounded in and made of the “selfsame flesh,” both body and world are thus intertwined—their general existence figuring and differentiating itself into particular forms and modes of material being. Furthermore, this intertwining can be seen as “passionate,” for, commonly grounded “in the flesh,” the provisional alterity of the subjective body and objective world are reversibly enfolded each in the other—not only raising Merleau-Ponty’s question of the limit between them but also evoking two similarly reversible yet figurally differentiated relations we have to the world in the extreme experience of what we call passion.

On the one hand, passion is defined as suffering; it is the state or capacity of being acted on and affected by *external* agents and forces, usually adversely. Thus, as material existents, both subjects and objects are capable of suffering. In general, we tend to use the word *passion* in its sense as suffering primarily in relation to intentional and embodied subjects (and, in Western Judeo-Christian culture, specifically in relation to Christ’s crucifixion and suffering). However, insofar as the passion of suffering names a certain condition of passive existence in which a body-subject or an embodied object is subjected to the will of others or the action of external forces, and insofar as it suggests a lack of intentional agency, the passion of suffering brings subjective being into intimate contact with its brute materiality and links it, as well, to the passive, mute, and inanimate objects of the world. Here we might think, for example, of a devastating tornado or earthquake in which some intentionless external force acts on us with such extremity that we become acutely aware not only of the irrelevance of our subjective will but also of the extreme vulnerability of our material objectivity. We might also think, for example, of certain instances of illness when what seems an external agent seems to deny one’s subjectivity and will even as it occupies and affects one’s own body.⁴ And, more horrific to contemplate, we might think

3. Elena del Río, “The Body as Foundation of the Screen: Allegories of Technology in Atom Egoyan’s *Speaking Parts*,” *Camera Obscura*, nos. 37/38 (summer 1996): 103–4. In the quote, del Río is citing Gary Brent Madison, “Flesh as Otherness,” in *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Galen A. Johnson and Michael B. Smith (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1990), 31.

4. This sense of passionately “suffering” the condition of being passively material in the instance of illness can be extremely complex. A cold (or a cancer), for instance, may be regarded as an external agent insofar as it is beyond one’s control, yet it is one’s own body that seems alienated insofar as it functions without one’s volition; this is one’s body as material object. At the same time, however, one also may have the sense of subjectively suffering “one-self”—that is, not merely and passively enduring the suffering but also actively inflicting

of willful acts of torture, in which the very task of the torturer is to provoke and intensify the body-subject's re-cognition of their existential vulnerability as a merely objective "thing."⁵ Indeed, it is in being constituted and treated *as an object*, whether by nonintentional worldly phenomena or by an intentional body-subject, that the body-subject "suffers" a *diminution of subjectivity* and, in this diminution, comes to experience—within subjectivity—an increased awareness of *what it is to be a material object*.

It is this sense of passion as suffering the agency and power of external forces on our lived bodies that provides us the *material foundation* that primordially grounds the possibility of our *ethical* behavior toward others and the world. That is, the passion of suffering not only forces recognition of oneself as an *objective subject* always immanently and substantially "here" and open to being externally acted on regardless of one's volition—but it also enhances the awareness of oneself as a *subjective object*: a material being that is nonetheless capable of *feeling* what it is to be treated *only* as an object. Indeed, it is our own *reversibility* as subjects and objects that provides us the material, corporeal, foundation for the possibility of recognizing—and caring for—material objects external to ourselves, be they other animate beings or inanimate worldly things. The passion of suffering thus intimately engages us with our primordial, prereflective, and passive material *response-ability*—the general sense of which becomes reflectively and actively re-cognized in consciousness as that particular *ethical* concept we call *responsibility*.

On the other hand, passion is also defined as an *active devotion* to others and the objective world, as an intense, driving, and overmastering feeling that emerges and expands beyond our conscious will yet acts on us, nonetheless, from *within*. Thus, like suffering, passionate devotion is in excess of our volition; but, unlike suffering, it is within our agency. And, unlike suffering, this devotion is not passive but rather asserts our corporeal and affective adherence to others and the objective world. Actively—passionately—expansive, it expresses our desire to enfold other subjects and objects (and often

it. Indeed, in general, illness is an experience that is perceived ambiguously as in excess of our volition but somehow also within our agency. Here questions of intentionality and/or psychosomatism emerge and merge: hence such treatments of subjectivity itself through visualization or "laughing oneself well" or passionate and intense involvement in treatment plans and therapies that restore a sense of intentional agency. In illness, then, one suffers from an acute sense of being *both* an actively material object *and*—in relation to suffering and being subjected to trauma or disease—a passively intentional subject. For more on the phenomenological experience of pain and disease see Drew Leder, *The Absent Body* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 70–83.

5. On the objectification of subjectivity through torture see Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 27–59.

the world itself), to know their materiality and objectivity intimately and, indeed, to embrace their alterity *as our own*.⁶ This kind of devotion engages what Walter Benjamin has called the “mimetic faculty”⁷—significant, as Jennifer Bean puts it,

because it lays bare, in its at once originary and imitative force, the ways in which the organism’s relation to its environment, . . . to the individual’s relation to the other, is blurred and confused. . . . Mimesis turns the relation between identification and desire on its head; identification emerges not as the result of the subject’s unconscious desire for a loved object, but rather as an imitation by one “self” of an “other” that to all intents and purposes is indistinguishable from a primordial identification in which the organism first *acts* like, and only later desires, the outside or other.⁸

Hence, the mimetic and corporeal activity of the child who, as Walter Benjamin suggests, “plays at being not only a shopkeeper or teacher but also a windmill and a train.”⁹ Hence, sexual passion is a devotion to the fleshy possession of another that is, paradoxically, not self-possessed but is rather, as Elaine Scarry has written, a condition of “self-displacing, self-transforming objectification.”¹⁰ This overwhelming investment in and self-displacement in

6. Here, in relation to embracing the alterity of the flesh of the other as one’s own flesh, we might contrast the passionate “suffering” of illness to the (usually) passionate “devotion” of pregnancy—a quite concrete example of a material enfoldedness that is reversible yet differentiated. Without intentional volition but within one’s bodily agency, the pregnant lived body is a material expansion of oneself but also the coming into material being of an other who is *not* oneself. Although this experience can sometimes lead to a passionate sense of suffering alterity and alienation or the invasion of one’s own body, it most often leads to a passionate sense of devotion—that is, of coming to understand this “other” material body that is as yet still “mine” as an alterity enfolded, if never completely possessed. As with illness, however, the experience of pregnancy tends to be less one of feeling oneself a material object than of being a material subject (although, of course, there are moments when the alternative may be true). For a phenomenological discussion of the experience of pregnancy see Iris M. Young, “Pregnant Subjectivity and the Limits of Existential Phenomenology,” in *Descriptions*, ed. Don Ihde and Hugh J. Silverman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), 25–34.

7. Walter Benjamin, “On the Mimetic Faculty,” in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 1978), 333–36.

8. Jennifer M. Bean, “Technologies of Early Stardom and the Extraordinary Body,” *Camera Obscura* 48, vol. 16, no. 2 (2001): 45.

9. Benjamin, “On the Mimetic Faculty,” 333.

10. Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 166. The passage from which this citation comes is worth quoting in full in relation to the distinctions I am making here between passion as suffering and as devotion:

[I]f a thorn cuts through the skin of the woman’s finger, she feels not the thorn but her body hurting her. If instead she experiences across the skin of her fingers not the awareness of the feel of those fingers but the feel of the fine weave of another person’s work, or if she traces the lettering of an engraved message and becomes mindful not of events

the “flesh” of the world or another is an unselfish, radically decentered, and expansive self-interest. It is an in-corporation that, through reaching toward or touching the material object that is other than oneself, seeks to actively grasp both a concrete sense of one’s own self as immanently material and a concrete sense of how some of the world’s objects may also be subjects. That is, such passion seeks to grasp what it is to be not only an *objective subject* but also a *subjective object* whose intentionality and alterity can be sensed from *without*.

Indeed, in being actively devoted to (rather than passively suffering) the embracing and enfolding of the world’s—and one’s own—objectivity, the body-subject experiences not a diminution of subjectivity but its *sensual* and *sensible* expansion—and an enhanced awareness of what it is *to be material*. I would argue that it is this sense of passion that provides the material foundations of our *aesthetic* behavior toward the world and others. That is, it allows us to understand in a primordial way the general pervasion in existence of material *sense-ability*. Our recognition of and care for ourselves not only as *objective subjects* who are capable of grasping and feeling the alterity of other worldly objects but also as *subjective objects* that can be experienced in such a way by others allows us the possibility of appreciating—and caring for—the form and substance of “things” external to ourselves. It also allows us to hope that the world and others’ material grasp of us will be similarly appreciative and “care-full.” In sum, passionate devotion to the world, acting on and enfolding its and our own materiality through our *senses* and with *feeling*, intimately engages us with our primordial, prereflective, and material *sense-ability*—the general understanding of which becomes reflectively and actively re-cognized in consciousness as that particular *aesthetic* concept we call *sensibility*.

