

NIGHT ON EARTH: THE NOCTURNAL SENSORIUM IN WORLD CINEMA

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ABSTRACT

THE NOCTURNAL SENSORIUM IN WORLD CINEMA

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“Night on Earth: The Nocturnal Sensorium in World Cinema” draws on cinema and media studies, psychoanalysis, affect theory, and new materialism to interrogate the relation between processes of perceptual mediation and emergent political and economic sensoriums. Addressing how the night allegorizes perception by decelerating vision, I explore how nighttime blurs distinctions between atmosphere and materiality, labor and leisure, as well as visual spectacle and invisibility. This project analyzes how the low-light capacities of digital cameras enable new configurations of sensory acquisition and world responsiveness, thus unsettling the prevailing notion that celluloid film has a concrete material relation to physical reality that digital cameras simply aim to transcend. Through close readings of both analog and digital films, I probe how spectacular nightscapes reflectively thematize the sensory modalities enabled by different media, but also how these representations link the alternative social orders of the night to new perceptual thresholds. In doing so, I engage critical orientations that are infrequently combined, aligning ontological questions on cinema’s underlying essence with feminist and queer epistemologies. My project thus builds on ecomaterialist arguments that atmosphere is as much an extension of physical reality as landscapes and flesh; conceptualizations of biometric opacity in media studies; and descriptions of bodily exhaustion in critiques of neoliberal globalization. Reading across these coordinates, I map how cinematic nightscapes allow for a critical reflection of our perceptual and corporeal limits while at the same time redrawing where those limits might be.

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PREFACE

This dissertation takes its title from Jim Jarmusch's eponymous film from 1991. The film is structured around an episodic conceit featuring five vignettes that trace the interactions between cab drivers and their fares in five different cities at night: Los Angeles, New York, Rome, Paris, and Helsinki. In all these scenes, narrative action is constrained to the space of the taxi, such that the film's movement through a succession of nighttime vistas redoubles the experience of viewing the film in a darkened room or theater, a milieu that conjoins, as Sandy Isenstadt evocatively suggests, "visual movement and bodily stasis, and an alignment of the eye with projected light as the sole source of illumination."¹ Through its association with propulsive movement and modern technology, the automobile has also been repeatedly aligned with narrative progress and mobile vision, as well as the perils and fascination of collision and collapse.² In this film, however, the night impinges on how the car serves as a metaphor for diegetic time in ways that elude dramatic climaxes, or the sweeping itinerary of the road movie. Each vignette charts its sense of place through captivating but visually obscure and often depopulated fragments of urban topography, conveying a sense of both danger and solace that intensifies the impersonal but intimate feeling of riding in a car with a stranger at night. While these encounters enact forms of financial exchange that are shaped by the labor politics of the service industry, they are not wholly reducible to them either. Each of the film's vignettes give rise to moments of brief and equivocal connection between passenger and driver that exceed indifferent anonymity but which never fully develop into mutual self-knowledge.

In his analysis of the film, Juan Suárez has observed that "moments like this are difficult to apprehend through standard ways of discussing intimacy because they do not show clear-cut, one-channel affect but clusters of contradictory, quickly changing emotion; and in addition, these

¹ Sandy Isenstadt, "Auto-specularity: Driving through the American Night," *Modernism/Modernity* 18, no. 2 (April 2011): 227.

² Karen Beckman, *Crash: Cinema and the Politics of Speed and Stasis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

emotions arise in the context of ephemeral contacts that do not solidify into stable relationships.”³ Drawing on Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner’s notion of “border intimacies... adventitious relations that take place on the margins of long-standing associations, like those between parents and children, long-term lovers or friends or family members,” Suárez reads the interpersonal dynamics staged in these scenes as “liminal intimacies that are rarely the object of event-centered stories... they emerge in moments that fall outside the range of traditional storytelling, and because of this, they are best expressed in narratives that purvey no narrative at all.”⁴

My study develops the thematic and structural premise of *Night on Earth*, although it expands its geographic scope and resituates its temporal emphasis to cinema after 2004, a time frame defined by the progressive outphasing of photochemical film towards digital parameters. But here I also invoke the film’s mobilization of nocturnal excursion as a visual frame, narrative motor, and metaphorical conceit that gestures toward changed horizons for both individual subjectivity and public culture, as well as the ideological and institutional conditions of world cinema. As *Night on Earth* suggests, the nocturnal opens a chronospace where the rhythms and practices of social and economic protocols are temporarily displaced, even when they operate, like the taxi cab and cinema itself, as part of the infrastructure which circulates and extends the flow and movement of capital. As the night is less regulated by the dictates of vigilant governance and conventional behavior, its darkness in the film thematizes the fissures and gaps through which regulatory norms and capitalist effects fail to achieve totalizing completeness over any given social arrangement. Despite their constrained temporal structures (each ride lasts for about twenty minutes), *Night on Earth*’s episodes are attuned to fleeting nocturnal relations laden with a sense of unpredictability and contingency. These transient and dimly conceived modes of contact fall outside the scope of relationships that are culturally prestigious, or which are seen as central to social and personal intelligibility. However, even when these encounters are registered but

³ Juan A. Suárez, *Jim Jarmusch* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 81.

⁴ Ibid.

ultimately avoided, or only briefly entertained, they are encrypted with a sense of renewal or diversion from established life narratives and norms. In this way, the film's exclusive focus on transient and indeterminate exchanges breaks from entrenched narrative schemes oriented towards closure, spatiotemporal coherence, or causal progression, aligning itself instead with principles of liminality, open-endedness, and chance.⁵ To this end, the film centers circuitous conversations and fleeting forms of contact while excising events that would advance a coherent and progressive sense of each characters' developmental life path.

The space of the taxi cab thus mirrors the temporality of the night as an ancillary zone, an interval that lies between scheduled and culturally coordinated moments for cultural production and exchange. Taxis are the hinge between "origin and destination" in the same way that night is the interstice between "yesterday and tomorrow." Thus, the experience of being both a night-shift driver or in transit at night symbolizes forms of social presence that unfold in a differential relation to normative flows of time and movement. In *Night on Earth*, we never witness or even learn where the passengers are going, and how their proper life presumably resumes after their cab ride is over. In doing so, the film's nocturnal itinerancy provokes attention to the underthought spaces at the margins of institutionalized social life which are often left out of linear narrative schemes: experiences of drift or waiting, awkward silences or stunted conversations, or even the drudgery of nightshift labor.⁶ Here, the limited visibility of nocturnal space colludes with the fragmented diegetic systems of post-classical cinema, interrogating normative patterns of recognition and eventfulness by supplanting progressive action with the sense of an indeterminate experience of temporal duration.

At the same time, the permeability of the night also functions on a meta-textual level.

While the film's vignettes are not narratively interlinked, Suárez observes how they are each

⁵ For conventions on post-classical narrative systems see Jean Ma, *Melancholy Drift: Marking Time in Chinese Cinema* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010) and David Bordwell, "Intensified Continuity: Visual Style in Contemporary American Film," *Film Quarterly* 55, no.3 (Spring 2002): 16–28.

⁶ For more on the relationship between the representation of labor and cinema see Jean-Louis Comolli, "Machine of the Visible" in *The Cinematic Apparatus*, eds. Teresa de Lauretis and Stephen Heath (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), 121–142.

encoded with allusions to American and European auteurs, particularly through the use of actors whose images are closely tied to the cinematic histories suggested by the film's different geographic locations. When Gena Rowlands lights a cigarette in the Los Angeles episode, she brings to mind the many moments when she magnetized a gesture as prosaic as smoking into an arresting sensory event, particularly in the films of John Cassavetes. The rapid repartee between Rosie Perez and Giancarlo Esposito in the New York segment evokes their roles in Spike Lee films, such as *Do the Right Thing* (1989). Roberto Benigni and the illuminated statues of Rome incite memories of Federico Fellini. At the time of filming, Isaach de Bankolé was largely linked to the early, acclaimed films of Claire Denis, Jarmusch's former assistant. And while Bankolé's partner in this scene, Beatrice Dalle, had not yet appeared in any films by the French director, she would eventually star in several of her motion pictures, retroactively consolidating the sequence's association with Denis. Lastly, the Finnish episode does not only use three actors, Matti Pellonpää, Kari Väänänen and Sakari Kuosmanen, who frequently appear in films by the Kaurismäki brothers, but two of the characters they play share the directors' first names, Aki and Mika. Alongside these intertexts, Jarmusch also offers moments of self-citation, from the episodic structure that would be familiar to fans of his many films, to the reappearance of both the 8-ball and Roberto Benigni from his earlier *Down by Law* (1986).

As a result, the night and the movement of taxi cabs scattered across different time zones signify the workings of allusion as a porous and transversable system through which Jarmusch inscribes his auteurial persona. Jean Ma has beautifully assessed how transnational intertextuality serves as a paradoxical strategy that can shift between fragmenting and aggrandizing the figure of the auteur. In her discussion of Tsai Ming-liang's use of citations, a director whose films are also intimately linked to the night, she observes how "intertextuality reinscribes the cohesion of the corpus itself as a framework of interpretation even as it dissolves the unity of the singular film by opening it up to a larger textual universe... this cohesion ultimately refers back to the figure of the auteur, whose shadow presence is now amplified as a locus of meaning. As his control extends from the shaping of the film to the elicitation of a certain way of

viewing, Tsai hyperbolizes the function of authorship.”⁷ Here, Ma draws on Timothy Corrigan’s influential notion of auteurism as a commercial strategy that reflects “a period when the play of commerce ... increasingly assimilated the action of enunciation and expression.”⁸ For Corrigan, allusion serves as a distinct aesthetic feature for post–classical films by eschewing narrative unity or a homogeneous sense of diegetic time. But by materializing the presence of the auteur through an interlocking relay of his or her influences and interlocutors, this strategy should also be viewed as a marketing tactic, in keeping with how the cult–status of the auteur invests the internationally–circulating commodity of the art film with cultural capital.

Thus, as a habitual feature of post–classical art cinema, the defractive prism of intertextuality forecasts the auteur’s cosmopolitan belonging within a global milieu of cineastes, but also within an international network of distribution and promotion. If the permeable night signifies Jarmusch’s auteurial presence through disseminated citations, it therefore also thematizes how the material and discursive construction of any singular film is entwined within global systems of funding, distribution, and taste–building. Throughout this study, the night’s association with borderzones and the porousness of intertextuality informs my engagement with the cinematic image as a form of worldly address. I will return to this point later.

Night on Earth’s figuration of the nocturnal as a diegetic domain and meta–textual metaphor casts it not only as a space of transition and liminality but also as an interval of uncertainty and dispersion. I invoke the film’s episodic structure, transnational influences, and attunement to marginal intimacies to express the methodological and critical orientations of this study. While *Night on Earth* was filmed in the early nineties, my research addresses a nexus of recent films that turn to the night in order to allegorize ongoing reconfigurations of cinema’s material, technological, and institutional conditions in this contemporary moment. In this study,

⁷ Jean Ma, *Melancholy Drift*, 90–91.

⁸ Timothy Corrigan, “The Commerce of Auteurism” in *A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture After Vietnam* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 103.

the night's darkness, its symbolic tension with both endings *and* intervals, and its association with blurred frontiers signify interrelated transformations in the spheres of both cinematic production and the field of cinema studies.

Cinematic Ontology

The first of these changes relates to the perceived crisis of cinema's object of study linked, in particular, to the widespread outphasing of photochemical film in favor of more cost-efficient digital technologies in almost every stage of production, distribution, and exhibition. Among filmmakers, cinematographers, and film scholars alike, the redefinition of the cinematic experience through the digital has incited vigorous debates on the cognitive, sensory, and existential implications of this technological reconfiguration. When I belatedly began my graduate studies in film history and theory in 2011, the field's discussion seemed to gravitate around a return to cinema's ontology. These discourses drew from and revived classical film theory, in particular André Bazin's seminal account of the ontology of the photographic image, its material, indexical bond with light and pro-filmic space defining cinema in terms of physical reality. These discussions were also linked to a sense of generational nostalgia leading to a discourse increasingly defined by invocations of mortality. Francesco Casetti, for instance, observes that "the progressive abandonment of photographic film and the darkened theater has given rise to discussions of its death."⁹

Similarly, D.N. Rodowick exemplifies a line of thinking regarding the transition from the photochemical to the digital that has been widely influential in framing these discussions. Extending the notion of cinema's death, Rodowick argues that "the digital 'image' to the extent that it is one [is] forged in the logic of information, [its] ethics of perceptual realism is based on a vision of the world that is entirely mathematical in nature; or rather, it is a nature that is

⁹ Francesco Casetti, *The Lumière Galaxy: Seven Key Words for the Cinema to Come* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 2.

mathematical before it is or could be imagined as physical.”¹⁰ In contrast to photochemical cinema, digital cinematography for Rodowick loses its indexical relation to profilmic space, as it converts the world into zeros and ones, and thus becomes more susceptible to forgery and manipulation. In his view, these computational protocols attenuate what was once cinema’s primary relationship to real existence, such that the ontological distinctions between the photochemical and the digital invariably open into epistemological concerns regarding the veracity of what we apprehend and how it shapes our sense of obligation to our environment. Similarly, Vivian Sobchack frames the photochemical to digital transition as an ontological rather than simply technical transformation. But her interest in ontological difference is related to phenomenology more so than analytic philosophy, and her primary interest resides in how the digital grounds us in a different, and perhaps dangerously transcendent, experience of our corporeal moorings to physical reality. Despite the ethical seriousness of her digital skepticism in essays like “The Scene of the Screen,” Sobchack’s orientation towards the sensuous experience of film has at times led her towards discrepant or inconsistent positions towards its affordances.¹¹ I do not view this oscillation between conflicting registers as incoherent or imprecise, but rather it suggests how ontological distinctions between celluloid and digital parameters can be recognized without becoming locked or prescriptive mandates. In an interview with Scott Bukatman, for instance, she at first defends the “indexicality of photochemical cinema” and deems the digital as an impoverished and distinct order of ontology as it “gives you ... a second order indexicality,” only to end the interview qualifying that “the digital has its own pleasures. There’s the clarity, the

¹⁰ D.N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 175.

¹¹ Vivian Sobchack, “The Scene of the Screen” in *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004). For a counter–argument on the digital see Vivian Sobchack, “Introduction,” *Meta–Morphing: Visual Transformation and the Culture of Quick– Change* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), xi–xxiii.

extraordinary resolution, the color saturation, all of which create their own intensity as well as erotics.”¹²

I invoke Sobchack’s phenomenological and affective description of the digital to register my sense that in the intervening years concerns over ontology have been supplanted, if not outwardly resisted, by a critical engagement with the sensory and affective experiences new media generates. This reorientation can be discerned both in discussions of aesthetic representation that engage the technical specificities of their mediating apparatus but also in a recalibration of the field’s discussions from concerns over the media ontology of distinct devices to a broadened view of their networked effects (this is to say, the discourse of media ecology). In both these registers, a critical turn to the senses does not deny or dismiss issues of ontological difference but propels them towards the changed temporal, affective, and perceptual effects that new media plays on our social and physical environments. As W.J.T Mitchell argues, for instance, “If digitization has produced a change in the ontology of images, it might, then, be more plausibly sought in the changed conditions of their ‘being in the world’—the changed conditions of their production and circulation, the exponential increase in the number of images, and the rapidity of their transmission, especially via the Internet.”¹³

In a related vein, Mark Hansen suggests that any engagement with the speed and proliferation of digital flows must also address their defining attribute of imperceptibility. In his view, “human experience is currently undergoing a fundamental transformation caused by the complex entanglement of humans within networks of media technologies that operate predominantly, if not almost entirely, outside the scope of human modes of awareness.”¹⁴

Drawing on Hansen’s paradigm, Yuriko Furahata observes that not only does networked media

¹² Vivian Sobchack, “Vivian Sobchack in Conversation with Scott Bukatman,” *e-media studies* 2, no. 1 (2009) <http://journals.dartmouth.edu/cgi-bin/WebObjects/Journals.woa/1/xmlpage/4/article/338>.

¹³ W.J.T Mitchell, “Image” in *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, eds. W.J.T Mitchell and Mark B.N. Hansen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 158.

¹⁴ Mark B.N. Hansen, *Feed-Forward: On the Future of Twenty-First-Century Media* (Chicago: Chicago University Press), 158.

organize “our sensory access to the world” but in its totalizing ubiquity it has also become the very milieu for our sensory acquisition. “Media has become our atmosphere,” she writes, “seamlessly blending into our surroundings, like the air we breathe and that envelops us.”¹⁵

As the night’s darkness and its artificial lights invests the seemingly extraneous milieu of air with substantiality, atmosphere has a privileged place in this study both as a visual image in specific films and as one of the defining conceits through which the pervasive opacity of new media has been theorized. In this way, the allegorical trope of nocturnal atmosphere links questions of aesthetic representation to discourses of media ecology and circulation, offering a locus in which our discognition from the material infrastructure of ubiquitous digital operations is thematized, interrogated, and potentially redressed.