If all this seems too abstract (particularly as it speaks of and to our corporeal being as both concrete subjects and objects), let me provide a literally embodied example. Here we can see illuminated the intimate and dual relationship we have with materiality—how, as Alphonso Lingis puts it, “corporeal intentionality” not only “comprehends the things in the folds of its own flesh” but also “knows itself in the things.” Thus, our subjective body image is always also materialized objectively in a potentially mimetic “postural

in her hands but of the form and motivating force of the signs, or if that night she experiences the intense feelings across the skin of her body not as her own body but as the intensely feelable presence of her beloved, she in each of these moments experiences the sensation of “touch” not as bodily sensations but as *self-displacing, self-transforming objectification*; and so far are these moments from physical pain, that if they are named as bodily occurrences at all, they will be called “pleasure,” a word usually reserved either for moments of overt disembodiment or, as here, *moments when acute bodily sensations are experienced as something other than one’s own body*. (166; emphasis added)

schema” responsive to the world we inhabit.¹¹ In an extraordinary essay called “The Furniture Philosopher” Lawrence Weschler focuses on a dramatic and specific instance of the reversible—and mimetic—relations that we embodied subjects have with equally embodied objects.¹² The subject is a man named Ed Weinberger, who, at the age of forty, suffered the onset of an extremely severe case of Parkinson’s disease.¹³ Even with drug treatment, his body might suddenly freeze in place “like a block of solid muscle: clenched, planted, immovable”—or he might lose all his corporeal will and crumple to the ground, not able to move for long periods (73). At other times, however, “his body . . . became a tempest of extravagant tics and tremors he could not control” (68). A venture capitalist by trade, in the wake of his illness Ed began to design and make furniture (something he had never done before). These were amazing aesthetic pieces (now collectors’ items) that, similar to his own strange physical condition, seemed to challenge—while articulating—the laws of gravity. That is, as Weschler tells us, “Parkinsonism seems, in one of its aspects, to set the body against itself, such that every impulse feels as if it were being met by an immediate counter-impulse, the parkinsonian living in a perpetual, unrelieved isometric clench, seemingly slack, while growing stronger all the while” (68). Ed’s unique and astonishing furniture exists in a similar isometric tension, and thus it “drives architects crazy, because the thing that’s holding the planes up is at the same time pulling them apart. Complete contradiction; simultaneous push and pull” (69). We might say, then, that Ed designs and makes furniture in the “Parkinsonian mode”—but this description subtends *both* Ed *and* his furniture. That is, it describes the specific and “embodied” materiality of both subjectivity and objectivity and their complex relationship—here, a primarily *dialogic* one in which alterity, body image, and postural schema are passion-

11. Alphonso F. Lingis, “Sense and Non-Sense in the Sexed Body,” *Cultural Hermeneutics* 4 (1977): 351.

12. Lawrence Weschler, “The Furniture Philosopher,” *New Yorker*, Nov. 8, 1999, 66–79. Subsequent references will be cited in the text.

13. Cases of “dis-ease” are often objects of phenomenological description and interpretation since they denaturalize the transparency of embodied being in the world. Merleau-Ponty used clinical cases of neurological impairment, particularly in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962); and these also provide the basis for the less philosophical work of phenomenological neurologist Oliver Sacks. Justification for describing and interpreting the transparency of being in the world through the “opacity” of those who live in bodily dis-ease is glossed by Thomas Langan, *Merleau-Ponty’s Critique of Reason* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966): “The bodily synthesis . . . goes about its task so silently, so fundamentally, that its . . . contribution is no more noticed than the light which illumines and thus makes possible every visible spectacle. Only unusual experience revealing a fissure in the otherwise unrelieved atmosphere of an already constructed world . . . can provide the epoché needed to suspend the practical experience’s attention-absorbing hold on us” (22–23).

ately intertwined and intimately grasp each other rather than setting sentient subject and inanimate object in *dialectical* opposition to each other.

What is most telling in the present context, however, is that this passionate intertwining of Ed and his furniture is not emergent from conscious thought—even as it is articulated through conscious thought. Rather, it is *materially lived* in Ed's suffering the involuntary and contradictory “push-pull” of his body, whose dynamics seem that of a thing outside his agency—a piece of furniture, if you will, whose being he intimately grasps as his own. In this regard Ed's own account of a particular incident, early on in his new interest in furniture, is telling. Fascinated by a mock-up he made of a table, he tells Weschler:

[F]eeling myself starting to freeze up, I'd arrange to crumple slowly onto the floor, falling on my side right there, beside the table, my arm extended toward the back of the drawer. Frozen, I'd gaze at the drawer, referencing the perpendicular, trying, as it were, to gain conceptual leverage, a sense of uprightness. I would follow a plane and shift to the next plane—the intersection of one plane with another, the distribution of weight, tension across space, fulcrum and transparency. These were all classically modernist themes, but *what for them [the modernists] had been metaphor for me was immediate experience.* (72; emphasis added)

As a subjective object who “suffers” and yet feels his own brute and particularized materiality, Ed is not only fascinated by but also intimately *lives* and thus understands the same condition “suffered” by a worldly object—even if in nonintentional alterity. Indeed, in this extreme incident the passion of his passive suffering is reversible with—and turned into—the passion of an active devotion that embraces otherness as its own. In relation to the table, he tells us: “I'd barely be able to move; at most, with great effort, I could just tap the back of the drawer, nudging it along in the tiniest, most infinitesimal increments. And I'd study them: those little spaces became like the whole world for me. I'd notice how the smallest physical change could have a huge impact on the piece's over-all physical presence” (72). Prone on the floor for extended periods of time, barely able to move, Ed's brute and passive response-ability is transformed into an extraordinarily active and attentive sense-ability, into an aesthetic appreciation of and ethical care for the material object that is his other.

Indeed, this is a deep and passionate aesthetics that is indistinguishable from ethics—and here I am reminded of Bruno Schulz's *The Street of Crocodiles* and the narrator's father, who has a passionate devotion to inanimate objects—including furniture: “‘Who knows,’ he said, ‘how many suffering, crippled, fragmentary forms of life there are, such as the artificially created life of chests and tables quickly nailed together, crucified timbers, martyrs to

cruel human inventiveness.”¹⁴ And elsewhere, he appositely cries out: “Yet we should weep . . . at our own fate, when we see the misery of violated matter, against which a terrible wrong has been committed.”¹⁵ In this regard—and in all seriousness—Ed rejects his intensely “care-full” work as “art” insofar as, in today’s world, art is usually considered a nonessential commodity removed from ethical consideration. Thus, he tells Weschler, “It’s not art furniture, which I find precious and prissy, and it’s not furniture masquerading as art. *It is just a chair taken seriously as such*—a chair truly interrogated, a chair raised to the level of a question” (72; emphasis added).

And thus we are returned by the extreme experience of Ed Weinberger to the question that opens this essay in which Merleau-Ponty posits the *common condition of materiality* that grounds and unites (as well as allows the separation of) the discrete figural being of both enworlded body-subjects and worldly body-objects as “flesh.” Not reducible either to matter “in itself” or to being “in itself,” flesh is the tie that binds them in existence, the common ground of their differentiated relation to and reversibility each with the other. As Merleau-Ponty writes in *The Visible and the Invisible*:

The flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance. To designate it, we should need the old term “element,” in the sense . . . of a *general thing*, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle. . . . Not a fact or a sum of facts, and yet adherent to *location* and to the *now*. Much more: the inauguration of the *where* and the *when*, the possibility and exigency for the fact; in a word: facticity, what makes the fact to be a fact. And, at the same time, what makes the facts have meaning, makes the fragmentary facts dispose themselves about “something.” (139–40)

Thus, as James Barry Jr. glosses it, “flesh” names the *existential manifold* “in which perception erupts from the originary and differentiating encroachment of body and world” in a being that is “porous”—this because demarcation between the world’s “inhabitants is always provisional, never quite finished and always open to new possibilities of encroachment.” These possible encroachments of body and world on each other are a function of their common existential matter, “the primordial obscurity and openness of things-of-the-world, movements which emigrate into other forms, thus giving rise to domains of things . . . which no longer seem quite so ‘thingly.’”¹⁶ Significantly, when things no longer seem quite so “thingly,” subjects no longer

14. Bruno Schulz, *The Street of Crocodiles*, trans. Celina Wieniewska (New York: Penguin, 1977), 69. In the chapter titled “Treatise on Tailors’ Dummies: Conclusion” Schulz writes, “The essence of furniture is unstable, degenerate, and receptive to abnormal temptations” (67).

15. Schulz, *Street of Crocodiles*, 64.

16. James Barry Jr., “The Technical Body: Incorporating Technology and Flesh,” *Philosophy Today* (winter 1991): 390, 392.

seem quite so “subjectly,” so absolute and closed in their selfsameness, so other in their difference from the substance—or “thingly-ness”—of things.¹⁷

Merleau-Ponty’s question of the limit between body and world, then, not only interrogates the passionate suffering or passionate devotion of existential subjects in relation to existential objects but also posits the reversible (or, in phenomenological terms, “chiasmatic”) nature of subjects and objects.¹⁸ That is, although the body-subject and the objective world are *differentiated* and *noncoincidental* in their particular modes of material existence, in that they share in the same “fleshy” manifold of general material existence, Merleau-Ponty suggests both are reversibly capable of *acting upon being* and *being acted upon*, and each provides a reversible *ground* for the *figure* of the other. Emergent from the manifold that is flesh (the medium that is immanent and yet also transcendently “matters”),¹⁹ the dual structure of passion as suffering and devotion is thus inherently both *dialectical* and *dialogical*. Thus, although the intertwined and reversible structure of passion and the fleshy reversibility of body and world are experienced primordially before they are consciously thought, they are foundational—and central to our more reflective understanding of how subjective *value* is objectively produced and enacted in the world in two of its mutually informing and axiological modalities of consciousness and action: namely, *ethics* and *aesthetics*.²⁰

17. Slavoj Žižek makes a related argument in his rereading of Hegel’s phenomenology, “The Hegelian Ticklish Subject,” in *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999), 70–132. According to Žižek, Hegel’s phenomenology articulated the understanding that “there is no ‘absolute Subject’—subject ‘as such’ is relative, caught in self-division, and it is as such that the Subject is inherent to the Substance” (89). It is also worth noting in relation to my project here that this chapter ends with a section titled “Towards a Materialist Theory of Grace.”

18. *Chiasm* is the term first used by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in “Eye and Mind,” trans. Carleton Dallery, in *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James Edie (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), to indicate a “unique space which separates and reunites, which sustains every cohesion” (187). In general phenomenological usage it is used to name the ground of all presence against which discrete figures of being emerge as such; it is thus the ground from which oppositions both emerge and fall away, in which they become reversible but noncoincidental. In Merleau-Ponty’s later work “flesh” names the manifestation of the chiasmus in existence, as Catherine Vasseleu writes, in *Textures of Light: Vision and Touch in Irigaray, Levinas, and Merleau-Ponty* (New York: Routledge, 1998): “The chiasm is flesh in its intertwining, reversibility and its divergence or non-coincidence with itself” (29).

19. It is important to stress at the outset that the transcendent and transcendental are not to be confused with each other. Existential phenomenology is *not* grounded on the metaphysics of the transcendental but on the transcendence available in material and physical immanence. “Flesh,” therefore, is transcendent *in* existence; its transcendence subtends differentiated and particular existential and immanent presence as every “one,” every “where,” and every “thing.”

20. Axiology is the third branch of philosophy, the other two being ontology and epistemology. Where ontology is the study of being (what is) and epistemology the study of knowledge (how we know what is), axiology is the study of value (how we evaluate and judge what is).

In the pages to follow I want to explore more fully how the dialectical and dialogical passion of the body-subject's flesh, in all its suffering of and devotion to the "flesh" of the world, provides both the enabling conditions and concrete premises for a *single system of reversible valuation* that does not bifurcate ethics and aesthetics as they emerge from and in our material existence. In its primordially fleshy facticity this single system of valuation provides the grounds for our more conscious differentiation of ethics (our reflective experience of response-ability) from aesthetics (our reflective experience of sense-ability).²¹ Furthermore, I will argue that those existentially extreme and passionate moments in which we experience the question of the "limit between the body and the world" (that is, in which we experience a sense of the spiritual, the just, the sublime, beauty, grace, and so forth) are *not* transcendently grounded (an oxymoronic phrasing in this context)—nor do we have to resort to metaphysics to explain and understand them. Rather, such passionate moments in the relationship between body and world are transcendent "in the flesh"—emergent from the common ground of the world's physical incarnation and temporalized materiality and in the immanence of the lived body's primordially material sense-ability and response-ability. It is in the flesh that both aesthetics and ethics make sense—and here, in its illustrative extremity of their origin in a single fleshy system, we might recall the experience of Ed Weinberger. Indeed, transcendental explanations of the body's transcendent moments that metaphysically separate and (usually) elevate spirit over flesh and mind over matter constitute both aesthetics and ethics as immaterial and thus nonsensical—idealist philosophical constructs that can have no meaning or value because they do not literally *matter*.

Here, then, I want to begin to describe and understand how it is possible that material objects in the world are not only *sensible* to our own flesh but how they also can make us devoted and *responsible* to the flesh of the world and others. I would suggest that it is only through the intimate (if often infrequent and always incomplete) subjective recognition of ourselves as material objects that we can share in the full being of the world and—as Ed Weinberger's experience so richly details—feel not merely a superficial passion *for* the material (that is always other than ourselves) but feel also the existential passion *of* the material (that is always also ourselves). It is only by apprehending the unfathomable mystery of our own immanent and egoless "objectness" that we can lose sight of our egological selves enough to be passionately devoted to and transcendently moved by the sublimity of a sunset

21. Elaine Scarry also understands ethics and aesthetics as a single system of valuation and argues that the experience of beauty and the understanding of justice are intimately linked and enfolded one in the other. See her *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

or landscape. It is our existential grounding in the flesh that allows us to feel mimetically the passionate and porous possibilities of those material others and objects that constitute our environment, to be overwhelmed by a sudden recognition and reverence for the “sacredness” of all secular existence, to feel “graced” by the fleeting facticity of our existence just *here* and just *now* at the moment sunlight falls in just such a way on the carpet.²²

In short, in order to better understand the material foundations of aesthetics and ethics I want to propose a phenomenology of a mode of corporeal engagement with the material world that I call *interobjectivity*. It is a neologism meant specifically to invoke its well-known complement: *intersubjectivity*. Although much has been written by philosophers and theorists across a range of disciplines on how human beings co-constitute a sense not only of their own subjectivity but also of the subjectivity of others who are not themselves, there is little written about the complementary co-constitutive experience we have of ourselves and others as material objects. However, given the general tendency today to regard much of our own passion *for* the material pejoratively (in a reduction to either commodity fetishism or non-dialectical materialism), it is this broader and more constitutive experience of interobjectivity—the passion *of* our material being—that most interests me here.

I

My father never tired of glorifying this extraordinary element—matter. “There is no dead matter,” he taught us, “lifelessness is only a disguise behind which hide unknown forms of life. The range of these forms is infinite and their shades and nuances limitless.” —BRUNO SCHULZ, *The Street of Crocodiles*

At this point it seems appropriate that I expose the personal provocation that generated this chapter. My choice of such a peculiar word as *passion* to talk about material being, my desire to ground the transcendental in the transcendent and deny it metaphysical status, to locate the origin of ethics and aesthetics in our and the world’s “flesh” all demand that I admit to being an unrelenting atheist. In this regard I find a line of dialogue in Werner Herzog’s extraordinary film about Kaspar Hauser, *Every Man for Himself and God*

22. What I am here calling the unfathomable mystery of our own material being is *not* meant in any transcendental or religious sense. The mystery here is both materially based and immanent—it is unfathomable because, as discussed later in this chapter, unless we become completely (and, in all likelihood, clinically) alienated from ourselves as subjects, we can never completely experience or know our objectivity qua objectivity; that is, our objectivity is always already experienced to lesser or greater degree through our subjectivity.

against All (1975), not only apposite but also moving.²³ Asked to explain why he adamantly refuses to go into a church in which Sunday services are being held, Kaspar says simply: “All that lives within me is my life.” Like Kaspar, I too have always felt the value of my life is in its living; anything more than that would be, for me, much less—a deflection, as it were, of my existential attention and adherence to the world. However, my existential refusal of the transcendental was a more general than specific impetus for writing this essay—the contours of which first emerged from an extremely intense experience I had viewing a film that (for me, oddly) foregrounded religious, transcendental experience.

The catalytic movie was *Thérèse* (Alain Cavalier, 1986), a spare (although not ascetic) biography of fifteen-year-old Thérèse Martin, whose overwhelming passion was to become a Carmelite nun and who, after receiving special permission from the Pope because of her young age, was allowed to enter a convent where she eventually contracted tuberculosis and died at the age of twenty-four. Canonized many years later in 1925 as St. Thérèse of Lisieux and popularly known as the “Little Flower of Jesus,” the young nun never performed any miracles in her short but ecstatic religious life; rather, she found her *ekstasis* in the belief she was quite literally wed to Christ and in the performance of ordinary and menial convent chores such as dusting, cleaning, and washing linens.²⁴ Watching this particular film “biography” of *Thérèse*, I was incredibly—and incredulously—moved.²⁵ Indeed, the intensity of my experience, the constriction I felt in my chest, near tears in relation to some sort of overwhelming sense of recognition achingly felt but unnamed, physically recalled to me a similar experience I had years before first watching *The Diary of a Country Priest* (Robert Bresson, 1950), the relentless account of the impoverished life and cancerous death of an abject young French curate who keeps a diary, its handwriting and ink stains forever blotted on my memory.²⁶ Only a year after seeing *Thérèse* and still worrying over the meaning of these extreme film experiences, I had yet another—this when I saw *Babette’s Feast* (Gabriel Axel, 1987), its narrative about a Parisian

23. Herzog’s film is also known under the title *The Mystery of Kaspar Hauser*.

24. The Greek *ekstasis* means literally to be “put out of place.” On St. Thérèse of Lisieux see John Coulson, ed., *The Saints* (New York: Hawthorn, 1958).

25. For an illuminating discussion of this extraordinary film from an art-historical perspective see Angela Dalle Vacche, *Cinema and Painting: How Art Is Used in Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996).

26. For two different discussions of how this canonical film achieves its effects, both relevant to the present discussion, see André Bazin, “*Le Journal d’un Curé de Campagne* and the Stylistics of Robert Bresson,” in *What Is Cinema?* trans. Hugh Gray, vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 125–43; and Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).

refugee housekeeper (once a great chef) who wins a lottery and, out of gratitude and love, makes an extraordinary gourmet meal for the extremely religious, ascetic, and kind Danish sisters who employ her and whom the richness of material life has passed by. Here we see in great detail the ecstatic preparation and consumption of an incredibly extravagant and lovingly made “last supper” after which no one dies—and during which the symbolic saying of grace is merely the prelude to existentially achieving it.