Through this framework, I want to argue that representations of nighttime offer phenomenological thresholds that enable us to bridge the gap between the different epistemological concerns regarding our “being in the world” that media ontology and media ecology explore through seemingly irreconcilable parameters. Firstly, digitally–shot night images redress the notion that “digital image capture is designed to produce outputs that are indistinguishable from [photochemical] photographs,” as Rodowick suggests.¹⁶ For while digital cinematography has often “mimicked” the perceptual norms of its photochemical precedents, its nocturnal images also propel the aesthetic differences between digital and celluloid film in unprecedented ways. Through this dynamic, I argue that the specifically digital attributes Sobchack invokes in the earlier example may offer a distinct exegetical force through which to think about cinema’s historic situatedness.¹⁷

¹⁵ Yuriko Furahata, “Architecture as Atmospheric Media: Tang Lab and Cybernets” in *Media Theory in Japan*, eds. Marc Steinberg and Alexander Zahlten (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 117.

¹⁶ D.N. Rodowick, 117.

¹⁷ Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

A key film in this regard is Michael Mann's *Collateral* (2004), whose production indexes the temporal start–point of this study given how its critical reception has largely revised attitudes regarding digital film aesthetics, presenting them not just as cheaper or second order alternatives to photochemical precedents, but as a distinct expressive system in their own right. As we shall see, the discursive and industry–defining impact of the film is inextricably linked to its nocturnal milieu. Set entirely at night in Los Angeles, the film follows yet another cab driver, Max (Jamie Foxx), as he is forced into driving a hit man (Tom Cruise) across the city to kill one mark after another. In the spirit of *Night on Earth*, each destination serves as a microcosmic world underscoring the nocturnal city as a fragmented constellation of parts rather than as a homogeneous unit. In contrast to Jarmusch's film, however, here transnational flows are reflected into the multiethnic enclaves of a single city, rather than through episodic vignettes that are representative of a (partial) notion of the world. Most of the film's interiors were shot using 35mm photochemical film, but Mann and his cinematographers Paul Cameron and Dion Beebe turned to two digital HD cameras, Thompson's ViperFilm–Stream and the SonyCineAlta precisely, for their capacities to film in low–light conditions at nighttime. The film's juxtaposition of film with digital creates a comparative structure that emphasizes what Sobchack calls the digital's specific pleasures and erotics through a distinctly nocturnal climate and visual idiom. Foregoing additional film– or directional light, *Collateral* hones in on the extreme light sensitivity of its cameras' digital sensors. As a result, as Simon Rothöhler has described, the film “[takes] the HD image beyond the photo–realist standards of visibility in film. Full of contrast and variety, palm trees are silhouetted in front of a nuanced, dark gray and purple night sky. In the areas where 35mm registers a deep, rich black, HD reveals a world full of different shapes and shadows.”¹⁸ Almost every piece of academic writing on the film, in fact, registers its attunement towards nighttime atmospherics and phenomena that have hitherto eluded photochemical film's capacities. In his analysis, for instance, Stephen Prince observes that “black areas in the night exteriors of

¹⁸ Simon Rothöhler, “Where Film Drops Off: Michael Mann's High–Definition Cinema” in *Screen Dynamics: Mapping the Borders of Cinema*, eds. Gertrud Koch et al. (Vienna: Österreichisches Filmmuseum and Synema, Gesellschaft für Film und Medien, 2012), 142.

Collateral are gray and semi-transparent, turning the night into a kind of milky film that hangs over the city.”¹⁹ What is striking about these assessments, in a way that can be discerned in the visual analyses of digital cinema as a whole, is the affective and phenomenological excess of their descriptive tenor, suggesting an emergent attunement to an unfolding rather than patly recognizable reality. In other words, by propelling the specific sensory properties of digital aesthetics, night images signal how our “wanting connection to reality” persists and is even revitalized through the sensory reconfigurations that digital cameras can enable.²⁰

In 2002, Mary Ann Doane observed that “a certain nostalgia for cinema precedes its death. One doesn’t – and can’t – love the televisual or the digital in quite the same way. It is as though the object of theory were to delineate more precisely the contours of an object at the moment of its historical demise.”²¹ However, one of this study’s speculative lines of inquiry is whether love for one kind of cinema might also arise in the moment of its historical emergence. In this way, as an interval of transition and passage, the night as a heuristic conceit thematizes dynamics of both endings and arrivals. In fact, many recent films that have inspired particularly passionate forms of cinephilia for their textural and sensate qualities, or sheer aesthetic beauty, are distinctly digital in their appearance, and often prevalently or significantly nocturnal in their mode of sensory address (remaining within the American context, we might here list Barry Jenkins’ *Moonlight* (2016), Greta Gerwig’s *Ladybird* (2017), Anna Rose Holmer’s *The Fits* (2015), Andrea Arnold’s *American Honey* (2016), Sean Baker’s *Tangerine* (2015)). In many of these films, the hyperphotographic quality of their digital cameras (or in *Tangerine*’s case, its Iphone) redress how photographic film, as Richard Dyer has famously observed, was designed for white

¹⁹ Stephen Prince, *Digital Visual Effects in Cinema: The Seduction of Reality* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 87.

²⁰ Rodowick, *Virtual Life*, 67.

²¹ Mary Ann Doane, “The Object of Theory” in *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, ed. Ivone Margulies (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 87.

skin, with the exception of particular, and now outphased film stocks, often distorting the appearance of brown skin tones in the process.²²

For instance, describing his work in *Mother of George* (2013), a prevailingly nocturnal film about Nigerian immigrants in Brooklyn, the cinematographer Bradford Young has observed that he used the RED Epic not only due to budgetary restraints but also because of the need to shoot black skin tones in darkness. “What I like about the RED is that it reminds me of Kodak’s old 6279, a stock that was so colorful with velvety blacks. And I don’t think you’re getting that in contemporary film stocks, which are flat and purely designed to go to DI with and make the look later. 6279 has such a high contrast and I feel like the RED is like that. It actually, in some instances, outperforms film in that way.”²³ Later, he adds that “for a story like *Mother of George*, with all these characters buried in shadow, with these intense colors and reflective textiles, you need the RED, which has this strong bias towards these stronger looking images.”²⁴ Reading through these atmospheric but also racial coordinates, the digital camera’s connection to reality exceeds a slavish mimicry of photochemical realism and indexical principles. It also extends visible presence to subject positions, temporal spheres, and atmospheric conditions that have been excluded or marginalized from aesthetic regimes of cinematic representation in ways that interrogate the technologically and ideologically–defined terms of what has hitherto counted as “physical reality.”

However, my study does not limit the importance of the night in recent cinema to the lowlight responsiveness of digital cameras. It also engages contemporary modes of pre–digital simulation, such as day–for–night cinematography, as well as “night–for–night” uses of

²² Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (London: Routledge, 1997).

²³ Bradford Young quoted in Anthony Kaufman, “In the Same Way Painters Used Paint,” *Filmmaker Magazine*, August 13, 2013 <https://filmmakermagazine.com/75637-in-the-same-way-painters-used-their-paint-d-p-bradford-young-on-aint-them-bodies-saints-and-mother-of-george/#.WsLbo9PwZHQ>

²⁴ *Ibid.*

photochemical film. My discussion of photochemical attributes is thus not siloed from the post-digital era. Instead, I put celluloid's nighttime properties in dialogue with questions of virtuality and materiality that digital debates have positioned at the center of film studies' concerns, and which reframe our understanding and relationship to its aesthetic attributes. As we have seen, the digital turn has often provoked productively polemic but often sweeping statements that have tended to reify the digital to questions of CGI and manipulability, but which also fix pre-digital cinema to an indexically-defined notion of realism. A heightened attention to the night in pre-digital contexts redresses this binary opposition, centering pre-digital histories of virtual simulation that have been surveyed, in particular, by scholars of early cinema in their preoccupation with additive color and profilmic manipulation.²⁵ Joshua Yumibe, for example, has traced how early cinema featured many non-photographic devices such as hand-coloring and stenciling, arguing that these pre-digital modes of simulation held both expressive but also realistic uses: "The reasons for tinting and toning were at times fairly evident: to create certain diegetic meanings, such as blue for night...a blue tone might provide a sense of darkness and the chilly sensation of a wintry night."²⁶

However, while early film scholars have richly and robustly surveyed the ubiquity of artificial, unnatural, and additive techniques to the film experience of early film spectators, day-for-night strategies that were used in the post-silent era in Hollywood remain conspicuously under-historicized. We might attribute this oversight to the historic liminality of this technique, a holdover of early cinema's artisanal-modes of filmmaking that nonetheless exists outside of its proper temporal scope. Instead, while coeval with technicolor cinematography, day-for-night was not just a peripheral practice within this mode of filmmaking. It was also seen as detracting from cinematography's defining formal properties for the prosaic exigencies of diegetic continuity. Nonetheless, it is largely due to its associations with the marginal and improper that day-for-night has been put to expressive use as a symbolic zone of exclusion in a diverse gamut of films

²⁵ See Giovanna Fossati et al., *Fantasia of Color in Early Cinema* (Amsterdam: EYE Film museum, 2015).

²⁶ Joshua Yumibe, *Moving Color: Early Film, Mass Culture, Modernism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 5.

from Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) to George Miller's *Mad Max Fury Road* (2015), and in the case study I discuss in Chapter 3, Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010). It is thus worth outlining this technique's historical and discursive construction in this introductory overview on nocturnal cinema.

Pre-digital Virtuality

At the most basic level, "day for night" signifies strategies for shooting night-effect exteriors in the daytime due to the inability of early or cheaper film stocks to register profilmic information with limited amounts of light. As François Truffaut famously underscored through the title of his celebrated film, day-for-night was developed in the Hollywood Studio system, and was called in France, not without a little derision, "la Nuit Americaine," as if to distance a realist or self-reflexive ethos in the French cinema from Hollywood's corporate artifice.

In the 1930s, night effects could be obtained using infra-red reversible film, as in the films of John Ford. To all intents and purposes, this method simulated nocturnal ambience for wide shots filmed in diurnal conditions, but its costs were prohibitive for motion pictures with smaller budgets. Thus, in the technical literature of the era, and in the sparse contemporary scholarship on this method, this technique is rarely considered "day for night"-proper, a term which thus designates nocturnal effects aimed specifically towards cheaper productions. While day-for-night methods can be managed differently according to the cinematographers' idiosyncratic tactics and the demands of the narrative, the process predominantly relies on a reasonably consistent set of procedures, namely underexposure. One option, used primarily for monochrome film, requires the camera operator to underexpose the film stock slightly (1 1/2-2 stops) and to employ graduated "effect" filters (over-correction) that together decrease visible detail, thus evoking the nighttime's perturbation of clear vision.²⁷ Another largely forgotten option in contemporary annals of cinematography is the use of Type A Kodachrome film produced by

²⁷ Charles G. Clarke, "Shooting Night Effects in Daytime," *American Cinematographer*, December 1956, 742-743.

The Eastman Company where the blue filter “effect” was already built into the chemical composition of the film’s material substrate, and which would not require the use of a color filter.²⁸ As one technician put it “without the filter outdoors Type A gives a distinctly bluish, moonlight effect.”²⁹ The third and most straight-forward strategy for shooting in technicolor simply required underexposing the film and sliding a blue filter on the lens.³⁰ Across these various methods, visual detail in the image is diminished in order to artificially mimic the indeterminacy of the optical field at night while still retaining enough legible information for the audience to clearly decipher developmental events in the diegesis.

A 1961 article published in *American Cinematographer* argues explicitly that “day-for-night” operates outside the boundaries of properly cinematic realism: “At best, day-for-night scenes are only an illusion, for in actual night detail is far less discernible than commonly seen in motion pictures, where some detail is necessary in order to maintain continuity of action or theme.”³¹ In other words, day-for-night is a simulation technology that hardly aspires towards isomorphic resemblance, the night it conjures is notational rather than phenomenological, parlaying an artificiality that stalls an immersive belief in the image as a faithful rendering of atmosphere. In fact, what emerges from the archive of film accounts describing day-for-night strategies is the impression that it is a cheap and somewhat disreputable compromise improper to cinema’s ontological grounding in material indexicality, if not a threat to cinematography itself. In an essay on color in the silent era, Tom Gunning has addressed the historical and ideological contours that have marginalized the chromatic within film studies. While Gunning is discussing tinting rather than day-for-night, his observations nonetheless illuminate the chromophobia through which day-for-night came to be considered an embarrassing effect at the height of its usage, even among its purported practitioners. “Film scholars often view color as an add-on

²⁸ Anonymous, “Grabbing Night Effects in Daytime,” *American Cinematographer*, August 1939, 371.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Anonymous, “Day-for-Night Shots: How the Illusion of Nighttime is Created in Scenes Photographed in the Daytime,” *American Cinematographer* (January 1961): 56.

rather than an essential aspect ... some critics claimed that tinting was vulgar and obscured photographic qualities, a claim sometimes made by critics in the silent era as well ... Philosophers held that color was not a primary, but, according to Descartes, a secondary accidental quality.”³²

Anxieties regarding supplementary color-effects were thus viewed by cinematographers and critics alike as threatening the aesthetic standing of their professional work and their reputation, at a moment in which cinematographers were lobbying for greater benefits and representative autonomy owing, precisely, to their artistic insights rather than their “mere” technical proficiency. As an example, let’s take another testimony from an anonymous technician describing day-for-night tactics in an article published in *American Cinematographer* in 1939. After mentioning how a “professional cinematographer” would simply “[use] infra-red sensitive film with a 23-filter” to film a night-effects scene during the day, the anonymous writer proceeds to qualify his statement, while also disparaging the article’s intended audience. The writer observes that “not enough of these night effects enter the province of substandard filming to make it worthwhile for any manufacturer to market a 16mm, or 8mm, infrared reversible film.”³³ He then proceeds by enumerating the various options available to “amateurs,” even though the piece is ostensibly aimed to other cinematographers seeking preliminary advice for medium to smaller-sized productions. The practical yet dismissive tone of the article can be detected to varying degrees across similar abridged “manuals” describing day-for-night in trade journals from the thirties to the mid-sixties. This derisive inflection would not seem so charged or consequential, however, were it not for *American Cinematographers’* pivotal role in legitimating cinematography as an art form, and elevating the “director of photography” in the public imaginary as an artist and craftsman whose aesthetic sensibilities were integral to the film industry.

³² Tom Gunning, “Where do Colors go at night?” in *Color and the Moving Image: History, Theory, Aesthetics, Archive*, eds. Simon Brown, Sarah Street, and Liz Watkins (New York: Routledge, 2013), 83.

³³ Anonymous, “Grabbing Night,” 371.

As Patrick Keating has argued, the status of the cinematographer began to shift as early as the 1920s due largely to a new public image that was discursively articulated through these guild journals: “the cinematographer had acquired a new public identity,” he suggests, “this new understanding was promoted by a particular institution: The American Society of Cinematographers. Through its monthly journal, *American Cinematographer*, the ASC crafted a compelling narrative about the development of a new kind of art – and a new kind of artist. No longer a laborer turning a crank, the cinematographer was a skilled professional making a valuable contribution to the cinema – a contribution that could best be described as aesthetic.”³⁴

It is thus striking that the disavowal of day–for–night was performed in the very space that first disseminated its technical properties, as the additive nature of this technique was at odds with the journal’s other purpose of consolidating the artistic legitimacy and professional prestige of the cinematographer. These articles thus reveal how the cinematographer’s legitimated identity was not only developed at the intersection of debates regarding cinema’s proper regime of aesthetic integrity and value, but it was rather the professional goals of cinematographers that largely managed and regulated these critical discourses. By presenting the director of photography as a “master of light” who expressively transcribes physical reality, the publication reflected its professional guild’s strategy of situating cinematography within the cultural continuum of “the high arts,” reifying cinema through a singular, and clearly defined medium – the control of film’s responsiveness to light and its indexical properties.

At the same time, however, a certain non–indexical virtuality also haunts nocturnal films shot *en plein air* in panchromatic film, even without their conversion into digital intermediates and outside of any use of additive color. As Sean Cubitt reminds us, “photographic black is the color of nonresponse, the absence of light.”³⁵ In other words, the high–contrast, and highly suggestive appearance of the rich and velvety blacks of film noirs is not a casual, indexical transcription of

³⁴ Patrick Keating, *Hollywood Lighting: From the Silent Era to Film Noir* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 15–16.

³⁵ Sean Cubitt, *The Practice of Light: A Genealogy of Visual Technologies from Prints to Pixels* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 39.

shadow. It is purely notational space, a material site of non-response that materializes into black during the developmental process, and which we retroactively interpret as profilmic darkness. “The photosensitive salts of silver used in photography react only to the presence of light, the shiny metallic salts responding to the brightest light by oxidizing and turning black,” Cubitt observes, adding that “these black molecules in the negative then shield the corresponding areas of the positive print from the light of the enlarger, so that they remain white, and areas where there was no light, and therefore no reaction, react by oxidation, turning black.”³⁶ In chapter 2 of this dissertation, I engage photochemical darkness in Claire Denis’ *35 Shots of Rum* and Yasujiro Ozu’s *Late Spring* (1949). In my reading, I aim to theorize photochemical nighttime beyond diegetically-determined signifiers of perdition and illicitness that we see in American *film noir*. Instead, I link the symbolic resonance of photochemical nighttime to its material basis as a site wherein no light or information is registered. In these contexts, the medium’s limited range at night is far from an aesthetic deficiency, as it reflects the film’s concern with social relations predicated on the refusal of paternalist, heteronormative, or neocolonial inheritance, and it thematizes the discursive blind spots and excisions of world cinema’s ideological and institutional conditions.