Given my own philosophical and irreligious stance, it was obviously important for me to understand the nature of my reaction to these films. I certainly had no similar response to a whole host of other “religious films,” whether the sort made by Hollywood (like *The Song of Bernadette*, Henry King, 1943) or by auteurs of the “art cinema” (like *The Virgin Spring*, Ingmar Bergman, 1959). Yet these three particular films moved me greatly and made me, as I’ve suggested above, not only think of but also feel such abstract words as *passion* and *grace*. This was, of course, very unsettling—at least until I set about understanding why and in what manner I was so moved by these films. Although it is not my intention here to explore the three works in question, what I realized they had in common was that each in its own way set alongside their dramatic and thematic focus on the transcendental and religious an equal focus—achieved quite literally and precisely by the camera eye—on the secular and empirical mystery (or transcendence) that inheres in immanence and materiality.²⁷ That is, in each film, as the human protagonists seek ecstasy or grace or salvation within the compass of institutionalized religion, the camera seeks a parallel *ekstasis* in the “flesh” of the world: it offers up a profane illumination of objective matter that, in its unrelenting “hereness” and “nowness” opens into an apprehension of something ultimately unfathomable, uncontained and uncontainable—not only in the thing on which we gaze but also in ourselves. This apprehension is transcendent in its egological recognition that we are some “thing” more (and less) than egological beings, but it is hardly transcendental in its grounding in matter that “matters.” In *Beauty and Being Just* Elaine Scarry writes of such transcendence in our particular encounter with beautiful things—beautiful because they provoke in us such a sudden and deep regard or passionate devotion that “we undergo a radical decentering”:

When we come upon beautiful things—the tiny mauve-orange-blue moth on the brick, Augustine’s cake, a sentence about innocence in Hampshire—they act like small tears in the surface of the world that pull us through to some

27. It is important to stress that I am not anthropomorphizing the camera here or later (even as I refer to its “eye”). As developed at length in my *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), the precise materiality of camera vision suggests both similarities (of function) to and differences (in nature) from human vision.

vaster space. . . . It is not that we cease to stand at the center of the world, for we never stood there. It is that we cease to stand even at the center of our own world. We willingly cede our ground to the thing that stands before us. . . . In any event, it is precisely the ethical alchemy of beauty that what might in another context seem like a demotion is no longer recognizable as such.²⁸

This egological demotion in the presence of beautiful things—of matter that matters—provides, for example, both the theme and the cinematic detail of *Babette's Feast*. The film contrasts the sisters' religious and transcendental form of passionate devotion (and egological demotion) with the material and transcendent form of passionate devotion (and egological demotion) of the woman who was once a master chef and is now their housekeeper. Here "grace" and "care" are materialized in the intertwined and reversible "flesh" shared literally by human beings and worldly things in their mutual incorporation—and through the sensual pleasures of quite a different form of transubstantiation than the Eucharist. Indeed, here the "transubstantiation" is existential—its sublimity experienced by *both* body and spirit.

Although differently than *Babette's Feast*, both *Thérèse* and *The Diary of a Country Priest* also heighten our sense of the transcendent alterity of material things—and thus the transcendent alterity of our own subjective selves as worldly objects. Again, we apprehend in these films—and at the insistence of the camera's attentive gaze—the flesh of the world as something that subverts not only the religious protagonists who, each in their own way, make a habit (a horrible but apt pun) of egological demotion for "something higher" but also the egoless worldly material usually dismissed as "something lower." In no way making their religious subjects and their transcendental aspirations ridiculous, both films see the material world as already transcendent—equal, that is, in its "primordial obscurity," its "openness" of things and their "movements which emigrate into other forms," to those domains that are the immaterial provinces of religion, metaphysics, and idealism. Hence the camera eye literally "clarifies" into material purity a small bowl of Thérèse's tubercular sputum. Hence the camera eye lingers on a dip pen, its nib clogged with paper fibers, making tortured marks equal in passionate suffering to that of the country priest who writes with it. Hence, the porosity between Ed Weinberger's corporeal disease and his Parkinsonian furniture and Elaine Scarry's transcendent "decentering" in the immanent presence of "the tiny mauve-orange-blue moth on the brick." Hence, much more recently and through the doubled eyes of camera and camcorder, the "touchstone for transcendent existence" in *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes, 1999) that is the "mute aerial ballet amid dust and dull brick" of a plastic bag

28. Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, 110–13.

caught in the wind and by a “disaffected teenager’s sublime video”²⁹—the dancing piece of trash standing not only for but also as what the teen calls “an entire life behind things” and “the unbearable beauty of the world.” Here Bruno Schulz, in *The Street of Crocodiles*, is apposite and eloquent—not only in relation to the grace that adheres to a plastic bag swirling and dipping in the wind but also to the grace that adheres in the laborious efforts of a dip pen as it encounters the fleshy resistance of paper. Speaking through the voice of his intensely passionate shopkeeper father, Schulz writes:

“Can you understand . . . the deep meaning of that weakness, that passion for coloured tissue, for papier-mâché, for distemper, for oakum and sawdust? This is . . . the proof of our love for matter as such, for its fluffiness or porosity, for its unique mystical consistency. Demiurge, that great master and artist, made matter invisible, made it disappear under the surface of life. We, on the contrary, love its creaking, its resistance, its clumsiness. We like to see behind each gesture, behind each move, its inertia, its heavy effort, its bearlike awkwardness.”³⁰

No less poetic for being overtly philosophical, Mikel Dufrenne, in *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, distinguishes between the aesthetic object and the object of science in a counterintuitive argument that suggests the aesthetic object has more to do with the real than does the scientific object. This is because the aesthetic object illuminates the real, whereas the object of science constitutes the real as merely determinate. The “real,” however, is indeterminate—open and porous to any and every meaning. Dufrenne writes:

It is not with the objective world as conceived by science that one should compare the aesthetic object. Instead, the aesthetic object should be compared with the real, which we must intercept at the point where it does not yet have determinate signification. . . . The real is the preobjective. It is manifested in the bruteness of fact, the constraining character of being-there, the opacity of the in-itself. . . . This overflowing character is like an inexhaustible reservoir of the given, but only because it holds nothing in reserve. It is an inexhaustible matrix of significations, but only because it has no signification of its own. Everything is united in it—flowers were blooming at the gates of the death camps, and the ascetic rubs shoulders in a crowd with the debauched. . . . The

29. Ed Leibowitz, “An Oscar for Best Supporting Polymer,” *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, Nov. 14, 1999, 14.

30. Schulz, *Street of Crocodiles*, 62. (The relevant chapter is titled “Treatise on Tailors’ Dummies, or The Second Book of Genesis.” The epigraph beginning this section of my chapter can be found on pp. 59–60.)

unity of the world does not arise from the unity of the real but from the unity of the look which settles on the real.³¹

In *The Diary of a Country Priest*, *Thérèse*, *Babette's Feast*, and, in more recent and secular mode, *American Beauty*, it is the camera eye's "unity of the look" that gathers the material world in the attentive and passionate embrace of its gaze, making little distinction between human flesh and the flesh of inanimate things—at the same time neither reducing human beings to mere objects nor reducing things by "raising" them as subjects but only "for us."³² While the characters seek and speak an overdetermined religious salvation and ecstasy in the three films that generated this essay, the camera eye finds the sublime and the spiritual in the open indeterminacy of the world's materiality that includes not only animate and subjective human bodies but also inanimate objective "things." As its gaze lingers on crude handwriting and ink blots, on a bowl of oranges or a salver filled with sputum, on the intricacies of meats and fish and pastry, in a duration that overtakes and undoes denotative comprehension, the camera eye undetermines these worldly objects as merely "for us." That is, the camera eye creates an equivalence between human flesh and the flesh of things, and suggests a sanguine—and auratic—unity of transcendent being, an *ekstasis*, that has been there all the time in the flesh of the world.³³ (This is the ultimate discovery of *American*

31. Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, trans. Edward S. Casey et al. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 529–31. Subsequent references will be cited in the text.

32. The "unity of the look" that operates in these films is also related to but not precisely coincident with the notion of "the visible caress of the eye" as discussed in Emmanuel Lévinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), 118. As Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), notes of Lévinas's discussion of sight as caressive and proximate to its object: "Visual erotics allows the object of vision to remain inscrutable. But it is not voyeurism, for . . . the looker is also implicated. By engaging with an object in a haptic way, I come to the surface of my self, . . . losing myself in the intensified relation with an other that cannot be possessed" (185).

33. My use of the word *auratic* here is meant to evoke Walter Benjamin's focus on auratic perception—particularly as it entails the radical openings provided by the "optical unconscious." For an extended and illuminating discussion of Benjamin's understanding of "aura" (and a form of subjectivity) in natural objects within the context of human history see Miriam Hansen, "Benjamin, Cinema, and Experience: 'The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology,'" *New German Critique* 4 (winter 1987): 179–224. Hansen writes of Benjamin's sense of aura in nature: "The gaze that nature appears to be returning . . . does not mirror the subject in its present, conscious identity, but confronts us with another self, never before seen in its waking state . . . marking the fleeting moment in which the trace of an unconscious, 'prehistoric' past is actualized in a cognitive image" (188). Hansen continues, citing the work of Marleen Stoessel: "The tree and the bush that we endow [with an answering gaze] were not created by human

Beauty's Lester Burnham, and it is particularly ironic yet intensely transcendent that the deep and phenomenological materialism of the film undoes its characters' superficial "commodity fetishism"—the objective world and "things" moving all of them beyond the limits of their conventionally constrained imaginations.) In each of these works of cinema, "things transcend their status as objects at the very moment they promise to be only that, mere objects, for in so doing they suggest the possibility that each is thoroughly interchangeable with another through an essential homogeneity. . . . That is, while things are, in everyday terms, unique, their essence or 'whatness' is in every case the same."³⁴ Thus, each of these films moved me to ask the same radically materialist question posed by Merleau-Ponty—the question that existentially grounds all spiritual questions and, in creating equivalence and reversibility between the world's subjects and objects, relocates the transcendental in the transcendence of the immanently real: "Where are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh?"

What also moved me, an atheist (often considered the supreme egoist), about these films was their parallel interrogation of their characters' (and my) egoism. Egoism is apprehended not only as a reduction and fixity of being but also in its possibilities as an extroverted expansion of being. Subjectivity is not lost but is decentered and diffused into all "things" in a "comprehension" of the grace of common material being—and its dispersal becomes a deep material knowledge of the reciprocity between subjects and objects that subtends any determinate division we might make between them or any particular privilege we would confer on ourselves. Although other films have also moved me in this way (I think here of certain moments in Michelangelo Antonioni or Terrence Malick's work, and most of Robert Bresson's), the narrative emphasis on the religious and the transcendental in the films that generated this essay heightened my sense of the equivalence and the "mattering" of all matter. That is, the discourse of the transcendental is dialectically challenged by the highly empirical engagement of the camera eye with the immanence of bodies and things—and both are dialogically synthesized in a radical phenomenological materialism that effects transcendence: the sense of being part of the homogenous, if tenuously differentiated, "flesh" of the world.³⁵ This transcendence of our particular and

hand. Hence, there must be a human element in objects which is not the result of labor.' That forgotten human element, as Marleen Stoessel argues in her ingenious commentary, is nothing but the material origin—and finality—that human beings share with non-human nature, the physical aspect of creation" (212). (The reference is to Marleen Stoessel, *Aura, das vergessene Menschliche: Zu Sprache und Erfahrung bei Walter Benjamin* [Munich: Hanser, 1983].)