I develop these arguments and methodologies across four primary case studies. In what follows, I trace the discrete concerns of each of these chapters while also expanding my description of their scope towards the broader, thematic concerns of this study as a whole, addressing issues of precarious labor, digitality, globalization, and relational solidarities that the night draws our attention to in both recent cinema and throughout an interdisciplinary corpus of critical theory and material histories. In this vein, this study explores how spectacular nightscapes express and thematize the sensory modalities enabled by different media, but also how these representations link nocturnal publics to new perceptual thresholds. In fact, through its association with deviancy, counter intimacies, and illicit forms of border crossing, the night in the

³⁶ Ibid.

films I address gesture to alternative configurations of the social that default from capitalist, nationalist, neocolonial and heteronormative cartographies. As a result, this study engages critical orientations that are infrequently combined in film studies, aligning ontological questions on cinema's underlying materiality with feminist and queer epistemologies for reimagined possibilities for public culture and social life.

My first chapter traces how digitally–filmed nightscapes in Leos Carax's *Holy Motors* (2012) simultaneously reflect the uninterrupted temporal processes of late capitalism while also disarticulating our perception from their accelerated rhythms. The film follows the unforgiving work schedule of Monsieur Oscar (Denis Lavant) who embarks on a series of strange performances from the early morning to the very ends of the night. These episodic appointments require him to undergo a never–ending succession of physical transformations for some cryptic and potentially sinister purpose. In a certain reading, the film's diegetic conceit merely serves as an excuse to organize a procession of cinema's historic technologies and genres, from slapstick to the musical to the melodrama, and so on. But the trope of the 24–hour work day also attunes us to Oscar's fraying and exhaustion, evincing a sense of lived duration that reminds us that the digital's redefinition of cinematic form cannot be removed from the cognitive and physical labor that underpin its production. Critics have drawn a comparison between Lavant's virtuosic physicality and earlier modes of slapstick performance, an intertextual hailing that thematizes different stages of capitalist management. As has been repeatedly argued, slapstick's wayward and unruly body resists the mass–synchronization of Fordist/Taylorist capitalism by failing or refusing to adapt to its regulation of gesture and somatic rhythms for optimal industrial extraction.³⁷ Here, the indecipherable surplus value of Oscar's enigmatic, nonstop performances – the absence of any legible context for all this work – evinces the transformation of labor under late capital toward what Maurizio Lazzarato and Michael Hardt have described as its newly

³⁷ For an overview see Alex Clayton, *The Body in Hollywood Slapstick* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2007).

“immaterial” conditions.³⁸ This term reflects the precarious norms for employability under a neoliberal socioeconomic order in which workers subsist through flexible forms of contingent work in a cycle of economic uncertainty. Lazzarato has since revised his use of the word “immaterial” as an apt descriptor for these working conditions, arguing that the term diverts attention from the physical effects and material forms through which extractive exploitation still operates in accordance with earlier economic systems.

Through a similar metaphoric valence, the night in *Holy Motors* at first appears like an extraneous, empty space of darkness – in other words, an immaterial sphere. But throughout the film, the specific sensory affordances of its digital camera attunes us to the night as a diffuse but amorphous mode of substantiality. Through the hyper-photographic capacities of its digital camera, the night here is rendered not only through the darkness of a nocturnal visual field, but also through the sodium vapors of its orange street lighting, the respiration of cigarette smoke, and visual details such as particles of glitter and dust that the digital RED epic make eminently visible even in low light conditions. Simultaneously spectacular yet unremittingly dark, *Holy Motors’* night images extend uncommon visibility to nocturnal conditions of diffuse or sparse illumination. By soliciting our fascination, I argue that these nightscapes desync our perception from the unremitting activities unfolding in the film’s narrative, creating lingering intervals of observation incompatible with the speed of cognitive labor under late capitalism. Thus, in the context of a film about deregulated but often indeterminately defined labor, this chapter suggests that the texturally variegated form that the night assumes throughout the film provokes attention towards the consistently material terms and forces that are concealed under pat notions of “immateriality” and “dematerialization.” Here, these terms denote both labor conditions in the digital era but also in the discourse of digital cinema itself, which has often been characterized as decorporealized, insubstantial, and transcendent. Such an account, as I have already suggested,

³⁸ Maurizio Lazzarato, “Immaterial Labour,” in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, eds. Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 133–47.

is too simplistic, as it isolates the digital's ontology from the structural constraints and workflows of cinematic production through which it actually operates.

My second chapter moves from the digital to the photochemical in its focus on Claire Denis' *35 Shots of Rum* (2008), while also addressing mid-century Japanese cinematography through a discussion of the film's citational hailing of *Late Spring* (1949). Through this joint lens, the chapter returns to the question of how the night thematizes the permeable textuality through which auteurial self-inscription is signified across post-classical art cinema. But far from a route, reflexive gesture, I argue that Denis steers the fragmentary effects of allusion towards a reflection on the gendered and geopolitical valences that organize world cinema's institutional conditions. Based on Yasujiro Ozu's *Late Spring*, the film's narrative traces a daughter's devotion to her father (reflecting, in a certain reading, Denis' allegiance to Ozu). While Ozu's film, however, was racially homogeneous, Denis' film features an all-black cast of characters of Antillean and Senegalese origins, meta-textually reflecting the West African-raised Denis' association with diasporic and postcolonial cinema. Here, I redress the ways in which the critical reception of the film views the father-daughter bonds that structure the film's textual and meta-textual registers as a benign validation of paternal obedience.

Such a reading, I argue, disregards how paternal identification in the film is routinely directed towards a flirtatious appraisal of alternate parental forefathers, including the Senegalese auteur, Djibril Diop Mambéty (whose niece stars in the film), and the German director Reiner Werner Fassbinder (whose former wife Ingrid Caven plays a small but pivotal role towards the end of the film). In this way, I argue that nocturnality in the film inflects our understanding of citation's textual and symbolic operations beyond its conventional signification of permeability, extending it towards a supplementary register of meaning. The film's loitering movement between citations demands to be read, I argue, through the rhythmized promiscuity of sexual cruising, metaphorically recasting the film's citational field not only as one of multiplicitous fathers, rather than the unique and singular patriarch, but also through dynamics of incest metaphorically

encrypted in both *35 Shots* as well as *Late Spring*, and foregrounded more specifically in other films by Denis. By invoking the rhythmic movement between semi–occluded bodies at night, the film’s intertextuality gestures to world cinema as a realm of predominantly homosocial relations that might still be reimagined outside of paternal inheritance. My discussion thus builds on but also expands queer theory on cruising by interpreting it not as a visual or textual component of the film but rather as a strategy for registering and decrypting allusion’s symbolic valences.

Chapter Three focuses on nocturnal experiences of sleep, spectral apparitions, and lateness in two films by the filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul. The first part of the chapter addresses Apichatpong’s first digital feature–length, *Cemetery of Splendor*. Produced during Thailand’s military coup d’état in 2014, the film’s political allegory is organized around countervailing figurations of bewildered alertness and unwilling, narcoleptic slumber. Thus, if *Holy Motors* was concerned with the encroachment of daytime productivity and labor into the night, *Cemetery of Splendor* reverts this logic. Through the trope of narcolepsy, it asks what would happen if nighttime disrupted the terms through which diurnal social orders reproduced their appearance of seamless and natural givenness. In doing so, the film strives to disorganize the ideological and cultural terms that have revived a rhetoric of Thai exceptionalism grounded in the figure of the king.

This chapter also extends the discussion of the night as a metaphor for kinship and generational transmission from father–daughter dyads to aunting relations, focusing in particular on the film’s protagonist, Jen (played by Jenjira Pongpas), and her intergenerational bonds with her “nieces and nephews.” Here, the older aunt’s alliance with the night’s lateness and opacity is signified by her advancing age, her economic and social marginality, and the slower pace of her balance and gait resulting from her disability. But by virtue of her social positioning as an “aunt,” this alliance with the night is offered here as a temporal structure and conduit signaling an alternative vector for generational transmission and cultural reproduction outside of patrilinear or biologically reproductive logics.

In the second half of the chapter, I explore how the night in *Uncle Boonmee who can recall his past lives* (2010) signals the “lateness” of photochemical film and its processual vanishing from contemporary media environments. In the process of expressing film’s mortality, however, the night in *Uncle Boonmee* also showcases pre-digital simulation strategies, in particular day-for-night cinematography. In doing so, I trace how the film upends a tendency to conflate photochemical film with physical causality by revealing analog film’s oft-elided relationship to predigital virtual simulation. This discussion also opens into a discursive construction of “slow cinema” as the prevailing aesthetic idiom around which global art cinema has been institutionalized and marketed. By juxtaposing the overtly artificial chroma of day-for-night with a temporal register often described in terms of a realist ethos, I argue that the film contests how “slowness” in the reception of Asian filmmakers is often interpreted as a resistance against globalization that mobilizes a reactionary turn towards the timeless origins of the nation, a fantasy which the artificial chroma of day-for-night lays bare as a hallucinatory ruse.

In this study, “earth” denotes not just a particular, nocturnalized profilmic space but it also suggests how the specific localities and places these films evoke are inextricably linked and shaped by complex global relations. As John David Rhodes and Elena Gorfinkel have argued, “global totality cannot be thought without reckoning with local specificity. In other words, place, in its specific concreteness, does not act as a hurdle to abstract and generalizing thought but is instead the means through which such thought is able to articulate and materialize itself.”³⁹ I offer the night as a productive lens through which to think about the interconstitution of local cultures and transnational flows through both spatial as well as temporal axes. The cabbies in *Night on Earth* and *Collateral*, the immigrant nightshift drivers in *35 Shots of Rum*, the overtaxed laborers in *Holy Motors*, and the round-the-clock caretakers in *Cemetery of Splendor* evince what Sarah Sharma identifies as differential experiences of structural inequality that are experienced at the

³⁹ John David Rhodes and Elena Gorfinkel, *Taking Place: Location and the Moving Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), xv.

level of time.⁴⁰ The nocturnal labor force of these films are often immigrants or older workers who presumably lack the stable footing of secure retirement, exposing the occluded systems of maintenance through which the totalizing efficiency of capitalist time is maintained. In a more ludic, but nonetheless political, register, the forms of conviviality and intimacy that these films find at night express alternative forms of belonging and social presence that are excluded from the temporal loops of heteronormativity.

The organization of these chapters does not aspire towards comprehensive global representativeness, or its noble but ultimately doomed approximation, which only inevitably replicates blind spots. Instead, it offers four paradigms through which the transnational politics of national and world cinema have been approached, in order to critically reflect on the field's ordinal taxonomies. *Holy Motors'* exhausted protagonist invokes a paradigm of national cinema that is both beleaguered and enabled by foreign influences. It foregrounds how French cinema has functioned as a paradigm for the commodification of other national cinemas' marketing, as we can see in the succession of "waves" used to describe any local film cultures' successful circulation. *35 Shots of Rum* invokes domestic intimacy as well as gay sexual cruising as interacting, but also defractive, lenses through which to reflect upon the ways in which heterofamiliast and patriarchal ideologies often define and ennoble diasporic discourses, foreclosing their more radical politics. Lastly, the figures of sleep and the nocturnal aunty in the Thai cinema of Apichatpong Weerasethakul reflects upon the role of cinema in constituting but also potentially disorganizing the exceptionalist rhetoric of a nation that has avoided direct colonialism.

⁴⁰ Sarah Sharma, *In the Meantime: Temporality and Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

HOLY MOTORS AND THE DIGITAL NIGHT

“Look how beautiful Paris is tonight,” suggests the limousine chauffeur, Céline (Édith Scob), to her passenger, Oscar, precipitating one of *Holy Motors*' (2012) many striking visual compositions. Her directive incites a familiar self-reflexive trope of a screen-within-a-screen, a symbolic configuration of the relationship between spectator and the cinematic image. But rather than look out the vehicle's window, an element of *mise-en-scène* reflecting the moving image's frame as its most fundamental aspect, Oscar turns his gaze to a competing screen instead, a High Definition-monitor in the limousine's spacious interior. The first transmission displayed on this device offers a view of Paris that cues an unsettling visual register due to its unmistakably digital sheen whose vivid quality of eye-catching sharpness is rendered even more salient by the image's latitude in the dark. The image's extreme resolution crystallizes the stylized visuality routinely linked to Carax's auteurial signature while also evincing something paradigmatic about digital cinematography's relationship to the night in recent cinema. One critic, for instance, has described the otherworldly tenor of such digitally-mediated displays of nighttime, as seen in films as diverse as Tsai Ming-liang's *Stray Dogs* (2013) and David Fincher's *Zodiac* (2007), as “ineffably foreign.... lacking grain, imperfections, or flicker...simultaneously hyper- and sub-real.”⁴¹

But just as this hyper-photographic image begins to unsettle and reshape the perceptual standards of cinematic realism, the screen flashes into the green infrared outputs of night-vision devices. Later, this same device will show a visual field of tangible physical presence only to convert it into a dematerialized figuration of heat signatures otherwise imperceptible to the human eye. Such digital displays, at times congruent to human optics but also at turns exceeding them, relay different figurations of sensory phenomena that reflect back on the film's conditions of technological production. *Holy Motors*, in fact, is not only Carax's first full-length film in thirteen-years but also his first feature shot digitally, using the High-Definition Red EPIC Camera at 4K by

⁴¹ James Crawford, “Dark Matter: James Crawford on David Fincher's *Zodiac*,” *Reverse Shot*, April 26, 2008, http://reverseshot.org/archive/entry/69/david_fincher.

cinematographers Caroline Champetier and Yves Cape (who briefly succeeded Champetier when production went overschedule). While only marginally significant to the film's narrative development, these visually striking nightscapes, reflectively thematize *Holy Motors'* overarching concern with the existential relation between digital film aesthetics and physical reality, probing the epistemological and ontological distinctions to which the digital's technical premises give rise. At the same time, however, the night's association with opacity and occlusion aligns this aesthetic inquiry with a broader discourse on digital media's pervasive saturation of everyday life, what media theorists refer to as the "elemental" givenness and enveloping ubiquity of modern technology to everyday life.⁴² As a dark and encompassing ambience, therefore, the night serves as a metaphorical trope in the film for the inscrutable processes through which electronic digitality influences and reshapes our current social, political, and ecological life-worlds. By analogizing the sensory experience of the present, the night discloses a visual and conceptual space through which *Holy Motors* explores whether digital cinema can offer a conceptual or technical paradigm distinct from, and potentially resistant to, the ascendancy of digital data and its relation to the inhuman operating speed of neoliberal economic orders.

Addressing the post-celluloid status of cinema, numerous film theorists have framed the digital image's undergirding principles as world-liquidating rather than world-responsive, arguing that its basis in numerical code instead of photochemical emulsion renders it insubstantial, transcendent, and dematerialized, and thus limitlessly available to manipulation and reconstitution. Based on these technical premises, D.N. Rodowick, for instance, argues that the digital's "emerging ontology" is not based on "physical reality molded to the imaginary ... but the free reign of the imaginary in the creation of images *ex nihilo* that can simulate effects of the physical world (gravity, friction, causation) while also overcoming them."⁴³ Rodowick's widely-circulated contention is grounded in the technical procedures distinguish analogic from digital

⁴² Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker, *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

⁴³ D.N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 104.

processes that are worth summarizing in this context. In analog transcription, the physical world imprints itself through light on the film-strip – what art history and film studies describe in terms of the semiotic concept of the index – thus establishing a material and temporal continuity between a photographic representation and its profilmic referent.⁴⁴ Digital images, in turn, might resemble their originating source in the world, but the processes by which they register that environment is not physically continuous but fragmented across their digital hardware’s modular structures. Lev Manovich, one of the first scholars to systematically outline these operational distinctions, asserts that the visual structure of digital recording recasts the cinematic image as a subsidiary effect of a broader media convergence such that it no longer constitutes an autonomous physical entity in its own right. In Manovich’s view, the technical premise of digital cinema reverses the traditional sequence of filmmaking’s workflows, rendering the encounter between an apparatus and the profilmic world a secondary rather than primary phenomenon, since “in digital filmmaking, shot footage is no longer the final point it is merely raw material to be manipulated on a computer, where the real construction of a scene will take place.”⁴⁵ Building on these earlier observations, Markos Hadjioannou frames the disparities between analog and digital filmmaking as tensions relevant not only to cinema’s self-definition but also to the ethical bond between image and reality. Sharing Rodowick’s interest in film as the articulation of existential and ethical predicaments, Hadjiannou argues that celluloid film’s principle of physical causality ensures that “celluloid cinema ... enables a realization on the part of the spectator of her or his existential position within the world and so qualifies an ethical implication in the image as the potential for responding to, and acting in, the world.”⁴⁶ In contrast, due to the fragmentation of physical and

⁴⁴ See also Tom Gunning, “Moving Away from the Index: Cinema and the Impression of Reality,” *differences* 18, no. 1 (2007): 29–52.

⁴⁵ Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 291.