34. Barry, "The Technical Body," 393.

35. In regard to this "dialectical dialogism" it is interesting to note its general irresolution in the binary discourse surrounding Bresson, who, in his explorations of and attempts to deal

reductive appropriation of and distinction between lived bodies and worldly things, this transcendence of ego as a recognition of what being is at its most extensible and yet its most finite, this was what moved me about these movies. My sense of grace and the sublime were activated by the cinematic debate between the transcendental and the transcendent and, siding with the camera eye, located in an intense and moving recognition of what *really matters*.

II

In the end, all figures of otherness boil down to just one: that of the Object. In the end, all that is left is the inexorability of the Object, the irredeemability of the Object. . . . The Object's power and sovereignty derive from the fact that it is estranged from itself, whereas for us the exact opposite is true. —JEAN BAUDRILLARD, *The Transparency of Evil*

The sense of finding ethical grace and the aesthetic sublime in the “unity of the look” that also unifies subject and object as it embraces the world’s existence in the fullness of its flesh is obviously not the only reaction one might have to this confusion of the existential limit between subjective body and objective world.³⁶ Indeed, I want to further explore the subjective sense we have and make of the reversibility between ourselves as mattering and the objective matter of the world and others with one of the least sanguine—and most famous—encounters between body and world: namely, the encounter between Antoine Roquentin and the chestnut tree in Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Nausea*. For Roquentin the phenomenal density and “thingly-ness” of being that has congealed as the chestnut tree is completely *other* from the “no-thing-ness” that is his perceiving consciousness. Awareness of the tree’s density and otherness utterly pervades and horrifies him. He passionately “suffers” the tree—but he does so by virtue and in terms of *the subjective objectivity of his own body*. “I’m suffocating,” he says. “Existence penetrates me everywhere, through the eyes, the nose, the mouth” (Sartre, 126). As the chestnut tree presses itself against his eyes, he realizes that there is “no half-way house between non-existence and this flaunting abundance.

with alterity, is alternately seen as a religious or modernist filmmaker. Film critics André Bazin, Amedée Ayfre, and Paul Schrader take the former view, whereas Lindley Hanlon and David Bordwell take the latter.

36. Against the prevailing academic notion that language is inadequate to experience, I would pit its adequacy in such a word as *confusion*. It says what it means in an extraordinarily complex—if unfortunately “naturalized”—articulation. Combining the prefix *con* as meaning both “with” and “against,” it clearly describes and linguistically enacts the existential problem it nominates. One of the accomplishments of semiotic phenomenology (and here it is somewhat akin to deconstruction) is to denaturalize and revitalize ordinary language and its relation to the contradictions and possibilities inherent in being.

If you existed, you had to exist *all the way*, as far as mouldiness, bloatedness, obscenity were concerned” (Sartre, 128). Through the “no-thing-ness” that is his perceiving consciousness, Roquentin—horrified, disgusted, and nauseous—comprehends that the tree’s “root, with its colour, shape, its congealed movement,” is “*below* all explanation,” is emptied of all human meaning and value—utterly contingent, merely “in the way,” by happenstance “there” (Sartre, 129). He is overtaken by the *passivity* of immanence and the *opacity* of the material: “To exist is simply *to be there*: those who exist let themselves be encountered, but you can never deduce anything from them” (Sartre, 131).

And in this state of passionate suffering and disgust (also described as “atrocious joy” and “horrible ecstasy”), Roquentin, too, poses the question of the limit between the body and the world—although he does so in terms of being and “no-thing-ness.” That is, he opposes and yet—in his very sensibility—also conjoins the fleshy density of worldly existence that is “something” and the stream of subjective consciousness that is “no-thing,” asserting: “I *was* the root of the chestnut tree. Or rather I was entirely conscious of its existence. Still detached from it—since I was conscious of it—yet lost in it, nothing but it” (Sartre, 131). Here the event of Scarry’s encounter with a beautiful thing as the experience of a radical decentering holds—but the aesthetic and ethical value of such a decentering and egological “demotion” is turned ugly and nauseating. Rather than embracing his and the world’s porosity and reversibility, Roquentin sees the material world as dense and complete, incapable of being-in-time or becoming, despite its seeming activity. Emerging from the depths of his insight, he watches the tree’s movement but understands it as “absolute.” “My eyes,” he tells us, “only encountered completion. The tips of the branches rustled with existence which unceasingly renewed itself and which was never born.” The tree’s “shudder was not a nascent quality, a passing from power to action; it was a thing; a shudder-thing flowed into the tree, took possession of it, shook it and suddenly abandoned it” (Sartre, 132). Aware of the alien nature of all this insentience and chance, Roquentin is “stupefied, stunned by this profusion of beings without origin: everywhere blossomings, hatchings out” (Sartre, 133). But then, in what seems contradictory to this sense of the world’s absolute, complete, and alienated “thingly-ness,” but is, in fact, the deep source of his nausea, Roquentin also senses his own implication “in the flesh” and the porous boundaries between his body and the world’s body. Thus he tells us: “My ears buzzed with existence, my very flesh throbbed and opened, abandoned itself to the universal burgeoning. It was repugnant” (Sartre, 133).

Here, then, “in the flesh,” is Sartre’s alienation from the density, the materiality, the existence of the objective flesh that Merleau-Ponty posits as the fundament of both perceptive, embodied consciousness and the world’s objective existence, the element that grounds communion between them.

For Sartre, however, there seems no common ground between subjective consciousness and enworlded object, between the unfixed being that is no “thing” but the perceptive and reflective activity that is the *living* of the body-subject and the dense “thing” that is the brute body-object, the “thing” that gets caught up not particularly, but generally, in the blooming, buzzing confusion and scandalous objectivity and immanence of the world’s passive and universal burgeoning. In *The Transparency of Evil* Jean Baudrillard, addressing the “Object” as an extreme phenomenon and glossing its scandal as if he were Sartre (or Roquentin), writes:

Even at the outer frontiers of science the Object appears ever more ungraspable: it remains internally indivisible and hence unanalysable, infinitely versatile, reversible, ironic, and contemptuous of all attempts to manipulate it. The subject tries desperately to follow it, even at the cost of abandoning scientific principles, but the Object transcends even the sacrifice of scientific rationality. The Object is an insoluble enigma, because it is not itself and does not know itself.³⁷

Roquentin’s consciousness, then, is nauseated by the thought of being either absorbed or abandoned by the very fleshy Object that allows such sensibility but that, at the same time, overruns and escapes this sensibility’s explanation and control—that is, its volition, thought, comprehension. Early in the novel he tells us: “Objects should not *touch* because they are not alive. You use them, put them back in place, you live among them: they are useful, nothing more. But they touch me, it is unbearable. I am afraid of being in contact with them as though they were living beasts” (Sartre, 10). Roquentin is disgusted and fearful at the thought of the passionate miscegenation between the flesh of his own alienated lived body and the flesh of the world. Thus, for him, for the “no-thing-ness” that is the existentially conscious and transcendent subject, the “some-thing-ness” that is the existential and immanent object is always the repulsive, if necessary, flesh that is other.

Where in this alienated relation is the possibility of its alternative? In what mode can perceiving consciousness experience ease, belonging, and intense pleasure in the common and immanent density of its own flesh and the “thingly-ness” of the world’s things or in the sense and recognition that one’s own flesh exceeds one’s explanation and control and inheres in a “universal burgeoning” of immanence “without origin”?³⁸ Experience tells us that we are not always *alienated* from the world’s objectivity but are sometimes *devoted*

37. Jean Baudrillard, “The Object as Strange Attractor,” in *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena*, trans. James Benedict (London: Verso, 1993), 172. (The epigraph to this section can be found on the same page.)

38. Here again—and without any romantic mystification—I would raise the limit case of pregnancy as, in the alienated mode, I would raise the limit case of cancer.

to it—and not merely in the reductive mode of commodity fetishism. Atrocious joy and horrible ecstasy have their counterpart in our sense of the sublime. The repugnant penetration of our subjective consciousness by the world’s existential “thereness” and the disgusting resistance of our lived bodies to our will may also be experienced as an intensely pleasurable “here-ness,” as a liberation from the constraints of a conservative selfishness and an embrace of the fullness (rather than the completion) of being. In *The Visible and Invisible* Merleau-Ponty describes this liberation in the recognition “that my body is made of the same flesh as the world (it is a perceived), and moreover that this flesh of my body is shared by the world, the world *reflects* it, encroaches upon it and it encroaches upon the world (the felt [*senti*] at the same time the culmination of subjectivity and the culmination of materiality), they are in a relation of transgression or of overlapping” (248).

Here, it is illuminating to counter Roquentin’s chestnut tree with Vincent Van Gogh’s *The Mulberry Tree*, painted in 1889 at the asylum in Saint-Remy during one of his lucid periods.³⁹ As its branches and lush yellow foliage bloom in buzzing confusion, in a “universal burgeoning” that grasps the bright blue sky and the rolling and romping fields, *The Mulberry Tree* hardly constitutes the “scandalous” passivity and “absoluteness” of objectivity and being. The joy painted here is not “atrocious.” The diffusion of ego into the flesh of the world is not horrible—and the tree is not a sheer and indifferent other. As Van Gogh wrote in one of his letters around the time he painted this particular study: “I have a terrible lucidity at moments; these days when nature is so beautiful, I am not conscious of myself any more, and the picture comes to me as in a dream.”⁴⁰ In *The Mulberry Tree* one sees and feels “at the same time the culmination of subjectivity and the culmination of materiality”; there is no contradiction between “no-thing-ness” and being. Here, as Elizabeth Grosz puts it (in terms that both appositely and conveniently locate themselves in a similar, if generalized, arboreal object): “[T]he painter sees trees, but the tree also, in some sense, sees the painter. This attribution of

39. Whether done in moments of madness or sanity, nearly all of Van Gogh’s paintings reveal various stages of and attitudes toward his constant and heightened awareness of something like Merleau-Ponty’s question about “the limit between the body and the world.” Along with Van Gogh, quite a range of artists—including Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, Chaim Soutine, and Paul Cézanne—have also explored this question. For a non-Western vision of the reciprocity (aesthetic and ethical) between being and the world (one that is interesting in relation to Sartre because its “negativity” negates negation and thus alienation), see Norman Bryson on Japanese *ch’an* or “flung ink” painting, in “The Gaze in the Expanded Field,” in *Vision and Visibility*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988), 87–113. (In this regard see also chapter 4 in the present volume.)

40. Quotation taken from the obverse side of a print of *The Mulberry Tree* made for the Norton Simon Art Foundation.

visibility to the visible as well as the seer is not an anthropomorphism, but rather, a claim about the flesh, about a (non-identical, non-substantive) ‘materiality’ shared by the subjects and objects of perception.”⁴¹

Even Sartre, via Roquentin, had his joyful moments, felt pleasure, and was subjectively devoted to the world rather than abjectly overwhelmed and horrified by its “thereness.” Indeed, one could read *Nausea* against the grain, perversely looking for the “happy” parts. Here, we might think of Roquentin as he experiences an oxymoronic “small happiness of Nausea” listening to music—but the insubstantiality or lack of “in the way-ness” of music seems to please him more as a representation of the “no-thing-ness” that is consciousness than as an immanent appeal to its “thingly” reverberations in his flesh. Roquentin, however, has a more sustained sanguine encounter with the world—and finds transcendent pleasure in the flesh as the common denominator that both unites and differentiates embodied consciousness and the world’s material density. Early in the novel—and described in as much length as his later encounter with the chestnut tree—Roquentin finds himself enfolded in the world in a mutual embrace of materiality and immanence. Fittingly, it is on a Sunday that he experiences the transcendent (some might say sacred) nature of flesh. On this Sunday the awful contingency of brute materiality and unspeakable immanence are transformed for him into the awesome “grace” of the world’s merely being there in all its expansive fullness. All things—subjects and objects alike—are embraced and comprehended by their mutual enfoldedness in the objective world’s profane illumination and the subjective unity of his look.

This experience of materiality and grace also begins in the park. Roquentin tells us: “It was there—on the trees, on the grass, like a faint smile. It couldn’t be described, you would have had to repeat very quickly: ‘This is a public park, this is winter, this is Sunday morning’” (Sartre, 40). This Sunday world is blessed, however, in no transcendental sense; rather, it has grace in the fullness of its precise, dense, and universal objectivity. Roquentin moves about it (and, more important, within it) describing all its contours, all its universal burgeoning, and all the qualities of light that make its being visible.⁴² Objects, subjects, world—their common flesh constitutes a moving,

41. Elizabeth Grosz, “Merleau-Ponty and Irigaray in the Flesh,” *Thesis Eleven* 36 (1993): 45. The reference to the tree comes from a discussion of this reciprocal gaze between the painter and his object in Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 167. This issue of the reciprocal gaze between the subject who looks and the object that is looked at is also explored in James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

42. This issue of “light” in terms of the making visible and manifest the world’s “flesh” or fundamental “manifold” runs through Merleau-Ponty’s *The Visible and the Invisible*. Major focus on light in relation to Merleau-Ponty’s formulations can be found in Vasseleu, *Textures of*

“touching,” manifold of being. Coming to both the end of this Sunday and his description (which is as tender as it is precise), Roquentin writes:

A gas lamp glowed. I thought the lamplighter had already passed. The children watch for him because he gives the signal for them to go home. But it was only a last ray of the setting sun. The sky was still clear, but the earth was bathed in shadow. The crowd was dispersing, you could distinctly hear the death rattle of the sea. A young woman, leaning with both hands on the balustrade, raised her blue face towards the sky, barred in black by lip-stick. For a moment, I wondered if I were not going to love humanity. But, after all, it was their Sunday, not mine. (Sartre, 53)

But, despite his protestation it *is* his Sunday. He continues: “The first light to go on was that of the lighthouse on the Ile Caillebotte; a little boy stopped near me and murmured in ecstasy, ‘Oh, the lighthouse!’ Then I felt my heart swell with a great feeling of adventure” (Sartre, 53). Thus Roquentin is intertwined with and opened up to the world and its illumination of the existential manifold that is his sameness and difference from all else that is. Indeed, in *Textures of Light* Cathryn Vasseleu might well be describing the trajectory and experience of Roquentin’s Sunday when she writes: “At the point of light’s contact with the eye, the objectivity of the visual standpoint becomes a perception of the presence of difference, where light is experienced as a non-rational subjection to feelings such as being penetrated, dazzlement, ecstasy, or pain.”⁴³ Bathed in the various illuminations of this Sunday, Roquentin experiences a passionate, ek-static devotion to the flesh of the world rather than suffering it, a devotion that breaks down his egological resistance to his own porosity and opens him up to the “adventure” of being—an *advent* of being that, in its continuing emergence and movement, owes nothing to his volition.

Continuing on his way, Roquentin muses about the coming into being of this sudden sense of fullness he feels: “Nothing has changed and yet everything is different. I can’t describe it; it’s like the Nausea and yet it’s just the opposite: at last an adventure happens to me and when I question myself I see that it happens *that I am myself and that I am here*; I am the one who splits the night, I am as happy as the hero of a novel.” And, as he continues into the Rue Basse-de-Vielle, he tells us: “I do not know whether the whole world has suddenly shrunk or whether I am the one who unifies all sounds and shapes: I cannot even conceive of anything around me being other than what it is” (Sartre, 54). Here, experiencing a state in which his being is in excess of knowledge and conception, in which it is deeply “touched” by the world’s

Light. For related discussion (and critique) see also Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, ed. and trans. Seán Hand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 108–13.

43. Vasseleu, *Textures of Light*, 12.

“flesh,” Roquentin articulates the wonder and pleasure of his own non-alienated intertwining, his own chiasmatic reversibility, with the world and worldly things. Looking in the Café Mabley at a “delicate face blossoming against the red curtain,” he says: “All has stopped; my life has stopped: this wide window, this heavy air, blue as water, this fleshy white plant at the bottom of the water, and I myself, we form a complete and static whole: I am happy” (Sartre, 56). This is Roquentin transcendent in—and of—the world’s immanence; this is Roquentin experiencing what Dufrenne describes as the aesthetic (and ethical) apprehension of the real as *preobjective*, as “overflowing . . . like an inexhaustible reservoir of the given” in which “everything is united” (531). Here, in articulating the complete and static quality of wholeness that unites him with the world, Roquentin speaks not of the absolute alterity of things that causes him nausea—but rather of the sameness in difference that enables his Absolution. This is certainly a far cry from Roquentin’s later suffering of the world’s flesh as he feels its unrelentingly objective, rather than preobjective, reality: “I looked anxiously around me: the present, nothing but the present. Furniture light and solid, rooted in its present, a table, a bed, a closet with a mirror—and me. The true nature of the present revealed itself: it was what exists, and all that was not present did not exist. . . . Now I knew: things are entirely what they appear to be—and behind them . . . there is nothing” (Sartre, 95–96).

Roquentin’s Sunday comes to a bitter and alienated end in the sense of emptiness he feels once the world’s adventure has left him, in the arbitrariness with which his sense of fullness comes and goes in disregard of his will. By Monday he writes: “At heart, what disgusts me is having been so sublime last evening. . . . I must wash myself clean with abstract thoughts, transparent as water” (Sartre, 56). He returns to his nausea, to a gaze in which, as Dufrenne puts it, the world’s “overflowing character . . . has no signification of its own,” in which the “indifferent unity of incongruities” such as “flowers . . . blooming at the gates of death camps” is horrific and “does not truly constitute a world, except for the person who cries out against this kind of injustice and considers the unity of this universe to be scandalous and inhuman” (531). Nonetheless, Roquentin’s quiet and grace-full Sunday fills Sartre’s pages as much as does his scandalous encounter with the brutality of the chestnut tree. It is only when Roquentin moves back into a form of thought-full and reflexive egoism that he loses a sense of his own diffusion in—and as—the world’s flesh, loses the sense that—in the preobjective reality of the existential manifold—he is merely differentiated rather than radically different from the objective others and things that surround him. Thus, as it is being articulated here, the phenomenological sense of the sublime or of grace or of absolution emerges experientially and materially and stands substantially counter to abstract thought. It has its origins in the materiality of being—even as the “no-thing-ness” that is consciousness might forget the

fact that it is always already in existence as material and embodied. Like Roquentin's experience of suffering nausea, the experience of worldly devotion that is sublime emerges from some *material communion* of the body-subject with the objective world, and in the experience of being *subjectively touched by objectivity* in a concrete, if fleeting, comprehension *by—and of—*flesh.

III

The affective exists in me only as the response to a certain structure in the object. Conversely, this structure attests to the fact that the object is for a subject and cannot be reduced to the kind of objectivity which is for no one.