⁴⁶ Markos Hadjioannou, *From Light to Byte: Towards an Ethics of Digital Cinema* (St. Paul, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 177.

temporal continuity upon which digital filmmaking relies, he concludes that “the digital seems unable to conjure up an image of the world as an existential guarantee.”⁴⁷

In a certain reading, *Holy Motors* seems aligned with critical positions that lament the lost evidentiary guarantee of photochemical film, a view that would thus link the agitated and restless pace of its narrative to digital filmmaking’s diminished or merely incidental relation to evidentiary truth. The film’s diegetic unity, in fact, continuously comes undone, such that the parameters of the reality it designates appear disorienting, opaque, and permanently unresolved as if to reflect the digital image’s intrinsic plasticity or purported lack of material closure. Willfully disorienting and unstable, the film’s narrative conceit follows Oscar (Dennis Lavant) as he is ferried in a white limousine by his attentive chauffeur, Céline (Édith Scob), through a hectic succession of bizarre appointments. Each of these appointments requires him to drastically alter his appearance through costumes and prosthetics so that his limousine doubles as an absurdly-equipped storage unit and dressing room. While the precise function behind this unremitting schedule remains an abiding mystery, even by the film’s conclusion, a few key incidents hint at the sinister scope of their overriding purpose. After one of Oscar’s appointments goes awry, he is met by his imposing supervisor (Michel Piccoli) in the back of the limousine, indicating that these appointments are surveilled not only by an indiscernible audience but also by undetectable cameras. Impatient with senior management’s interference, however, Oscar breaks from an expected display of forced contrition to express his frustration regarding the inscrutable devices recording his work: “I miss the cameras. When I was young, they used to be heavier than us. Then they became smaller than our heads. Now you can’t see them at all.” This exchange crystallizes *Holy Motors*’ repeated connection of its digital conditions to a broader discourse of digital media’s pervasive, and often macro-sensorial, scope and reach. Towards the end of the film, another scene develops this generic concern with networked media’s opacity into a more explicit interrogation of its impact on

⁴⁷ Ibid.

the sensory–physiological schema of human bodies; especially through their organization of unsustainable demands for uninterrupted connectivity.

After the end of their long workday, we witness Céline drop Oscar home. But in what is perhaps the film’s most unsettling twist, she does not leave him in front of the mansion where he emerged at the beginning of the film in a business suit surrounded by his children and armed guards. Instead, he now dons the generic clothes of an everyman and, hunched over by fatigue, enters a different house to meet a different family who also happen to be apes (a humorous send–up of technogenesis, the notion that human life is co–evolving alongside modern media). Here we learn the devastating truth that Oscar knows no respite from performative labor, even in his sleep, and that the next day and night will merely reactivate this Sisyphean process of hectically moving through impermanent identities. For Jonathan Crary, the current debasement of sleep as a self–evident and inviolable right for workers becomes paradigmatic to the virulent expansion of technological networks not only in terms of their spatial, but also their temporal, extension, encroaching into zones of nighttime withdrawal once exempt from capitalist oversight and extraction.⁴⁸ That sleep for Oscar constitutes no meaningful interlude from corporate control serves as a hyperbole for networked technology’s unceasing activity and ubiquitous surveillance of planetary life; a phenomena so widely–observed, accepted, and even naturalized that a pervasive, and somewhat resigned, paranoia can be said to constitute an affective commons for our sentient social presence.

There are thus compelling motives to read *Holy Motors*’ narrative conceit as an analogy to what numerous critics identify as digital filmmaking’s emergent ontology – in terms of both the digital apparatus’ relation to the world it witnesses and relays, as well as the unprecedented ways in which the powerful ordinal forms of electronic digitality have become increasingly occluded from human perception. Within this framework, the range of cinematic allusions Oscar’s body materializes – from the slapstick performer’s refusal of Taylorist optimization to the macabre

⁴⁸ Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (New York: Verso Books, 2013).

excess of Grad Guignol all the way to CGI motion capture – act as a cipher for cinematic lineages of technological and cultural remediation. But this materialization of corporeal limits also bespeaks cinema's uncertain relevance in a broader context of digital convergence. As the day's demands on Oscar increasingly fray his body and psyche, it is as if the felt endurance of his labor begins to express our doubts regarding cinema's long-term capacity to endure within conditions of aggressively wholesale digitization. While digital networks in many ways extend cinematic culture by facilitating its dissemination across heterogeneous platforms (and channels of transmission both institutional and illicit), for critics like Rodowick and Hadjioannou these systems also threaten to subsume cinema's conceptual and material specificities into the undifferentiated miasma of numerical abstraction. Read through these coordinates, the drastic dissimilarities between each of Oscar's appointments would thus symbolize a range of operations repeatedly aligned with digital protocols: the attenuation of analog processes into numerical notation, the ease and speed with which electronic images can be translated and transmitted across different media, and the intrinsically mutable and manipulable structure of the digital image's computational base.

By that same token, the film's hectically episodic pace, underscored by Oscar's spasmodic fluctuations between energy and exhaustion, would thus also thematize the neurological configurations emerging in response to the overwhelming saturation of our current audiovisual sphere by virtual images. Addressing this technological reconfiguration of attention in the digital era, N. Katherine Hayles has conceptualized the interplay between emergent cognitive styles and more established habits of critical and reflexive attention. Coining the term "hyperattention," in contradistinction to close or deep modes of awareness, Hayles contends that this cognitive disposition "is useful for its flexibility in switching between different information streams, its quick grasp of the gist of material, and its ability to move rapidly among and between

different kinds of text.”⁴⁹ Rather than pitting close and hyper-reading in antagonistic tension, Hayles explores possibilities for their mutually-enforcing alliance. Devising modes of synergy between these seemingly incompatible forms of thought, she argues, enables a finer and more self-reflexive responsiveness to the structures of emerging works across a range of media that already “instantiate the cognitive shift in their aesthetic strategies,” thus demonstrating how “critical interpretation is not above or outside the generational shift of cognitive modes but necessarily located within it.”⁵⁰ Reading *Holy Motors* through Hayles’ suggestive paradigm, the “hyper” in the film’s aesthetic system seems readily manifest in the film’s restless mutations and rabid citational allusions that demand a constant, indefatigable scanning but little sustained engagement. The film’s correlating components that instead solicit the kind of deep attention “essential for coping with complex phenomena such as mathematical theorems, challenging literary works, and complex compositions,” appear correspondingly elusive, inhering in the visually seductive, but also disquieting and unfamiliar, intensity of its digital aesthetics.⁵¹

Critical responses to *Holy Motors*, in fact, repeatedly match its sensuousness to a correlating experience of intellectual consternation, to cite but some of the reviews, the film is “balls-to-the-wall crazy, beautiful and unbelievably strange”⁵² “confounding but on every level that matters a work of unfettered—and liberating—imagination,”⁵³ “weird and wonderful, rich and strange – barking mad.”⁵⁴ The film’s moments of visual inventiveness strike a decidedly oneiric tone, conjuring stylized formal compositions and textural affectivities over semantic or symbolic legibility: the serpentine arabesques of CGI monsters copulating, the contrapuntal textures of a

⁴⁹ N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2012), 72.

⁵⁰ N. Katherine Hayles, “Hyper and Deep Attention: The Generational Divide in Cognitive Modes,” *Profession* (2007): 197–198.

⁵¹ Hayles, “How We Think,” 72.

⁵² Eric Kohn, “Leos Carax Makes a Nutty Comeback With ‘Holy Motors,’ But Don’t Expect Easy Answers,” *IndieWire*, May 23, 2012, https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/holy_motors/.

⁵³ David Edelstein, “Virgin Immobile,” *New York Magazine*, October 8, 2012, <http://nymag.com/movies/reviews/the-sessions-holy-motors-edelstein-2012-10/>.

⁵⁴ Peter Bradshaw, “Cannes 2012–Holy Motors: Review,” *The Guardian*, May 23, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2012/may/23/holy-motors-review>.

rubber mask against the pallor of white hair, the undulating camerawork tracking a rambunctious gang of musicians in a candle-lit church. Such visually-striking moments appear all the more uncanny as they emerge unmotivated by any narrative or strictly symbolic context. Thus, through the lens of their shared disruptive excess, it might be tempting to read the film's visual style and its episodic transmutations as synched, rather than countervailing, forces. But by serving as an immersive mode of visual spectacle, the film's highly stylized aesthetics repeatedly stall the progressive march of the film's narrative itinerary. However fragmented its diegetic field might appear, in fact, the forward progress of the film's narrative is insistently propelled by the speed and stamina demanded by Oscar's labor. In other words, the spectacular viscosity of the cinematic image works in tension with the temporality of the film's episodic pace. By soliciting our fascination, *Holy Motors'* stylized images arrest our cognitive compliance to the narrative's temporal progress and thus decelerate our attention, de-syncing it from the speed of Oscar's nonstop activities. In doing so, they distort the unremitting rapidity of his work, inducing moments of dilated fascination akin to the cognitive process Hayles ties to a deep attentiveness; a lingering interval of astonished yet probing attendance incompatible with the hectic operating speeds of cognitive labor demanded by the sped-up pace of deregulated capitalism.

While such a reflexive correspondence between aesthetic form and social reality is hardly unconventional, it is the film's *excessive* address to the eye that seems at odds with a prevailing tendency in critical media studies to foreclose representational images from addressing the effects of digital culture. Given the aesthetic image's lingering association with a framed and fulsome viscosity, in fact, its structural devaluation in media discourses is repeatedly linked to a crisis of faith in optical perception in light of interlinked dynamics working on different measures of scale. The first of these misgivings ties the digital image's underlying computational structure to its compromised relation to objective truth. As the digital image's base inheres in abstract numerical operations, its detractors argue that it lacks material closure, such that images "can no longer be guaranteed as visual truth—or even as signifiers with stable meaning and value," as

W.J.T Mitchell has succinctly observed.⁵⁵ As a result, digital images are deemed incapable of offering a stable or coherent structure through which we might decode or perceive the organizing premises of digital networks. Such concerns thus extend into a broader conviction, exceeding the question of digital images as such, that the powerful ordering principles of digital capital and surveillance function at such a distance from human perception that human optics are too limited in scope to offer any tangible insight into their workings.⁵⁶ To this end, recent studies probing the activities, environmental ramifications, and material origins of technical media have frequently aligned themselves with explicitly anti-aesthetic and anti-visual discourses. In these debates, the digital image's discursive value, when it is hailed at all, merely serves as a signifier for the illusory, the outmoded, or as a symbol of voided authority.⁵⁷

For instance, while deeply invested in the relation between digitization and corporeal sentience, Mark Hansen asks why, "given the disjunction between surface appearance and materiality, do we continue to associate a given set of numerical coordinates or of information with a visually perceivable form?"⁵⁸ In his powerful study on the relation between media technologies, natural resources, and labor exploitation, Jussi Parikka, in turn, frames the critical leverage of "new materialism" as a "term recently suggested to counter the overemphasis on meaning, representation, and signification" that "reminds that we are facing a variety of materialisms."⁵⁹ Similarly, Hunter Vaughan has recently described the "material turn in eco-criticism [as] a shift in current eco-critical approaches to focus less on the problems of representation and more on the concrete environmental consequences of film culture, from

⁵⁵ W.J.T Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 57.

⁵⁶ See for instance Mark B.N. Hansen, *Feed Forward: On the Future of Twenty-first Century Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014); James J. Hodge, "Digital Psycho: Dedramatizing the Historical Event," *Critical Inquiry* 43, no. 4 (Summer 2017): 839–860.

⁵⁷ For different perspectives on this condition see Olivier Asselin et al., eds, *Precarious Visualities: New Perspectives on Identification in Contemporary Art and Visual Culture* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008).

⁵⁸ Mark B.N. Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 8–9.

⁵⁹ Jussi Parikka, *A Geology of Media* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2015), 97.

production methods to marketing discourse.”⁶⁰ Addressing recent trends in multisensory installations, Jill Bennett in turn observes that the artificial materialization of atmospheric conditions “offers a way of re–imagining a material connection between the space of an installation and the space of the world outside; in other words, a means of thinking through the ‘content’ of mediated immersive experience and its links to real world ecology without resorting to the language of representation.”⁶¹ While these critics arrive at debates on digital technology from varying points of interest, they all contest a cybernetic rhetoric of digital culture as a virtual realm transcending material or physical constraints. In arguing for a reconceptualized and reinvigorated approach to materiality in media studies, however, their positions all orbit around a shared assumption regarding the diminished force of the visual image, and the correlating need to deemphasize optical experience as a heuristic tool for facing the world’s most pressing problems. Given its digital conditions of production and circulation, the representational image, in their view, either diverts attention from the coordinating powers of technological networks, or appears too materially or culturally complicit with the environmentally and socially–ruinous orders in which it is embedded to leverage any credible opposition. Thus in these critics’ highly generative and urgent interventions, questions of aesthetic visibility are not merely elided, but this elision serves to rhetorically stake what is supposedly a more meaningful engagement with either (1) the alternative sensory modalities to which digitality gives rise or (2) models of “distant” analysis that visualize patterns across vast amounts of data, which deprioritize the close and singular in favor of the remote and multitudinous.⁶²

In a corresponding turn, film scholars still committed to the enduring force of the image in the digital era, such as Dudley Andrew and Homa King, argue that its critical potential lies in the

⁶⁰ Hunter Vaughan, “‘500,000 Kilowatts of Stardust’: An Ecomaterialist Reframing of Singin’ in the Rain” in *Sustainable Media: Critical Approaches to Media and Environment*, eds. Nicole Starosielski and Janet Walker (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2016), 24–25.

⁶¹ Jill Bennett, “Atmospheric Affects” in *Carnal Aesthetics: Transgressive Imagery and Feminist Politics*, eds. Bettina Papenburg and Marta Zarzycka (London and New York: IB Tauris, 2013), 111.

⁶² Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (New York: Verso Books, 2013).

extent to which it can develop aesthetic strategies and political concerns negating the digital ontology from which it emerges. While privileging different aesthetic discourses, both critics suggest that by emphasizing corporeal materiality or the discovery of profilmic contingencies, filmmakers working within digital premises can recover an embodied and phenomenological value for the digital image that works against its dematerialized premises.⁶³ But in exploring both the world and its own technical underpinnings, *Holy Motors'* images do not serve as ciphers for denigrated visuality or ideological deception, nor is their disclosive force or sensory address at odds with their insistently digital qualities.

As film scholars tend to define digital cinema through its most extreme abilities – simulation, mutation, invisible montage – and accordingly focus on big–budget studio productions, this emphasis has come at the expense of addressing the more ordinary, financially–constrained modes of filmmaking associated with independent or art cinema. In these contexts, the image, to all extents and purposes, is determined by the technics of the apparatus, the creative outlook of the filmmaking team, but especially the surrounding environment it records, while undergoing little retouching or manipulation beyond color correction in post–production. As a result, when simply mediating the physical world, the impact of digital imaging on the sensory perception of the spectator remains underexplored in film studies, and with it, the specific existential predicaments the digital's qualities might substantialize and pose through their phenomenological address.

In arguing for the expressive continuities between digital filmmaking and indexical photography, Philip Rosen, for instance, observes that “digital information and images can have indexical origins, the digital often appropriates or conveys indexical images, and it is common for the digital image to retain compositional forms associated with indexicality.”⁶⁴ While I agree with

⁶³ Dudley Andrew, *What Cinema Is! Bazin's Quest and its Charge* (Chichester, West Sussex, U.K.; Malden, MA: Wiley–Blackwell, 2010); Homay King, *Virtual Memory: Time Based Art and the Dream of Digitality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

⁶⁴ Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 314.

the overall arc of Rosen's observation, reading his statement through the lens of *Holy Motors* puts pressure on the notion of "compositional form" as the sole or even primary term through which a camera's engagement with the world, and its extension of a photographic ethos, might be revealed. While questions of form – as that which gives shape to matter, as a bounded and organizing enclosure, as the visible structure of a composition – define our most basic understanding of the representational image, the digital's hyperclarity brings to the fore less tangible but nonetheless pervasive elements of the image's sensate textures: atmospheric or sensory traits such as shadows both deep and diaphanous, registers of urban light from neon signs, as well as the sodium and tungsten vapors produced by street lamps. The aesthetic difference of digital images is thus most visible in its mediation of immaterial but nonetheless perceptible qualities – such as clarity, precision, resolution, sheen – that in turn mediate the appearance of compositional forms without, however, constituting an objectal presence in their own right.

This isn't to say, of course, that digital images possess textural or affective qualities to a greater or superior degree than photochemical film. Arguments to preserve celluloid film are in fact grounded in the unique sensory pleasure it affords and which we risk losing, such as the chromatic spectrum of different stocks, or the granular size respective to different intensities of light. But if technologies add their own expressive layer to the image, and to the physical reality they mediate, the visual patina of the digital appears more uncertain and unsettling, and thus more conspicuous, as it defaults from perceptual conventions established by existing media prototypes. Even an advocate of digital cinema, like Stephen Prince, prefers digital films like *Zodiac* whose dark tonalities nonetheless subscribe to a more traditional, which is to say photochemical, feel. Fincher's film displays a nightscape "where blacks are rich, deep, and dark" compared to *Collateral* [Note: I introduce this film in the dissertation introduction] wherein the "ability of video to see into shadows and its hyper-clarity" translate zones of nighttime traditionally relayed as undifferentiated blackness into areas that are "gray and semi-transparent, turning the

night into a kind of milky film that hangs over the city.”⁶⁵ And yet while Prince finds this translucent quality unappealing, Simon Rothöhler, conversely, views it as visually arresting and revelatory. “In the areas where 35mm registers a deep, rich black, HD reveals a world full of different shapes and shadows,” he observes. In his view, the sensory intensity of the HD night spectacularly unsettles conventional delineations between visibility and blindness, thus materializing a distinctly digital aesthetic that “points towards an epistemological problem in film studies: visual analyses need to be geared to the specific media in question and can no longer tacitly assign the role of the privileged image to projected 35mm (thus implying that all other identities of the image are derivative).”⁶⁶ Both Rothöhler and Prince are exacting about the technical specifics behind the HD image, and thus their conflicting assessments of the same film reveal their underlying critical investments rather than any common or obvious standard of visual pleasure. Prince valorizes the digital’s extension of existing perceptual conventions, while Rothöhler argues for critical epistemologies responsive to the digital’s aesthetic and technical discontinuities from analog media. But this misfire between their views also shows how standards of perceptual realism and aesthetic merit in film studies do not inhere in the underlying technical base of an image in any absolute way. Such valuative concepts emerge, rather, as unstable discursive sites that are constantly renegotiated as new sensory configurations are verified and compared against existing standards of perception articulated and established by earlier media.

Considerable critical space has aimed to identify *Holy Motors*’ most significant intertexts, as the film is saturated by allusions to earlier cinema.⁶⁷ However, the film’s citation of *Collateral* remains unexplored in critical responses to the film, despite their overwhelming similarities on narrative and production levels. Both narratives, for instance, are structured around a series of

⁶⁵ Stephen Prince, *Digital Visual Effects in Cinema: The Seduction of Reality* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 81.

⁶⁶ Simon Rothöhler, “Where Film Drops Off: Michael Mann’s High-Definition Cinema” in *Screen Dynamics: Mapping the Borders of Cinema*, eds. Gertrud Koch et al. (Vienna: Österreichisches Filmmuseum and Synema, Gesellschaft für Film und Medien, 2012), 143.

⁶⁷ See for instance the special issue of the online journal *Lola*, particularly Nicole Brenez et al., “Hail Holy Motors: Part 1” and Lauren Bliss et al., “Hail Holy Motors: Part 2,” *Lola: Issue 3 Masks* (December 2012) http://www.lolajournal.com/3/hail_holy_motors_1.html.

appointments executed over a single day. In *Collateral*, Tom Cruise plays a contract killer moving from one job to the next, while Oscar's performances also suggest a sequence of "hit jobs." In both cases, the urgency of meeting a predetermined deadline also acts as the films' narrative motor. Both films also foreground the moving vehicle as an intervening medium connecting each node in the killer/actor's schedule while also allowing for the transaction of affective labor between passenger and driver. While in *Collateral* the structural disparities between cabbie and fare are analogized through their racial difference, in *Holy Motors* the sense of professional boundaries between Céline and Oscar is visually reflected in their differing age and gender (Dennis Lavant was in his early fifties at the time of filming, Édith Scob was in her mid-seventies). In each film, the episodic-nature of their schedule serves as a formal device to display spectacular vignettes of their respective cities (Los Angeles and Paris) which are rendered into animate, and sensorially overwhelming presences by the digital's sharpness and indiscriminate attunement to different intensities of urban light. As I discussed in the introduction, *Collateral* was a historic landmark in digital cinematography, for while there are several antecedents of feature-length films shot digitally, these works largely strived to mimic the perceptual imprint of a photochemical surface. Conversely, as Rothöhler argues, *Collateral* paved the path for films "[engaging] more specifically with the aesthetic difference of high-definition," and practices wherein digital cinematography's particular and unique optics play a determinate role in thematizing the film's conceptual concerns and phenomenological address. As if to accentuate this very difference, Mann turned to the Thompson-Viper camera for the film's nighttime exteriors while filming interiors on 35mm. This juxtaposition serves to propel each medium's expressive qualities into visibility while also aligning the digital with the atmospheric address of the night sky and the nocturnal city's illuminated urban landscape. In hailing *Collateral* as an intertext, *Holy Motors* thus incorporates the earlier film's narrative design and technical history into its own aesthetic structure, forecasting the centrality of the night as a visual image and metaphorical trope in the film that visualizes the specific affordances of digital cinematography.

While numerous critics have aimed to identify and decode recurring motifs within *Holy Motors*' spectacular eclecticism, little attention has been paid to its depictions of nighttime spaces. This omission is surprising given how the night provides the film with its most consistent sensory interface, assures us of the diegetic progress of durational time, and throws the obscene deregulation of Oscar's and Céline's working hours into relief. The night thus serves as a visual image, narrative milieu, and symbolic conceit but, as an enveloping atmospheric environment, it also blurs the discrete distinctions between these critical functions and merges them into a unified sensory continuum. Through and within the night, *Holy Motors* links the singularity of its aesthetic experience to the technical and cultural dimensions of its digital optics, making this mimetic relation the central object of the film's concern and the organizing premise of its aesthetic design.

While Carax and Champetier initially considered shooting *Holy Motors* on a mix of silver–nitrate and 16mm, they ultimately opted for the Red EPIC digital camera. This decision was motivated not merely by budgetary issues but, more specifically, due to the many nocturnal scenes the script demanded.⁶⁸ Since “practically the entire film was filmed at night–time,” Champetier notes that “Super 16 at 400 or 500 ISO couldn't hold up to the sensitivity of the Epic's sensor in low light and its rendering of black.”⁶⁹ Sophisticated HD Cameras like the Red, in fact, possess extremely light–responsive sensors that can register an enormous amount of data in their inputs, even in conditions of darkness. As a result, much of the look of the film arises from Carax embracing the Red's specific operational capacities, as Champetier notes that “Leos wanted to push the Red EPIC to the very limits of its abilities to film in darkness.”⁷⁰ In fact, given the camera's intrinsic technical inclinations, Champetier set a lower ISO (640) for the nighttime scenes than the daylight scenes (800), in order to minimize the amount of noise registered by the

⁶⁸ Caroline Champetier quoted in François Reumont, “Cinematographer Caroline Champetier, AFC, Discusses Her Work on *Holy Motors* by Leos Carax,” *AFC Cinema*, July 18, 2012 <http://www.afcinema.com/Cinematographer-Caroline-Champetier-AFC-discusses-her-work-on-Holy-Motors-by-Leos-Carax.html?lang=fr>.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

camera's already hyper-receptive sensor.⁷¹ "It seems to me that these digital camera sensors literally feed off of light," she observes "Sometimes, a single point of light in the frame enables the image to come to life, even in the deepest darkness."⁷² These technical decisions are thus significant not only for clarifying the specific procedural capacities of digital cameras but also for how they calibrate *Holy Motors'* reassessment of physical reality to encompass atmospheric and affective dynamics frequently excluded from conceptions of materiality.

Following Champetier's statements, in *Holy Motors*, the Red's low-light capacities and resolution revises a conventional understanding of aerial space as empty, and attunes us instead to nocturnal atmosphere as an admixture of gaseous suspensions and diffuse, almost imperceptible, conditions of luminosity that give variability and texture to shadows. In doing so, *Holy Motors'* digital nightscapes demand a finer and more reflexive description of atmospheric space, as film theory has tended to sideline the indeterminate properties and baseline attributes of air and luminosity in favor of the concrete, physical enclosures of bodies and objects. As Elizabeth Povinelli reminds us, however, distinctions between affective and environmental microclimates and the bounded materialities of the world are not an ontological given but rather a metaphysical construct critical theory has repeatedly aimed to unsettle. Synthesizing the thought of several theorists, including Judith Butler, Rosi Braidotti, Elizabeth Grosz, and Brian Massumi, Povinelli observes how their writings "rejected the understanding of substance as embedded in a hierarchy of being in which being has a primary sense (substance) and a secondary sense (qualities, quantities, relations, and modalities of substance)."⁷³ Rather than desubstantializing our engagement with physical reality, this framework, I suggest, helps us understand the political and exegetical force of digital cinematography at night. By bringing "substance" and "qualities" into a similar plane of perceptual equivalence, in fact, *Holy Motors'* digital night recalibrates consciousness to a threshold of atmospheric visibility coterminous with the world's perceptual

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Elizabeth Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 106.

objects.

The film's visual substantiation of air and its gaseous suspensions, as well as mediating traits of the camera such as resolution and sheen, also analogizes a distinct yet conjoined understanding of ambience in terms of an affective environment, a collectively-held sense or feeling that permeates our relation to the now. For the critics of digital media I have surveyed, that sense relates paradoxically to a waning of sensibility – the diminished power of human perception in the face of occluded techniques of digital control and surveillance. In a certain reading, therefore, the night's darkness would merely symbolize an incapacitated agency linked to blindness. And yet this loss of sensibility also coincides with the emergence of other saturating affects that currently define the atmospheric commons of the present, such as dread, paranoia, or melancholia, but also reinvigorated solidarities across lines of race, class, and human-nonhuman distinctions, propelled by a recognition of a shared but differentially distributed vulnerability. However modest or localized, such affective reciprocities can incite the potential for new organizations of life particularly in adverse or depleted circumstances. I thus propose that *Holy Motors'* digitally-mediated reordering of perception – its heightened but by no means totalizing visual access to the night – insists on keeping a hold of the sensual experience of optical vision, as an uncertain but potentially resistant mode of world-responsiveness and world-making. In doing so, I track how the film's reconfiguration of nocturnal perception works in concert with the affects associated with the night, such as exhaustion, exposure, occlusion, and a dialectic of belatedness and emergence.

Reading through these coordinates, my analysis in the rest of this chapter draws on Jonathan Flatley's concept of "affective mapping." Flatley's model revises and expands Fredric Jameson's famous and endlessly debated formulation of a cognitive map, a framework that would allow the subject to coordinate partial and fragmented views into an overriding sense of how they relate to systems so broad and removed from perceptual apprehension they elude proper

representability.⁷⁴ In Elena Gorfinkel and John David Rhodes' pithy take on this notion, for instance, they observe that spaces for Jameson "even specific places, become the grounds for a thinking of totality, even if that thinking will always be a thinking of that totality's unrepresentability."⁷⁵ Flatley's model, however, supplants the distanced remove of this strategy with a more self-accounting reflection of how affective particularities shape our relation to given social structures, including media environments. "We always bring with us a range of intentions, beliefs, desires, moods, and affective attachments," Flatley writes, "hence our spatial environments are inevitably imbued with the feelings we have about the places we are going, the things that happen to us along the way, and the people we meet, and these emotional valences, of course, affect how we create itineraries."⁷⁶

Through this framework I explore how affective investments in media's waning materialities, and its shifting social functions and contexts, shape the rhetoric around which its new iterations emerge and are discursively received. To this end, the rest of the chapter is organized around three "affective dialectics" emblemized by the night in three different scenes. I first proceed to a discussion of fatigue/energy through *Holy Motors'* centerpiece filmed in La Samaritaine, which features a surprising appearance by the pop star Kylie Minogue, here serving as a short hand for the digital's association with commodity fetishism. Addressing the night as a space of transition and descent, the chapter then moves to a discussion of ideality/shame as it is elaborated in the film's recurring motif of father-and-daughter relations. This inter-generational but cross-sex dyad, I argue, reflects the ruptures and continuities between an established history of photochemical film and an emergent digital aesthetic. Lastly, I end with a coda focusing on the figure of Céline as an embodiment of the night, connecting her figuration throughout the film to a

⁷⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).

⁷⁵ John David Rhodes and Elena Gorfinkel, "Introduction: The Matter of Places" in *Taking Place: Location and the Moving Image*, eds. John David Rhodes and Elena Gorfinkel (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2011), xiv.

⁷⁶ Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2008), 77–78.

political and aesthetic discourse of a spectacular “digital opacity” – an oscillation between exposure/occlusion – through which we might counteract biometric technics of control. While most critical takes on the film have focused almost exclusively on Oscar as a cipher for cinema, my analysis is thus more oriented towards the film’s female figures. Through this emphasis, I explore how an implicitly gendered rhetoric informs misgivings about digital aesthetics and structures film theory’s prevailing understandings of genealogy and descent that the night, as a time–space of transition, allows us to see.

The Night as Mediasphere and Medium

The atmospheric turn in media studies mobilizes the elemental notion of “atmospheric” in several distinct but interoperative ways that are worth parsing in relation to *Holy Motors*, and the twenty–first century night image more broadly. Firstly, thinking media in analogy with atmosphere, as I have already explored, evokes how digital technologies operate as a ubiquitous and perennially vigilant superstructure, such that their computational flows saturate the field of social existence. Framing digital media as atmospheric casts it as an immanent and immersive ecology, the ambient default enabling but also delimiting our sense of autonomous movement within social relations and systems of governance. As a surrounding but largely intangible quality of experience, the notion of media as atmospheric connotes how the activities of networked technologies operate at a remove from overt human cognition and are felt, rather, as the diffuse and semi–conscious abstraction of this operational opacity. As Hansen has observed, “given that computation processes occur at time frames well below the thresholds constitutive of human perceptual experience, they seem to introduce levels of operability that impact our experience without yielding any perceptual correlate.”⁷⁷ Drawing and expanding on Hansen’s work, James Hodge has recently argued that much new media artwork responds to “the pervasive ordinary opacity of digital media”⁷⁸ through which it is structurally mediated, such that its “power derives

⁷⁷ Mark B.N. Hansen, *On the Future of Twenty–First Century Media* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2014), 4.

⁷⁸ Hodge, *Digital Psycho*, 842.

from its capacity precisely to render sensible the insensible operation of digital technologies. New media art thus grants critical and aesthetic form immanent to the very transformation it addresses.”⁷⁹ Through their aesthetic singularity, moreover, new media works do not only connect our sensuous faculties to the inconceivably vast totality of occluded digital flows. They also link the first definition of “atmosphere,” signifying the immanent and largely intangible extension of media operations, to its secondary inflection, in which an atmospheric imaginary expands the framework through which an individual medium’s specific parameters are configured. By interconnecting different scales of media structure, the atmospheric night emerges as both a critical metaphor and perceptual field that probes and visualizes the relation between the concept of the individual medium to a more abstract engagement with media as an ambient commons.

Approaching an individual medium’s formal technics through the enveloping membrane of the night positions questions of spectatorial affect, labor, exhibition, and social extension as integral components of its specific agency, rather than as secondary or collateral effects. In her recent work on early Chinese cinema, Weihong Bao repeatedly questions the self–enclosure linked to the notion of medium specificity. Through her concept of an “affective medium,” Bao foregrounds the centrality of limit–defying properties such as affect, resonance, and sensation for film theorists responding to the historic emergence of cinema in early twentieth–century China. As a result, she extends understandings of cinema beyond the technical properties of discrete apparatuses into “a notion of the medium as a *mediating environment* that not only redraws individual medium boundaries in an empirical sense but, in an attempt to transcend such boundaries, exploits the continuity between space, affect, and matter while reconnecting body, collectivity, and technology.”⁸⁰ In a complementary vein, but in an entirely different historical and geographic context, Antonio Somani has excavated the underexplored but critical distinction between *Medium* (medium) and *Apparat* (apparatus) in Walter Benjamin’s influential writings on

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Weihong Bao, *Fiery Cinema: The Emergence of an Affective Medium in China, 1915–1945* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 6.

the mass–mediation of perception. Somani argues that translations of Benjamin have obfuscated and conflated the specific valences of these closely related but distinct concepts in his work on mass subjectivity and the history of perception. To this end, Somani qualifies moments in Benjamin's writing in which "medium" should be understood as *Apparat*, implying the specific technological configurations shaping the domain of the sensible, or as *Medium*, specifying instead "the spatially extended environment, the *milieu*, the atmosphere, the *Umwelt* in which perception occurs."⁸¹ This distinction brings into relief how the sensory environment for Benjamin, although distributed and organized by different and evolving apparatuses, was not a passively shaped ground of experience but rather an operative force and agency that reconfigures human perception. Although oriented by different vantage points, and addressing different aesthetic phenomena, both Bao's and Somani's work are linked by their shared engagement of an "atmospheric turn" in media studies that approaches the agency of an individual medium through the aerial and affective milieu it saturates. Through this framework, they both attend to how specific mediums appearing in concrete historical moments are reciprocally and reversibly enfolded into their encompassing sensorium that includes evolving modes of aesthetic apprehension, existing protocols of communication and transmission, and the affective and material dimensions of the social worlds in which different mediums circulate.