—MIKEL DUFRENNE, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*

For Merleau-Ponty, both perceiving consciousness and the perceptible world, body-subjects and enworlded objects, are co-constituted in existence and share in that general element of being he comes to call “flesh” in his last philosophical investigations. Let us remember from earlier discussion that flesh is more than mere substance. It is “the formative medium of the object and the subject” (147)—the *common* and *general* medium of concrete materiality that grounds us as body-subjects in a primordial reversibility with other body-subjects so as to allow our essential *intersubjectivity* and also makes it possible for us, in any objective sense, to “have” a world. As flesh, “the body and things compenetrates one another. The body belongs to the order of things, and things are assumed into the realm of the body's being.”⁴⁴ Thus, generally sharing the common material of being, if in different modalities and differentiated forms, body-subjects and embodied objects are generally *reversible*. As David Levin tells us, flesh “is . . . that ‘medium’ in the depths of which subject and object, simultaneously coemergent, are forever unified, and through which they are continually mirroring one another.”⁴⁵

Indeed, as I've argued here, the mutual origin of aesthetic sensibility and ethical responsibility lies in the *subjective* realization of our own *objectivity*, in the passion of our *own* material. Aesthetics and ethics thus emerge first and corporeally as sense-ability and response-ability—by virtue of the inherent structure of the lived body-subject's transcendent consciousness of its own objective immanence, and in the experienced sense (both corporeal and self-conscious) of what it is to exist, at once, as a sensible body-object and a sensate body-subject. Thus Roquentin, even as he disavows it, cannot escape

44. Remy C. Kwant, *From Phenomenology to Metaphysics: An Inquiry into the Last Period of Merleau-Ponty's Philosophical Life* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1966), 58.

45. David Michael Levin, “Visions of Narcissism,” in *Merleau-Ponty Vivant*, ed. M. C. Dillon (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 67.

his existence as “some thing” more (or, for him, less) than “no-thing”; his consciousness of being absolutely “no-thing” and completely other than the insentient chestnut tree is ultimately a false consciousness. Not only does he experience the tree’s encroachment on his being through his objective body subjectively, but he also—and necessarily—confers on the insentient tree its own malevolent subjectivity. As both, and at once, a subjective object and objective subject, Roquentin is incapable of experiencing—or thinking through—either subjectivity or objectivity as absolute and “in-itself.” Thus, the transcendence-in-immanence and immanence-in-transcendence of the lived body is doubly and reversibly located: on the “no-thing-ness” side our consciousness of ourselves is always only partial, consciousness being above explanation as the origin of explanations; on the “being” side our dense flesh is often opaque and below explanation, overrunning our consciousness and its comprehension. This reversible structure of transcendence and immanence “in the flesh” provides the grounds for the possibility (if not always the observance) of that reversible structure of empathy and sympathy between our own embodied subjectivity and other body-subjects known as *intersubjectivity*. I would argue, however, that it also provides the grounds for the possibility of a similarly reversible structure of empathy and sympathy between our own subjective embodiment and other body-objects that I here call *interobjectivity*. Interobjectivity, then, stands in a necessary relation to intersubjectivity—albeit in a relation that is, at once, both complimentary and contrary.

For Merleau-Ponty the question, and possibility, of *intersubjectivity* was posed on the fundament of a primordial and embodied subjectivity—one experienced not as a conscious “self” but as a preconscious “here.” The egological self emerges gradually in development (both physical and social) through myriad acts of differentiation and increasing reflexive reflection upon them.⁴⁶ Thus, the construction of subjectivity was not a problem for Merleau-Ponty—but intersubjectivity was. On what grounds, given my preconscious but subjective sense of embodied presence “here,” could the other’s lived body “there” be differentiated from the rest of the objective world and come to be understood not merely as an *object-for-me* but also as a *subject-for-itself*. That is, living through and as that embodied subjectivity I invariantly experience as here and mine, the other would seem to be merely one object among many others. Acknowledging the asymmetricality of this

46. Merleau-Ponty, like Jacques Lacan, uses the mirror stage to discuss the emergence of the child’s conscious recognition of its “self” and its discrete egological existence between six months and eighteen months. However, Merleau-Ponty sees subjectivity as preexisting this moment of ego differentiation and as inherent in the lived body: the unselfconscious consciousness of “here,” where experience happens and is gathered, which precedes the “I.” For more elaborate discussion see my *The Address of the Eye*, 104–28.

perception, Merleau-Ponty writes: “In so far as the other person resides in the world, is visible there, and forms a part of my field, he is never an Ego in the sense in which I am one for myself. In order to think of him as a genuine *I*, I ought to think of myself as a mere object for him, *which I am prevented from doing by the knowledge which I have of myself.*”⁴⁷

The asymmetry of this relation to the other (in which my subjective consciousness prevents me from being able to think of myself as a mere object) is balanced, however, by the objectivity of my own body as *perceptible matter*, which I know—because I subjectively live it—is also *perceiving matter*. Informed by my subjectivity, this perceiving matter actively “has” a world and behaves in it intentionally, going about its “having of being” in a purposive and directed manner. In that both I, as a body-subject, and the other body-object not only share the mutuality of material embodiment in a world but also perceptibly express mutual modes of intentional behavior, my own sense of being reversibly perceptible and perceiving allows me to comprehend the other not only as a body-object but also as a body-subject. As Merleau-Ponty puts it:

I say this is another person, a second self, and this I know in the first place because this living body has the same structure as mine. I experience my own body as the power of adopting certain forms of behavior and a certain world, and I am given to myself merely as a hold upon the world: now, it is precisely my body which perceives the body of another person, and discovers in that other’s body a miraculous prolongation of my own intentions, a familiar way of dealing with the world. Henceforth, as the parts of my body together comprise a system, so my body and the other person’s are one whole, two sides of one and the same phenomenon, and the anonymous existence of which my body is the ever-renewed trace henceforth inhabits both bodies simultaneously.⁴⁸

The common ground of flesh and the fundamental reversibility of the lived body as both subject and object thus enable the lived structure of intersubjectivity.

What I am here calling *interobjectivity* is also grounded in the “anonymous existence” and reversibility of the flesh—but its structure is experienced in a mode both complementary and contrary to intersubjectivity. That is, interobjectivity connects us as we anonymously exist with the common matter and potential of materiality that is mutually shared not only by intentional subjects but also by *nonintentional objects*. The question interobjectivity thus poses is not how an “object-for-me” can ever be a “subject-for-itself.” Rather, given that I am a body-object who invariantly lives its incarnate and materialized being as always also subjective and “mine,” the question becomes, How can

47. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 352 (emphasis added).

48. *Ibid.*, 353–54.

I possibly apprehend another objective body as a *nonsubject*—as *in-itself*—at all? Indeed, a phenomenology of interobjectivity would reveal that we cannot do so and that, to varying degree, we cannot avoid imbuing nonintentional objects with a *quasi subjectivity*, their excessive opacity experienced not as “in-itself” but rather “for-itself.” Posed as the other side of intersubjectivity, interobjectivity is thus a structure of relations with objects that cannot be reduced to a simple anthropomorphism in which we attribute our *own* egological subjectivity to nonsentient existence. Rather, it is a more complex structure of experiential relations that cannot comprehend absolute and complete objectivity or “in-itself-ness” but, to varying degree, confers upon objects an *estranged*—and thus *transcendent*—subjectivity that seems uncanny in its *alterity* from our own. The structure of interobjectivity is eloquently given voice by the great Jorge Luis Borges, in a section of a poem called “Things”:

How many things,
Files, doorsills, atlases, wine glasses, nails,
Serve us like slaves who never say a word,
Blind and so mysteriously reserved,
They will endure beyond our vanishing;
And they will never know that we have gone.⁴⁹

To describe the otherness of objectivity and the “things” that we have appropriated (and fashioned) to function for us, Borges confers upon them subjectivity—albeit one constituted in alterity. Indeed, the poem describes not the “in-itself-ness” of the “things” but, rather, their “for-itself-ness.” Thus, the last line reverberates with ambiguity: will the “things” not know we’re gone because, as “things,” they cannot know anything? Or will they not know our vanishing because, in the reserve of their own secret life, they do not care?

It may seem a stretch from the great poet Borges to a television commercial. Nonetheless, we can see a similar—if reversed—interrogation in a recent advertisement mounted by IKEA (the worldwide home-furnishings store). In it we watch a young woman leave her apartment building to take out the trash: a filled plastic bag that she dumps in a trashcan and a small gooseneck lamp that she places on the sidewalk beside it, its “neck” curved “abjectly” downward. Night falls, and it begins to rain. The camera looks upward at the woman’s apartment window, lit by the glow of an apparently new lamp, and then moves downward to look at the trashed—and “forlorn”—little lamp on the rainy street. The scene then cuts to the abstraction of commercial space in which a young man tells us: “Many of you are feeling sorry for this lamp. Why? Because you are crazy. The lamp doesn’t feel anything.” The IKEA logo then appears to let us know where we, too, can buy a

49. Jorge Luis Borges, “Things,” trans. Stephen Kessler, *New Yorker*, Mar. 22, 1999, 66.

new lamp. Certainly no company would spend such a large sum of money and use such an accusation of craziness as a sales pitch without knowing intimately our tendency (helped, of course, by the camera and editing) to “subjectify” our objects—in this case, a lamp whose pliable “neck” is seen as emotionally responsive to its existential situation and, in a reverse echo of Borges’ poem, *our* lack of care.

Interobjectivity, as a structure of possible relations between body-subjects and body-objects, includes a wide and graded range of subjectively experienced reversibility with objects, varying in both the *ratio* of this reversibility (how proportionally subjective and for-itself is the object since there is great variance in kicking the tire of one’s car, giving a boat a proper name, and believing in the subjective agency of a magic charm) and the *degree* to which this experienced reversibility of subject and object is transparent or explicit to consciousness. Thus a phenomenology of interobjectivity would be both structural and historical in its understanding of the primordial grounds for our reversible relations with objects and in its differentiation of these reversible relations within the context of specific and temporalized cultural practices and reflections on them—hence, for example, those historical and cultural manifestations designated as animism, anthropomorphism, personification, and fetishism, or taken up and explicitly described by psychoanalysis as object relations or paranoid schizophrenia. This is certainly recognized in groundbreaking work on the fetish by William Pietz, for example, who writes: “The fetish might be viewed as the locus of a sort of primary and carnal rhetoric of identification and disavowal that establishes conscious and unconscious value judgments connecting territorialized social things and embodied personal individuals within a series of singular fixations.”⁵⁰ In this regard, and particularly as it, too, brings up our relationship to “things” and to judgment and value, a brief note in Mikhail Bakhtin’s “Toward a Methodology for the Human Sciences” is also apposite: “Our *thought* and our *practice*, not technical but moral (that is, our responsible deeds), are accomplished between two limits: attitudes toward the thing and attitudes toward the personality. *Reification* and *personification*. Some of our acts (cognitive and moral) strive toward the limit of reification, but never reach it; other acts strive toward the limit of personification, and never reach it completely.”⁵¹

Despite our invariantly subjective experience of our own objectivity, there is a degree to which we occasionally do seem to (almost) reach the “in-itselfness” of nonintentional objects in experiences that bring on nausea (such as that of Roquentin’s encounter with the chestnut tree) or fill us with a sub-

50. William Pietz, “The Problem of the Fetish I,” *Res* 9 (spring 1985): 14.

51. M. M. Bakhtin, “Toward a Methodology for the Human Sciences,” in his *Speech Phenomena and Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 168.

lime sense of awe at the world and one's own immanent here-ness (such as the experience of Roquentin's Sunday). As I've suggested above, however, this sense of "in-itself-ness" is a subjectively projected sense of the unselfdisclosed alterity and refusals of our own objective being. Even as the *idea* of it horrifies him, Sartre cannot *experience* absolute objectivity—"the kind of objectivity which is for no one," as Dufrenne puts it (442). Our *apprehension* of the in-itself-ness of inert and nonsentient objective existence is always grasped and qualified, in part, by our (transparent) subjectivity—and thus does not allow *comprehension* of the in-itself. Indeed, we never really sense a nonintentional "thing" existing in the world as an object *in-itself* but rather sense its real and present presence *as in excess of our comprehension* and as being *for-itself*. Like the things in Borges's poem, this kind of subjectification takes up the object's excess objectivity (that is, our lack of comprehension of some thing whose existence is only objective) as opacity and its inertia as somehow a refusal or judgment.

Dufrenne suggests that what we apprehend or glimpse in the (aesthetic or ethical) object is the larger and undifferentiated manifold of existence that is the real. He writes: "The real is the *preobjective*. It is manifested in the bruteness of fact, the constraining character of being-there, the opacity of the in-itself. The reality of the real is a presence which I encounter and to which I submit" (530). We could say, then, that our sense of the object's in-itself-ness is really a sense of its *preobjective* status as real, a sense of a presence that is *undifferentiated* for us in its materiality—that is, not yet an object and yet not a subject.⁵² In regard to this lack of differentiation in the real, and the way in which subjectivity differentiates and informs it with meaning and value, Dufrenne writes of affectivity and its relation to the aesthetic object. However, what he says of affectivity could be said of subjectivity in general, and what he says of the aesthetic object, to lesser degree, could be said of our relations to *all* objects:

[A]ffectivity is not so much in me as in the object. To feel is to experience a feeling as a property of the object, not as a state of my being. . . . There is something in the object that can be known only by a sort of sympathy in which the subject opens himself to it. Indeed, at the limit, the affectively qualified object is itself a subject and no longer a pure object or the simple correlate of an impersonal consciousness. . . . As a consequence, the affective qualities into which the atmosphere of an . . . object is resolved become anthropomorphic. (442)

Thus, Roquentin's chestnut tree has affect and agency, and it suffocates him; despite his protestations otherwise, indeed because of them and their emer-

52. Here it is interesting to contrast the *preobjective* with the *presubjective* to emphasize their reversibility but their different figuration and value. We might think of the pre-mirror phase infant as not yet a differentiated subject and yet not an object.

gence as the expression of his subjective perception, the tree is hardly in-itself; rather, its being behaves toward Roquentin to some degree intentionally—that is, for-itself. To those of us who are less alienated, however, the universal burgeoning of a mulberry tree, the massive, rocky crags of mountains against the sky, or sunlight defining the sharp discretion of a glass decanter on a table also occasionally take our breath away. But this gasp is experienced not as suffocation but rather as a response to something sublime—as a sudden and deep in-take of the brea(d)th of existence. This gasp is a recognition made *within* subjectivity of objectivity, of for-itself-ness, of material being (even our own) as a “some-thing-ness” that outstrips our determinate and determined comprehension and containment of it as merely—and reductively—only for us.

This is to say, as intersubjectivity is a structure of engagement with the *intentional behavior* of other body-objects from which we recognize *what it objectively looks like to be subjective*, so interobjectivity is a structure of engagement with the *materiality* of other body-objects on which we project our sense of *what it subjectively feels like to be objective*. In either modality, then, we can never completely conceive of being a mere body-object that cannot feel. In sum, like intersubjectivity, interobjectivity is perceived asymmetrically—for we are forever subjects even as we are always also objects. Thus we exist always as a *qualified* and *quasi object*—much as the object exists for us always (if much of the time, transparently) as a qualified and *quasi subject*. In this regard Merleau-Ponty’s characterization of the asymmetry of intersubjectivity can be reversed and paraphrased as the *asymmetry of interobjectivity*: insofar as the other objective body resides in the world, is visible there, and forms a part of my field, it is always in part a subject in the sense in which I am one for myself. In order to think of it as only an *objective body*, I ought to be able to think of myself as a mere object with it, *which I am prevented from doing by the subjective knowledge that I have of myself*. As with the asymmetry of intersubjectivity, however, the asymmetry of interobjectivity is also balanced—now by the underdetermined and perceptible matter of my own body, a body-object that often exceeds my volition and determination and is objectively situated among other perceptible matter, a body-object that, rather than “as-me” or “for-me,” is seemingly “for-itself.” In some ways, then, if never completely, I sense my body in its broader existence and possibility as flesh. This sense of our body in its broader existence can occur in heightened—and negative—consciousness, as in Roquentin’s case. But it is important to emphasize that this *conscious* experience of our own body as an objective thing that is in the way stands in marked contrast to the *transparent* (or *preconscious*) experience of our objective body as flesh—an experience in which we exist as an expansive material capacity enjoying reversible commerce with the common flesh of the world and realizing our most fundamental intentions without a thought.

Interobjectivity, then, is not equivalent to nor can it be reduced to anthropomorphism or its other variants such as animism, fetishism, or reification. Rather, interobjectivity is a subjective structure of bodily engagement with objectivity that, while accommodating Roquentin's alienation as one of these variants, also allows for alienation's other side: the sanguine sense of not merely being-in-the-world but of also belonging to it. That is, interobjectivity as a structure includes alienation: the density and opacity of material things in a *negative* relation of reciprocity with the body-subject wherein the latter experiences its own being, even though lived always as "mine," as an opaque and distanced body-object that—below explanation—leads a life of its own in indiscriminate and unwilling reversibility with nonintentional matter. However, the structure of interobjectivity also includes a *positive* relation of reciprocity between the body-subject and material things wherein the former lives transparently or sublimely experiences its own objective being, even though lived always as "mine," as an open affirmation of *belonging* to the world for-itself. It is within this more sanguine structure that the body-subject comes to re-cognize its own primordial inherence in the flesh and its passionate devotion to the world and to contrast it to the more passive passion of "suffering" the world. Re-cognized, this inherence and passion can then be reflectively and objectively *enacted*—that is, in the formation in consciousness and substantial action of a "higher-order" and more explicit aesthetic sensibility and ethical responsibility.

In his last work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty writes of vision, painting, and the realm of the sensible in terms that not only evoke the "passion of the material"—our suffering of and devotion to the objectivity and the things of the world—but also look toward the development and conjunction of aesthetic sensibility and ethical responsibility:

Since the seer is caught up in what he sees, it is still himself he sees: there is a fundamental narcissism of all vision. And thus, for the same reason, the vision he exercises, he also undergoes from the things, such that, as many painters have said, I feel myself looked at by the things, my activity is equally passivity—which is the second and more profound sense of the narcissism: not to see in the outside, as the others see it, the contour of a body one inhabits, but especially to be seen by the outside, to exist within it, to emigrate into it, to be seduced, captivated, alienated by the phantom, so that the seer and the visible reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and which is seen.⁵³

The captivation spoken of here is not Roquentin's alienated disgust and terror. Rather, it is an ecstasy, an *ekstasis*, that, as Levin suggests, "makes possible a self-developing socialization, eliciting from the deep order of our embodiment its inherent capacity to turn experiences of social relationship into an

53. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 139.

assumption of the *position* identified with the other.⁵⁴ This reversibility not only allows us the *aesthetic pleasures* of objectification but also, as Levin points out, serves “as our ground for the cultivation of those reciprocities so necessary for *ethical life*.”⁵⁵ Indeed, as I have introduced it here, interobjectivity names the condition of a deep and passionate recognition of ourselves and the objective world filled with “things” and “others” as immanently together in the flesh—that is, as both materially and transcendently real and mattering.

54. Levin, “Visions of Narcissism,” 70.

55. *Ibid.*, 71 (emphasis added).

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