In keeping with narrative conventions linking darkness to concealment, the night in *Holy Motors* serves as a metaphor for the imperceptible operations of current media technologies (thus engaging the first definition of atmospheric media); however, at the same time, the night's striking digital sheen – its visual precision in darkness, its variegated tonalities of black, and its probing capacity to see into shadows – textures this very condition of diminished visibility into a threshold not of blindness but of spectacular opacity, blurring the edges between visibility and sightlessness even as it propels such distinctions into relief. By rendering modes of strained perception sensuous, in fact, the film's nocturnal expanse calls attention to the agency of the individual

⁸¹ Antonio Somani, "Walter Benjamin's Media Theory: The *Medium* and the *Apparat*," *Grey Room* 62 (Winter 2016), 7.

medium, opening a discursive field in which to reckon with cinema's role within the often-invisible processes through which digital media shape and surveil human activity. At the same time, the sensory dimensionality of this recognition incites us to think about digital cinema in analogy to the atmospherics and affects associated with the night – darkness, artificial light, but also conditions at the precipice of normative psychic or corporeal limits, such as desire, sleep, and exhaustion. For Carax, in fact, what cinema and embodied subjectivity “share” at this present moment is a certain “fatigue of being oneself” and the film repeatedly parlays this sense of fatigue across fluctuating registers: from the sentient limousines gossiping about their futural redundancy; to Oscar's repeated emotional breakdowns; from Céline's poised composure that simultaneously ballasts yet intimates her lassitude; all the way to the impossibility for Oscar not only to sleep, but also, apparently, to die, a condition that supplants film theory's obsessive interest in cinema's mortality with an anxiety, rather, of deathlessness, as I will later explore.⁸²

Through its association with wilting and dissolution, fatigue might thematize the purported dedifferentiation of cinema, and all mediums, under digital conditions. Such totalizing auguries are not a new idea but strongly associated with media theorist Friedrich Kittler's sense that “the general digitization of channels and information erases the differences among individual media... and once optical fiber networks turn formerly distinct data flows into a standardized series of digitized numbers, any medium can be translated into any other.”⁸³ For Kittler, digital convergence heralds the erosion of the medium as a distinct operational category. Under digitized procedures, therefore, the cinematic image would no longer correspond to the immanent attributes of its technological medium, as the image now functions as a cosmetic and illusory interface with no perceptual correlation to its computational base in information. However, *Holy*

⁸² Leos Carax quoted in Dennis Lim, “A Farewell to Celluloid with a Tribute: Leos Carax Makes ‘Holy Motors’ With Film History's Help,” *The New York Times*, October 10, 2012 <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/14/movies/leos-carax-makes-holy-motors-with-film-historys-help.html>.

⁸³ Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Palo Alto, CA.: Stanford University Press, 1999), 1–2.

Motors figuration of fatigue opens a different route through which to approach the agency of the cinematic medium, an excursus oriented more towards an epistemological account of the digital camera's present protocols rather than an ontological prognostic of its future potential.

Here Teresa Brennan's work on affect as a technology and supplement of globalization provides a corrective to digital determinism's oversight of embodied labor's relation to the production of images. For Brennan, fatigue's delamination of physical boundaries discloses our interdependence with our natural and technological environment, thus unsettling the rigid boundaries of subject-object distinctions. By providing a visceral density to the limits of our "individual self-containment" – and indeed to how this sense of containment changes over time – dynamics of depletion inform her contention that "all entities in and of the natural world, all forces, whether naturally or artificially forged, are connected energetically."⁸⁴ In *Holy Motors*, fatigue signifies the passage of diegetic time through the progressive expiration of Oscar's stamina, such that the film's performative register offers an exegetical commentary on what Brennan calls bioderegulation, a process describing the incompatibility between deregulated capitalism's accelerated pace and the physiological limits of workers' bodies forced to "[conform] to the new rules of inhuman time."⁸⁵ For Elena Gorfinkel, the film scholar most closely associated with a fine-grained analysis of corporeal fatigue, the spectacle of weariness in recent cinema underscores the centrality of "gestural and aesthetic economies ... to critique the institution of work itself and its regimes of social utility, placing an emphasis on fatigue as a baseline symptom of survival, the constitutive condition of early twenty first-century modernity."⁸⁶ Thus as fatigue structures and interconnects *Holy Motors*' obsessive reflection of the cinematic medium – through the diverse genres encoded in Oscar's transformations, the film's immoderate allusions to early cinema, and its peregrinations across competing visual technologies – it also insistently

⁸⁴ Teresa Brennan, *Exhausting Modernity: Grounds for a New Economy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 41.

⁸⁵ Teresa Brennan, *Globalization and its Terrors* (London and New York: Routledge 2003).

⁸⁶ Elena Gorfinkel, "Weariness, Waiting: Enduration and Art Cinema's Tired Bodies," *discourse* 34, no. 2–3 (Spring/Fall 2012): 342.

incorporates the material realities of labor into an extended definition of the medium's empirical boundaries.

This uncompromising emphasis on labor in *Holy Motors* thus qualifies some of the more grandiose claims on the malleability of the digital image routinely articulated in media theory since the nineties. Turning her attention to the specific pipelines of film production and the workflows intrinsic to digital imaging, Julie Turnock has forcefully and cogently argued against this “technical myth of digital convergence, the incorrect assumption that digital technology turns ‘everything into zeros and ones’ and is therefore easily interoperable.”⁸⁷ The theoretical over-emphasis on the infinite plasticity of the digital image, she argues, severs an understanding of a medium's technics from the financial constraints and specialized expertise of industry workers without whom these digital properties would remain unimplemented and thus purely virtual. In other words, in expressing a concern with the specific materiality of digital filmmaking, digital media theories frequently render another form of materiality – the labor of set and post-production workers – invisible or inconsequential. While Turnock concedes that the manipulability of digital visibility is broadly true on a purely potential level, actualizing this capacity is constrained not just by cultural conventions but by the internal limits of a particular production's available financial and human resources. She thus observes that the prevailing assumption in film and media theory that digital images travel “raw” down the post-production pipeline, meaning as files with all available metadata registered by the sensor intact and available at any stage, simply does not correspond to the extant structure of production schedules, as “workers down the digital line rarely work with the raw files DPs capture, and instead receive data with some information, such as color ‘latitude’ ‘baked’ in already, meaning there are aspects of the image that cannot be significantly changed.”⁸⁸ The limited financial and temporal resources of film production, and the highly specialized expertise that are not shared across different technicians across its isolated stages of

⁸⁷ Julie Turnock, “Gravity and the ‘Lighting’ Designer Controversy: Cinematographers, Special Visual Effects Artists and the Rhetoric of Digital Convergence,” *Transnational Cinematography Studies*, eds. Lindsay Coleman et al. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), 192.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

production, constrain the “polymorphous” capacity of the digital camera. Thus the operational similarities between analog and digital cameras do not merely point to the persistence of cultural conventions desiring the profilmic real (although such a desire indubitably plays a part in the economic feasibility of cinema’s endurance), nor do they express a purely volitional resistance to the digital image’s base in immaterial code (though this might be an unintended benefit). But rather, the functional equivalence of a digital camera to its analog precedents under current financial and technological systems results from the interaction between infrastructural and material constraints related to the remuneration and regulation of labor. These constraints, however, delimit most art cinema films from utilizing the manipulable capacities of digital cameras in sustained and thus financially prohibitive manners, even for perceptually–realist ends. Thus, as we will see, Champetier makes clear that despite or because of the film’s production through a digital camera, the film’s on–set team of technicians could not neglect the camera’s negotiation of the profilmic world’s immediate physical and atmospheric phenomena. In other words, the film’s images could not transcend the material and atmospheric constraints of filming a nocturnal environment due to some purely theoretical scenario in which the image might be effortlessly reworked in post with no concern for the expenditure of time and money this would require, a scenario implicitly assumed, Turnock observes, in film and media studies. Through the film’s expressive foregrounding of fatigue and waning, *Holy Motors* thus incites a correlating valorization of the stamina and energy of its technicians and performers. Through this dialectic dynamic, *Holy Motors* positions cinematic labor not merely as an expenditure or skill passively expressed through the image, but rather as a property intrinsic to the formal and technical logic of the digital camera, thus propelling labor into an integral dimension of any expanded conceptualization of the cinematic medium.

***Cinéma du Look* as Pregonitor of the Digital**

The strangeness of Leos Carax’s body of work, with its surrealist undertones and fetishistic references to film history, has continuously posed challenges to European art cinema’s

categories of reception and analysis. Through his first three feature-length films – *Boy Meets Girl* (1984), *Mauvais Sang* (1986) and, in particular, *Lovers on the Bridge* (1991), Carax's highly stylized visuals, immoderate color palettes, and carefully crafted mise-en-scènes, for instance, have prompted critics to align his films with the self-consciously offbeat movies of his contemporaries Luc Besson and Jean-Jacques Beineix. These directors' films announced a new stylistic trend in French cinema – dismissively nicknamed *le cinéma du look* – that foregrounded high production values, striking camerawork, and spectacular images above narrative coherence, psychological realism or direct sociopolitical engagement.⁸⁹ Through elaborate set designs and Hollywood-style special effects, motion pictures like Beineix's *Diva* or Besson's *Subway* flaunt their status as virtual spaces for fantasy or delirium, that draw on the glossy imagery of advertisement and Mtv, thus breaking with a model of auteurist cinema Thomas Elsaesser has defined as “always [defining] itself against Hollywood on the basis of its greater realism. Whether one thinks of Italian neorealism, the French nouvelle vague's semi-documentary *cinéma vérité*, or Ingmar Bergman's clinically probing psychological realism.”⁹⁰

Le *cinéma du look* garnered significant domestic and international box office success, but it generated a predominantly hostile response from the French critical establishment. The locus of the criticism came from the journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*, founded by André Bazin, the critic most closely aligned with championing a realist cinema grounded in an indexical, material connection to the physical world set before the camera. Their opprobrium was informed not only by an expected resistance towards the unchecked influence of consumerist culture on the European art film and the declining influence of Marxism on a younger generation of cinéastes. It also expressed the underlying conviction that this new cinema's excessively stylized appearance was no longer congruent to a medium whose psychic and moral force was largely grounded in the

⁸⁹ The consolidation of these three directors as the core triumvirate of *le cinéma du look* arose largely through an influential article by Raphaël Bassan, “Trois néobaroque français,” *Revue du cinéma* 110, no. 449 (1989), 44–50.

⁹⁰ Thomas Elsaesser, “World Cinema: Realism, Evidence, Presence,” in *Realism and the Audiovisual Media*, eds. Lucia Nagib and Cecilia Mello (London: Palgrave, 2009), 17.

evidentiary force of photographic capture. Since the glossy images of the *cinéma du look* were achieved by filming real though overtly composed *mise-en-scènes*, critics like Michel Chion and *Cahiers* editor-in-chief Serge Daney argued that such cosmetic surfaces lacked any meaningful connection to physical reality and thus sidelined the referential status of the photographic image in the overall perceptual experience and intrinsic appeal of these motion pictures.⁹¹

While this debate participated in a broader discussion on spectacle's relation to ideology during the 1980s and 1990s, contemporary anxieties surrounding the widespread digitization of cinema have been critically reassessing *le cinéma du look* as a stylistic movement anticipating cinema's shift from analog to digital parameters. For instance, unlike David Rodowick, Dudley Andrew does not locate the devaluation of the real in new media to intrinsic digital properties of specific cameras. Following Elsaesser and Rosen, he argues, in fact, that most digital cameras in contemporary cinema still set out to film the world before them like their analogic precedents. Instead, Andrew identifies a degradation of the real on a fundamentally cultural rather than technological paradigm he traces to the emergence of the *cinéma du look* in the late eighties as a period in which "cinema began to doubt its constitution."⁹² By foregrounding the esthetic appeal and surface quality of the image, *le cinéma du look*, in his view, precipitated an arrogant ambition among young directors to manipulate the appearance of the physical world to conform to their desires and expectations, displacing an approach towards cinema as a means of revealing the autonomous contingencies of physical reality with cinema as a vehicle for the narcissistic affirmation of a private vision. Thus the photographic process began to appear as a secondary trait, if not an obstacle, to these new cinematic prerogatives, rather than as the undergirding premise that the cinematic image renegotiated across its technological remediations.

However, while Carax is indisputably part of the core triumvirate associated with *le cinéma du look* he has largely been exempt from the criticism directed towards Beineix and Besson even though his films exhibit similarly suspect attributes: an overt celebration of artifice

⁹¹ Michel Chion, "L'âge du Capitaine," *Cahiers du Cinéma*, no. 373 (June 1985), unpaginated.

⁹² Andrew, *What Cinema*, xiii.

and the fantastical, grandiosely elaborate set designs, and a proliferation of cinematic allusions creating a virtual hall of mirrors in lieu of the world itself. In fact, even though Andrew positions the rise of *le cinéma du look* as a catalyst for the devaluation of photographic realism in contemporary film practice, he substitutes Carax with Jean–Jacques Annaud when listing the three directors most closely associated with this movement – a conspicuous replacement given Carax’s persistent presence in the journalism and historical analyses identifying the movement’s three key figures. However, given the pivotal role of *Cahiers du Cinéma* in Andrew’s polemic against an “over–confident discourse of the digital,” we can read Andrew’s omission of Carax as a logical extension of the director’s perhaps surprising affiliation with the journal. Carax, in fact, began his career as a writer at *Cahiers du Cinéma* mentored by its then–editor in chief Serge Daney before working on his first short film. Carax’s trajectory parallels not only the careers of nouvelle vague auteurs such as François Truffaut, Jean–Luc Godard, and Jacques Rivette but also coincides with the movement from critic to filmmaker of a later generation of filmmakers such as Olivier Assayas and Arnaud Desplechin during the eighties. These last two directors, in particular, are noted in contemporary discourses on cinema for prioritizing a sense of physical immediacy and, in a manner diametrically opposed to the critical reception of *le cinéma du look*, for preserving and invigorating an aesthetic principle of world–discovery responsive to concrete reality.⁹³ Consequently, how might we account for Carax’s curious and somewhat incongruous standing in French cinema as both a key member of one of its most disreputable legacies *as well* as a figure professionally championed, intellectually mentored, and repeatedly defended by this specific intellectual milieu? A critical establishment, moreover whose defense of a foundational commitment to reality, is precisely the ground that *le cinéma du look*’s pyrotechnics were accused of derealizing?

Heavenly Bodies: Star Presence and the Distressed Commodity Image

⁹³ See for instance Kent Jones, ed., *Olivier Assayas* (Vienna: Österreichisches Filmmuseum: SYNEMA–Gesellschaft für Film und Medien, 2012).

Holy Motors thematizes and probes *le cinéma du look* as a locus anticipating critical attitudes towards the digital image in a key sequence taking place at La Samaritaine. Within the narrative structure of the film, this episode is not part of Oscar's pre-determined schedule of appointments, but rather an internal fold deviating from the regulated demands of his nonstop work. After an unanticipated collision with another limousine, Oscar discovers that the obstructing vehicle carries a fellow "actor," a woman named Jean. It soon becomes clear that he shares a romantic past with the woman, and that the reasons around that relation's ending remain painful and unresolved while never being explicitly disclosed. As their mutual chauffeurs quarrel, Jean and Oscar step out of their respective vehicles towards the gutted interior of the former luxury department store, whose rooftop once provided a panoramic view of Paris. The building holds a towering presence in Carax's *Lovers on the Bridge* which also starred Lavant, as a homeless fire eater, and the director's then girlfriend Juliette Binoche, as an artist losing her vision, who fall in love against the backdrop of France's bicentennial celebrations. This evocation of an earlier work incites not only a process mnemonic recall amplifying Carax's auteurial persona, but also an inversion of internal and external space, for as these surrogates for Pont Neuf's lovers walk into the Samaritaine they enter a place they previously experienced only from the outside. In *Lovers on the Bridge*, La Samaritaine was a model replica as both Pont Neuf and its surroundings had to be built in a vast studio due to Carax's lack of success in extending their permits after Dennis Lavant sustained an injury. Notoriously, the film went over budget and became, at the time, the most expensive French film ever made.

In lieu of Binoche, the original star of *Lovers on the Bridge* and Carax's real-life partner at the time, Jean is played by the Australian pop star Kylie Minogue, whom the film director Claire Denis recommended to Carax for another project. Minogue's presence in the movie acts as a cultural moebius strip that continuously stages a volatile relationship between the internal field of the diegesis and an external network of (pop)-cultural references and citations. On one hand, Minogue's "star persona" – associated with pop music, flamboyant showmanship, and a devoted gay fandom – is so far removed from a movie that is so self-consciously esoteric, and rather

heterosexually-oriented, art house affair. Yet, at the same time, and not in contradiction to this dynamic, the particular trajectory of her celebrity – a constant reinvention of her self-image, multiple “personas” nested into one body, and, more gravely, the press’ obsessive chronicling of her breast cancer – seem so congruent with the movie’s thematic concerns with spectacle, selfhood, and mortality. Through her performance in *Holy Motors*, the deceptive singularity of Minogue’s star transforms into a virtual repository for a vast range of entertainment modes (the chorus line, vaudeville, pop music, the soap opera, the serial and *le cinéma du look*) whose influence on cinema have often been discredited by film theory as disorderly aberrations improper to the medium itself. Moreover, Minogue’s celebrity presence does not only reference the numerous permutations of her individual career but also those of multiple actresses. As Jean, Minogue becomes a delegate for *Lovers on the Bridge*’s original star, Juliette Binoche; and a decoy – through Minogue’s pixie-cut wig, the name of her character, and her song’s allusion to a dead child – to the French New Wave screen icon Jean Seberg.⁹⁴ Through a more personal lens, she also serves as a surrogate to Carax’s partner Yekaterina Golubeva, who committed suicide prior to *Holy Motors*’ filming, and whose image appears as a still photograph prior to the film’s end credits.

Minogue’s fame as a showgirl, moreover, indexes how the spectacular image’s alignment with capitalist production processes have historically converged around discussions not only of the female body but also of its proprioceptive movement in performance’s duration. In Kracauer’s 1931 essay “The Mass Ornament,” he famously discusses the appeal of the Tiller girls, a chorus line of dancing women whose collective movements provide the impression of a streamlined whole. For Kracauer, the trained synchronicity of the dancing showgirls’ bodies corresponds to the deindividualized mechanics of the assembly line and the perfectability of the commodification

⁹⁴ Allusions to Jean Seberg have featured repeatedly in several songs by the Divine Comedy (“When the Lights Go Out All Over Europe” and “Lost Friends”). The band’s front man, Neil Hannon, composed the song performed by Minogue in *Holy Motors*.

process. Although Minogue rose to fame during the 80s and 90s, her image has been self-consciously fashioned after the ensemble showgirl through performances evoking The Folies

As Minogue's stardom emerged during the eighties, coinciding with Carax's fledgling start as a director, her presence in *Holy Motors* embodies the contemporary discourse of the digital while also connecting it to the mass-culture aesthetic of *le cinema du look*, particularly as she appears during the film's re-evocation of *Lovers on the Bridge*. Minogue's global popularity, in fact, was disseminated precisely through the spheres of pop culture – an Australian soap opera, music developed by British producers, and international product endorsements – whose glossy appearance and alignment with ideological corruption *le cinema du look* had been condemned for emulating. Thus, as a celebrity who reflects multiple registers of transformative flux, and whose recognition value traverses national borderlines, Minogue's appeal seems to crystalize the symbolic authority of the postwar star that Lauren Berlant has described as “com[ing] to embody the fantasy form of iconic citizenship, of a large body moving through space unimpeded, as only a technologically protected person can do.”⁹⁵

While Minogue's casting in *Holy Motors* functions as a shorthand for audiovisual spectacle, her performance also complicates the gendered metaphorization of this hypervisibility. Within the context of *Holy Motors*' engagement with new media, in fact, Minogue's presence throws into relief film theory's recurring conflation of the spectacular commodity form with the female body, an enmeshment connecting the interacting anxiety and excitement surrounding new media incarnations with a misogynist ambivalence towards femininity as target of both disdain and desire. While Minogue's performance in *Holy Motors* does not undo the congruence between the female star and this metaphor, it reworks its representational logic. If the celebrity's technologically-mediated body, following Berlant, provides a vision of invulnerable ideality, in *Holy Motors* Minogue registers the forms of psychic, corporeal and social precarity the spectacle of the female star is said to distract from or disavows. As her attire and narrative destiny cite the

⁹⁵ Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 104.

lives and careers of prematurely dead actresses, the movie cannot but bring to the fore the extra-textual knowledge of Minogue's intensely scrutinized breast cancer diagnosis and convalescence in 2005. Less solemnly, the film's many close-ups of Minogue bring into relief subtle traces of incipient aging on the surface of her face that call attention to the digital camera's at times unbearable high-definition. As the film programmer and critic Adam Cook has observed "digital cameras reveal different qualities, emotions, and connotations with how they represent faces with the veil of celluloid stripped away, leaving the texture of faces more vulnerable."⁹⁶ This close-up thus offers a more visibly incarnate and mortal image Minogue that resonates in direct proportion to the collectively-held image of her face as a smooth, often photoshopped surface, untouched by the passage of time.

But perhaps it is the broadly held assumption that Minogue is a terrible actress that most unsettles the image of invulnerable ideality she simultaneously stages. Although her popularity first began through her role on the internationally broadcast soap-opera *Neighbors*, her subsequent forays into acting have been met with a certain gleeful ridicule. In a review worth noting only for how clearly it evokes the critical consensus towards her acting ability, *The Washington Post* described Minogue as "the worst actress in the English speaking world."⁹⁷ And while her starring role in the 2007 *Doctor Who* Christmas special on the BBC was widely attributed to the "coup" of Minogue's casting, the largely negative responses to her performance describe her as nothing but a virtual simulacra of her own celebrity that leaves too faint an imprint on her character. *The Guardian*, for instance, comments precisely on how her star presence appears simultaneously amplified and weirdly insubstantial, commenting that the television

⁹⁶ Adam Cook and Daniel Kasman, "TIFF 2013. Dialogues: Tsai Ming-liang's "Stray Dogs," *MUBI Notebook*, September 14, 2013 <https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/tiff-2013-dialogues-tsai-ming-liangs-stray-dogs>.

⁹⁷ Richard Harrington, "Street Fighter," *The Washington Post*, December 24, 1994, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/streetfighterpg13harrington_a0ad15.htm.

event's "biggest flaw is its unique selling point – the presence of Kylie Minogue. She's just not that good. Truth be told, she's blank and insipid... [her character] is hardly there at all."⁹⁸

From Jack Smith to John Waters, there is a rich legacy in alternative art cinema, particularly queer cinema, celebrating bad acting for how it exposes good taste and aesthetic merit as neither absolute nor unconditional values but as a formal system naturalizing traits tied to established economic and cultural pedigrees.⁹⁹ And while Minogue's famously gay fandom has often aligned her persona with a camp sensibility, her presence in *Holy Motors* does not seem to harness or exploit a performative modality, to cite Elena Gorfinkel's ekphrastic account of bad acting, as "the labor of [bodies that]... can only signify itself as failure."¹⁰⁰ Instead, I have been proposing that *Holy Motors* registers the multiple ways Minogue's career stages the perfectability of the commodity image so hyperbolically she paradoxically denotes a notion of ideality as well as a certain irreducible distance from it. Within the context of the art film, this distance signifies either the ideologically improper (the cosmetic surface of the spectacular image, the plasticity of the digital, the celebrity as signifier of a culture of false consciousness) or the derivative substitute (the "image" as decoy to the real, the stunt casting choice replacing the original award-winning actress). As a figure who stands-in for a notion of the duplicity of spectacle, or the counterfeit inherent to mass culture, Minogue's presence in *Holy Motors* thus becomes a powerful symbol for anxieties surrounding the digital as a debased replacement for photochemical film, and of the image as a deceptive interface of reality itself. But much in the same way that *Holy Motors* deploys the light-sensitive capacities of its digital camera to engender new cinematic sensualities, the movie also provides Minogue with a forum wherein her performance, regardless

⁹⁸ Gareth McLean, "The Doctor Who disaster movie is a great success," *The Guardian*, December 20, 2007 <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/tvandradioblog/2007/dec/20/drwho>.

⁹⁹ Arguably the most famous essay on how bad acting brings into view the operations of normative meaning is Jack Smith, "The Perfect Filmic Appositeness of Maria Montez," *Film Culture* 27 (Winter 1962–63): 28–36.

¹⁰⁰ Elena Gorfinkel "Weariness, Waiting: Enduration and Art Cinema's Tired Bodies," *Discourse* 34, no. 2–3 (Spring/Fall 2012), 82.

of how it measures up against practice-oriented acting methods, compels and generates a certain pathos.

Jacqueline Rose has argued that celebrity is “often a ritual of public humiliation,” adding that “it puts into circulation certain things which do not easily admit into public acknowledgment.”¹⁰¹ As the female star articulates a notion of ideality, her exposure to public scrutiny renders her the target of shame whenever she fails to live up to the image of perfection for which she is also blamed for putting into public circulation. Through these mechanics, Rose argues, the particular curiosity stars solicit turns into a veiled form of licensed sadism. The social function of mass-mediated curiosity, in other words, displaces the possibility of shame and humiliation into the breathless expectation of seeing the star fall – bespeaking the fate of Minogue’s character in the film.

La Samaritaine: Cinema’s Frame and the Panoramic View

By intimating an underlying distress beneath the veneer of the commodified image, Minogue allegorizes *le cinema du look* as a precursor to a discourse on the digital that also establishes an analogy with the film’s setting in La Samaritaine, a similarly gendered locus that signifies misgivings against the cosmetic image. Mirroring how subtle traces of maturing on Minogue’s face indexes the passing of time, La Samaritaine’s glamorous decline also suggests the social and economic changes that have taken place between different stages of mass-mediated capitalism. As a result, the film’s expressive function as a cinematic place necessitates an account of the building’s rise and decline. Built in 1869, La Samaritaine was one of the largest, and most visible department stores during Haussmann’s spatial and social reorganization of Paris. The emporium has ceased to operate since 2005 and appears like a shell of itself in the film. Its former grandeur, however, is still amply intimated by its architectural structure and design. As soon as Jean and Oscar enter the building’s atrium, its open plan reveals tiers of ornamented

¹⁰¹ Jacqueline Rose, *On Not Being Able to Sleep: Psychoanalysis and the Modern World* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2003), 205.

staircases and curving balconies that solicit our gaze vertically towards the structure's soaring height. Owing to its central location, La Samaritaine was one of the key department stores in nineteenth-century Paris which, as numerous cultural historians have argued, were far from idle backdrops to industrial capitalism. On the contrary, by precipitating consumerism into a preeminent expression of urban modernity, *grands magasins* produced the spatial conditions through which retail became an integral ritual of bourgeois leisure. As a result, critics like T.J. Clark and David Harvey have argued that the rise of the department store enabled manufacturing economies and privatized interests to overrule the character of social assembly in public, neutralizing public space of its civic function and democratic potential.¹⁰² In Marxist cultural analysis, the Haussmanian department store thus serves as a particularly fraught site of critical censure, simultaneously accelerating consumerist capitalism while also occluding its underlying chain of labor relations into a spectacular and absorptive ambience (a line of argumentation that clearly resonates with a critical bias against cinema as the passive flâneurie of commodified worldviews).¹⁰³ Through these sedimented associations with bourgeois cultural domains and private enterprises, La Samaritaine's looming presence in *Lovers on the Bridge* thus accentuates the lead characters' romanticized exclusion from consumerist practices and their promise of a fully-realized and stable social belonging.

By 2005, however, La Samaritaine had shut down as a business, failing to keep up with changing consumerist demands and competing commercial practices. The nocturnal setting of Oscar and Jean's visit thus redoubles the building's air of belatedness and dissipated vitality, amplifying a sense of evacuated energy crystallizing the building's long years of processual decline. Through this qualitative register of loss, the critical function of the department store is also transformed. Its interior clearly no longer organizes the deceptive allure of spectacular

¹⁰² See T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965) and David Harvey, *Paris, Capital of Modernity* (Abingdon, UK and New York: Routledge, 2004).

¹⁰³ Aruna D'Souza, "Why the Impressionists Never Painted the Department Stores," in *The Invisible Flâneuse?: Gender, Public Space, and Visual Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris*, eds. Aruna D'Souza and Tom McDonough (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006).

space, as Clark might argue, but it discloses a quality akin to what Walter Benjamin describes as the “revolutionary energies that appear in the ‘outmoded.’”¹⁰⁴ For Benjamin, and the many critics writing in his wake, commodities that have recently been supplanted by upgrades and new fashions, are revitalized with a critical resonance at the very threshold of their waning. As soon as objects are no longer of instrumental value, he argues, their stubborn persistence in the field of phenomenal appearances offers a discordant affective register to the totalizing sense and experience of capitalist arrangements. At the same time, the outmoded’s revelatory force also forecasts how many of the professions, spaces, and materials distinguishing the present economic order will inevitably turn expendable within deregulated capitalism’s logic of supersession and renewal that gives rise to unsustainable demands of continuous adaptability. The building’s weathered appearance thus allegorizes such processes of accelerated economic restructuring while also making its localized effects palpable. Through its faded glamor and functional obsolescence, La Samaritaine bespeaks the decline of industrial and manufacturing economies, and the waged forms of labor they depended on, in favor of new modes of free enterprise fueled by digitally–enabled automation and the ascendancy of immaterial, and often unregulated, labor practices.

As Jean and Oscar make their way up the building, its allegorical overlay of different capitalist stages syncs to a visual excursus on cinematic remediation. In keeping with the film’s numerous allusions to different genres, in fact, the sequence develops into a sweeping musical number. Recorded live, with the orchestral score added in post–production, Minogue’s voice, thin and strained though not unpleasant, attunes us to the force of both acoustic and visual live recording, and their privileged relation to notions of contingency, imperfection, and immediacy. The melancholic crescendo of the musical interlude parallels the characters’ physical ascent, justifying the camera’s movement across La Samaritaine’s magnificently dilapidated space. As a result, this movement gives rise to architectural compositions that analogize questions of

¹⁰⁴ Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism, The Last Snapshot of the European Intellegentsia,” in *One–way Street* (London: New Left Books, 1979), 231.

outmoded and imperiled cinematic formats. As Jean guides Oscar into a particularly dark area of the building, for instance, its interior is rendered visible from the light emanating from a series of large windows opening into views of Paris at night, one revealing the illuminated flying buttresses of the adjacent Saint-Germain l'Auxerrois, another the Eiffel tower. Emanating light into a dark space, these bordered and thus partial vistas cannot but reflect back on our experience of seeing the film, particularly in the darkness of a theater.

Writing at the very turn of the twenty-first century, Anne Friedberg has historicized the figure of the window as an organizing metaphor for cinema, contending that this well-trafficked concept serves as cinema's defining feature and experiential premise. Her analysis focuses on the intransigent presence of the screen as a bounded limit and interface through which cinema is positioned within a lineage of enframed visibility (such as painting, the computer screen, and the proto-smart phone), thus distinguishing it from immersive media (the panorama, expanded cinema, or 3D IMAX). For Friedberg, framed systems of visibility are essentially predicated on the irreducible distance between the materiality of the spectator's body, and the immaterial, virtual world seen through a bordered aperture. In contrast, immersive systems engulf the spectatorial body in totalizing and simulated environments wherein perception is no longer transitive and focalized but indiscriminately dispersed, a model we might extend to the atmospheric milieu of contemporary media in the present whose constant operative functions surpass optical perception and human cognitive awareness. In Friedberg's view, the distinction between the virtual window and the "defenestrated" totality of pervasive mediation does not so much illuminate issues of medium-specificity. Instead the dissolution of the frame serves as an imagined horizon emblematic of a certain "digital determinism," as in the media prognostics of Kittler and Negroponte, wherein "digital technology inherently implies a convergence of all media forms" and thus the erasure of distinctions across apparatuses that endure, Friedberg argues, through the persistence of experiential and phenomenal conventions.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press,

Implicit in Friedberg's attentiveness to the long life of the screen, therefore, is the conviction that the image, and the conventions of optical perception and analogic resemblance it foregrounds, continue to impinge and shape cultural imaginaries, even as cinema becomes less differentiated and more entangled in broader processes of digital mediation. Thus, by contextualizing an allusion to extant screen dynamics within an edifice hinging between decrepitude and renovation, *Holy Motors* probes the imperiled status of the image through the qualitative differences enabled by new digital apparatuses. At the same time, through its richly allusory mise-en-scene, the sequence also addresses how the resonance of these formal and perceptual differences are inevitably read in terms of the rapid and ultimately unpredictable evolutions of a broader technoscape. To this end, the single-take used for the musical number puts into display the sensory qualities particular to the digital camera's technical abilities at night.

As Carax and Champetier wanted La Samaritaine's "inside dimness to be lit from the outside," they illuminated the interior of the building with pre-existing industrial lights that convey the transitory ambience of a site undergoing a structural renovation, thus accentuating the sense of an epochal shift. The external spaces outside the purview of the windows' border, however, are equipped with more than 300 KW of light, including a 100 KW Softsun suspended on a crane. The combined yet indirect radiance of these light sources presence the building's internal dimness, while also rendering the external architecture starkly visible through the windows' openings. Through this interaction between directional light design and the camera's technics, the resulting image materializes the specific aesthetic characteristics of digital recording. While these sensate traits showcase the visibility of the world at night, the reverse also rings true, as the physical world and its nocturnal ambience serve as the medium to detect the digital's qualitative differences, drawing our eye to nonfigural but atmospheric properties of the image materializing the "traces" of its technical mediation.

2006). In her discussion of immersion, Friedberg draws from Oliver Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 13.

In this scene, the shadowy areas bordering the window frame, for instance, display a rich tonal spectrum of dimness, wherein different textures of shadows are visibly layered inside other shadows into nested silhouettes. At the same time, the world-views glanced through the window's openings reveal the camera's impressive capacity to relay distant planes of space, albeit through varying degrees of sharp focus. The views through the window collect a captivating amount of physical and textural detail across the night's admixture of hard light and darkness, extending as far as Notre Dame (located approximately 1 km away from La Samaritaine). As a result, the dialogue between the mise-en-scene, with its air of abandonment, and the perceptual affordances of the digital camera stages the interplay between contrasting registers of depletion and an emerging vitality. To this end, the image's substantiation of dimness through the reflected glow of an adjacent environment offers figural form and affective density to the uncanny force of the outmoded, which the scene – through its multiple allusions to a cinematic world – invites us to read in terms of the critical and discursive depreciation of the cinematic image. Remotely illuminated by an adjacent but exterior source, in fact, the space's dimness allegorizes how an ebbing, weakened energy is paradoxically intrinsic to the outmoded's peculiar force. As Benjamin argues, the outmoded's revolutionary energies appear just as it is most threatened by cultural and symbolic obsolescence, such that its critical address coincides with, and is indeed indissoluble from, the waning of its functional value.

In a certain light, we might approach Oscar and Jeanne's ascent towards La Samaritaine's panoramic rooftop as a reflection of what Friedberg views as digital determinism's teleological thrust, its suggestion that processes of convergence merge all technologies into an all-encompassing elemental sphere wherein "apparatical distinctions" become irrelevant.¹⁰⁶ As the camera moves from the enclosure of the department store to the open air of the panoramic terrace, for instance, its vertical trajectory seems to metaphorically interrogate cinema's position within a broader digital mediasphere analogized by the darkened city and open sky. As Nanna Verhoeff has recently observed "to see everything – the "pan" in panorama – a view is necessary.

¹⁰⁶ Friedberg, *Virtual Window*, 239.

It requires a spatial but immaterial fact: void space” whose pervasiveness is materialized in this scene as the animate presence of the night.¹⁰⁷ The shot’s panoramic nightscape thus crystallizes the film’s repeated alignment of a broader digital expanse with the night’s immersive airspace. Through this lens, night’s darkness does not only conjure the nebulous operations of new media but also references the air as a literal medium for the transmission of information.

At the same time, however, the scene unsettles the rigid distinction between enframed and immersive systems of visibility that it simultaneously brings into focus. Returning to Weihong Bao’s emphasis on cinema’s sensory extension, she pushes back against “the *physical* separation of the spectatorial and representational spaces as the ultimate demarcation of a visual system (the frame) constituted by a variety of media, including cinema.”¹⁰⁸ Drawing on bodily affectivity as a force that confounds the borders between representation and spectator, Bao argues that “the frame system could simultaneously evoke a sense of separation and an effect to overcome that distance.”¹⁰⁹ Similarly, while the panoramic vista opens into an immersive overview bespeaking a “defenestrated” totality of media, Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover have observed that this image is also a visual trope in arthouse cinema that functions as “a means of reinvesting in the immersive and contemplative qualities of old fashioned film—going. Slow cinema often uses vistas to accentuate the richness and detail of the projected large—screen image.”¹¹⁰ The phenomenal experience of the panoramic shot thus calls attention to the frame of the screen while simultaneously evoking a sublime vastness extending beyond the image’s pictorial scope. In doing so, the nocturnality of the virtual image binds itself to our sensory awareness (or memory) of the material milieu of a darkened movie theater. While *Holy Motors*’ episodic narrative foregrounds a sense of panicked frenzy, this immersive view also insinuates a counter—temporality of slowness into the diegesis, an experience of distended time underscored both by

¹⁰⁷ Nanna Verhoeff, *Mobile Screens: The Visual Regime of Navigation* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2001), 47.

¹⁰⁸ Bao, *Fiery Cinema*, 144.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 145.

¹¹⁰ Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover, *Queer Cinema in the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 282.

nocturnal darkness' deceleration of vision and the arresting overpresence of the city's spectacular lights. Across these oscillating spatial and perceptual coordinates, therefore, the view from La Samaritaine stages a sequence of dynamic and unresolved tensions between the enframed and the immersive, the vertical and horizontal axes of the screen, and the singularity of the cinematic image against the atmospheric extension of digital operations. By unsettling the structural binaries it simultaneously puts into view, the nocturnal panorama thus positions the image as a discursive interface interrogating the existential, cultural, and epistemological relations linking the individual medium to an encompassing media environment. Through this framework, *Holy Motors'* nocturnal panorama reflects both our distance from the screen, as well as the simultaneous desire to overcome that distance, and in doing so it situates the representational image as a metaphorical threshold inciting what Joanna Zylińska and Sarah Kember describe as the desire for "understanding and articulating our being in, and becoming with, the technological world."¹¹¹

Surpassing the optics of the scenes within the building's structure, this rooftop view of Paris immoderately displays the highly light-sensitive capacities of the Red EPIC camera at night. As the camera pans the circumference of the terrace's space, it surveys the topographic horizon of the city the balcony overlooks, coordinating a sequence of recognizable monuments into a mapped expanse as it moves across the Arc de Triomphe, the Eiffel Tower, and the Louvre, while finally stopping before the Tour Italie and Notre Dame while Jean and Oscar pause to say goodbye. Through this mapping function, the shot's cartographic viewpoint offers a kind of cognitive scaffold through which we discern the Red EPIC's mediation of phenomenal reality and its qualitative differences. For instance, the view's dispersal of landmarks accentuates the HD image's ability to retain a sharp resolution across a far-reaching depth of field even in the dark.¹¹² While the darkness of the night renders certain areas of the cityscape illegible, its

¹¹¹ Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylińska, *Life After New Media: Mediation as a Vital Process* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), xv.

¹¹² While Champetier initially brought out wide-aperture lenses for the scene she discovered that they diminished, rather than enhanced, the focus of the image when used in tandem with the EPIC's sensor: "we realized that the Red Epic's sensor didn't put up well with that type of lens

blackness is not undifferentiated but sharply textured, particularly in areas where the reflected nimbus of urban light renders the surrounding shadows semi-translucent. As Rothöler has noted, the HD image is also indiscriminately attuned to marginalia, registering visual details according to a certain “centrifugal effect... its increased responsiveness to the unique aesthetic logic of disparate, profilmic light sources, and its artificial translation of nighttime gray zones.”¹¹³ As a result, the nocturnal panorama discloses the various intensities and kinetic rhythms intrinsic to divergent forms of artificial light with an indiscriminate promiscuity: the steady movement of headlights on distant bridges, the halo of vapor around streetlamps, the simmering sheen of reflected light in the Seine, and the soft glow emanating from the Notre Dame and the Tour Italie. Through this attunement to the different, dynamic properties of light and shadows, this HD vista stands in opposition to a cinematic image calibrated towards a single optimal standard for a homogenous color balance. Once the camera ceases in its tracking movement, the subsequent static shot’s kinetic relay of divergent lights and shadows, its purely incidental choreography of “autonomous visual islands,” comes to symbolize a specific kind of existential predicament within the scope of the narrative. For as the former couple’s separation unfolds in the scene’s foreground, the rest of world continues to flow unaffected with an indifferent though sensual intensity. In other words, the scene thus visualizes the world’s autonomous continuity outside the vicissitudes of human life, deprivileging human scale as the vantage point for the world’s intelligibility.

Through this technologically-enhanced vision, the HD vista’s translation of the landscape’s scattered particularities articulates a non-hierarchical view of the world as the emergence of manifold contingencies and interacting events. Manuel DeLanda has described such an approach in terms of a “flat ontology,” a tracking of phenomenal reality’s constitutive indeterminacy, underscored here by the opacity of the night that punctuates the image’s areas of

when they are used at maximum aperture. You end up with flat tints in the highlights that make the image look unfocused.” See her interview with AFC Cinema.

¹¹³ Rothöler, “Where Film Drops Off,” 149.

ecstatic visibility.¹¹⁴ [needs work] Despite the experience of perceptual plenitude mapped by the image's striking visual details, in fact, the intractability of darkness in the image forestalls the phantasmatic wholeness and transparency of the world viewed. It shrouds the physical topography connecting the vista's foreground and background and renders the connective space between one hyper-visible landmark and the next uncertain. For Rosalyn Deutsche, such a spectral layer of blindness within an image inhibits the spectator's sense of mastery, and interrogates the illusory coherence of both the looking subject and the object of representation. Responding to works of art that underscore the role of desire in looking, she observes that "the closer these works advanced toward the viewer, the less they seem to contain a hidden, stable truth to which the viewer might penetrate and around which the meaning of the image might reach closure, and the more vertiginous the subject's fall into uncertainty."¹¹⁵

When Oscar leaves Jean, any lingering sense of masculinist mastery linked to the elevated view is dispelled, as we see the mapped expanse of the nocturnal city through the perspective of a woman about to jump off the building. As a conduit to our vision, Jean is the most precarious of perceptual anchors. This precarity is suggested not only by her perilous position at the edge of a precipice but like her fellow actor, Oscar, she also serves as a cipher for a constantly fluctuating identity, amplified by Minogue's association with the feminized image as a "duplicitous" commodity. Such a conflation of the image with female masquerade – manipulative because manipulable – is linked in the context of the film with the visual spectacle and corresponding processual opacity of digital image culture. But the many stages of reinvention encoded in Minogue's star-text, and the forms of gendered spectacle her narrative presence references, make clear that the digital is but the current summit of a long and shifting lineage of distrust against the image, a critical distrust of the sensuous and surficial that has repeatedly

¹¹⁴ Manuel DeLanda, *Virtual Science, Intensive Philosophy* (Continuum: New York, 2002).

¹¹⁵ Rosalyn Deutsche, "Darkness: The Emergence of James Welling," in *James Welling: Abstract* (exh. cat.), (Brussels and Toronto: Palais des Beaux-Arts and Art Gallery of York University, 2002), 10.

found its expression in misogynist anxiety. Even here, at her most physically imperiled, Jean is putatively not “herself” (Jean, the actress) but rather the provisional embodiment of a suicidal stewardess, Eva Grace, “on her last flight.” Nonetheless, our knowledge that Jean is performing a role does little to diminish the force of her death-defying or death-courting stunt.

Through its powerful solicitation of the body, the scene thus evokes the thrill-chasing physical feats of silent film stars like serial-queen Pearl White or slapstick actor Harold Lloyd, who famously hung from a sky-scraper’s clock in *Safety Last!* (a mere elevation of the camera provides the illusion of fatal danger in both this film and *Holy Motors*, obscuring a ledge directly beneath the actors). Across a distance of almost a century, *Holy Motors* shares and extends these earlier films’ concern with the mimetic transmission of bodily excitation. Jean’s movement across the barricade calibrates our vicarious access to a thrilling but potentially lethal experience of standing over the edge. Her bodily presence, however, does not impart the fearless resolve of the silent serial queen or the ludic energetics of a slapstick actor. She conveys instead a certain strained, corporeal effort, whose equivocal affectivity is brought to the fore by its disparity with the cultural image of Minogue as a famous showgirl (a celebrity built in part on the imperceptible suppression of visible exertion). The awkwardness of Jean’s halting movement eclipses the impression of immaterial weightlessness routinely linked to a media star’s dematerialized presence. Instead the arduous physical obstinacy of her efforts precipitates the proprioceptive charge of her bodily density against gravity’s ineluctable force, aligning her corporeal limits with our own.

For an exquisitely tense moment, Jean loses her balance before managing to grasp the giant “I” of the building’s lettering, with all that this image implies of a tenuous grip on the self. The camera pans upwards to suggest the precarity of her position, and in doing so it reveals the full breadth of Pont Neuf underneath, giving rise to an experience of physical vertigo coinciding with a sudden rush of recognition. This moment marks the visual climax of the sequence’s intertextual dialogue with *Lovers on the Bridge*, disclosing the principle narrative field of that earlier film.

However, whereas that bridge was part of a fabricated set, our gaze now bears upon an image originating in Pont Neuf's physical existence in the actual world, thus amplifying the stakes of the digital camera's mediation of the real. The uncanny sense of *après-coup* produced by this encounter is hence conjured not by a ghostly register of indirect presence but rather by the evidentiary force of the bridge's concretely material existence. For Elsaesser, dynamics of return in recent cinema reflectively engage with a discourse on cinematic realism, expressing "a compulsion to repeat, an obsessive return to the same scenes, staging such 'returns' as a way to give a bodily envelope, to add an imprint to the 'evidence' of presence."¹¹⁶ This revelatory moment, however, does more than reinvest a digitally-mediated real with a sense of physical substance. In the process of revealing its concrete existence, the perceptual force of the physical world becomes linked to the intervening qualities of digital filming – namely, a sharp resolution at nighttime, a capacity to see through shadows at great distances, and a detailed rendering of material and atmospheric properties. As the digital image's sensory differences default from more established and implicitly photochemical standards of perceptual realism, this quality of errancy becomes a kind of affective supplement to the image, an expressive layer that probes and questions the underlying relation between physical reality and our mediating structures of technological and organic perception. Thus, the resulting interplay between the image's figural compositions and dispersed sensate configurations thematize how digitally-mediated images are redrawing our perceptual limits while simultaneously interrogating where those limits might be, particularly when the worldly grounds of reality are being concretely and continuously reshaped by digital systems operating outside the scope of human sensory awareness.

Through the veduta's forceful solicitation of our bodily senses, *Holy Motors* advances a mode of realism responsively thematizing a physical world affected by such imperceptible operations. As I have explored through Friedberg's treatise on separate systems of visuality, the panoramic view vacillates between the distinct visual structures designated by the immersive and

¹¹⁶ Elsaesser, "Realism," 17.

the enframed. But even more specifically, the film interrogates a post–digital relation to physical reality through a dramatically dispossessive connotation: Jean’s decision to jump across this precipice. This image both accentuates and confounds the notion of the screen as a barrier between viewer and image, between the material and embodied situation of spectatorial space and the virtualized domain of the screen. Through dynamics of affect and phenomenology, critics like Bao, as well as Laura Marks, Steven Shaviro, Vivian Sobchack, and Linda Williams, have argued against the priority attributed to this separation.¹¹⁷ And while they approach these debates from different orientations, a range of film scholars including Karen Redrobe, Daniel Morgan, and D.N. Rodowick have conversely argued for the ethics of preserving an operative account of the screen as barrier, a distinction that enables a nonappropriative relation to otherness while foregrounding the limits of our self–sovereignty.¹¹⁸

Through its position within discourses on digitized mediality, *Holy Motors* offers another route into these debates through a metaphoric of the night. For if the frame for Friedberg demarcates the empirical and epistemological distinction between material reality and a virtual mediascape, this discriminating function has been all but disabled by the ubiquity of technical circuits and data flows in contemporary life. Here, by referencing the erosion of the digital frame I am not recapitulating Hansen’s view that “the digital image *explodes* the frame” due to its “almost complete flexibility and addressability, its numerical basis, and its constitutive ‘virtuality’”.¹¹⁹ As we have seen, the unfixed and polymorphous technics and ontology of digital recording are not only constrained by purely cultural conventions of cinematic imaging but rather by the material and financial constraints of specific workflows, labor relations, and available resources required to

¹¹⁷ Laura Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and The Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thought: Embodiment and Visual Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, Excess,” in *Feminist Film Theory*, ed. Sue Thornham (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 267–281.

¹¹⁸ Karen Beckman, *Crash: Cinema and the Politics of Speed and Stasis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Daniel Morgan, “Where are we?: camera movements and the problem of point of view,” *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 14, no. 2 (2016): 222–248.

¹¹⁹ Hansen, *New Philosophy*, 8.

display how “data can be materialized in an almost limitless array of framing.”¹²⁰ At the same time, this is not to say that such instantiations of the digital are not possible – and Hansen attentively parses the particular experiences they can generate – but the new media forms he addresses are nonetheless significantly removed from the economic infrastructures and exhibition networks in which cinematic images of the profilmic world circulate. Within the purview of the perceptible world that cinematic images still desire to uncover, the erosion of the frame signifies the experiential rather than material or ontological extension of digital media. Over and above its empirical functions and effects, Hodge argues that collective knowledge of technology’s saturating presence has propelled digital media into a communal structure of feeling, a “felt if invisible infrastructure ... This situation cannot be explained by the logic of digital media so much as our existential and perceptual, in a word our experiential, relation to them.”¹²¹ Thus *Holy Motors* reinfects if not reverses debates regarding the frame as a permeable border between a virtual image and material reality that finds its most persistent analogy in a nocturnal dissolution of temporal and perceptual distinctions. The disaggregating phenomenology of the night conscripts attention to the borderzone of the frame as already eroded. However, it is precisely because of the framed image’s anachronistic or collapsed status that the film strives to revitalize a strategic belief in its resilience, and the heuristic modes of perceptual insight enabled by its focalized attunement to the world.

Needless to say, such a process of recovery risks consolidating a reassuring image of reality as an illusory and reactionary totality. But an aesthetics of the digital night oscillates between inciting and hindering vision, as well as ratifying a skeptical, and thus ceaselessly interrogative, view of the external world synched to the rhythm of Jean’s halting movement. As a result, the nocturnal image reflectively distances itself from a pretense of self-enclosure or autonomy while nonetheless discovering new layers of the phenomenal world. It affirms a perceptual relation to reality while forestalling the possibility of the world’s transparency, a means

¹²⁰ Ibid., 34.

¹²¹ Hodge, *Digital Psycho*, 848.

of insisting on the role of desire and projection in world-making while also visualizing obscurity as a concrete tactic within technological operations of contemporary power.

Just as Oscar leaves the balcony, Eva Grace's lover rushes to join her in an apparent suicide pact. We do not see the moment in which they leap, but once Oscar walks out into the streets, we gaze upon its (temporary?) aftermath. The couple's corpses lie in front of the parked limousine that waits to ferry Oscar off to his new appointment. But despite the obvious distress this sight provokes in him, it remains ambiguous whether their deaths are permanent or provisional. Throughout the film, even mortality no longer appears like an absolute constraint. Since Jean shares Oscar's shape-shifting profession, we assume she will also reconstitute herself after posing dead for a while, as we have witnessed Oscar die and recover several times during this same day. This apparent imperviousness to dying does not suggest an omnipotent fantasy of immortality but rather a condition of frayed and weary continuity I call deathlessness. While the term immortality seems to celebrate disembodiment as an existence unimpeded by material and time-bound constraints, deathlessness's specific register captures the laboring endurance of bodies across depleted reservoirs of energy and will. Here a conspicuous element of this *mise-en-scène* further underscores the term's specific conjoinment of fatigue and dread. Just to the left of the limousine, an electric billboard displays an advertisement for *La Nuit Blanche Paris*, the yearly festival in which the city's stores, museums, galleries are open all night long. While the festival is obviously celebratory in spirit, out of context, and indeed in a deserted city street populated by strange actors and ambiguously dead bodies, the sign acquires an uncanny valence connecting the phrase "*nuit blanche*" to its original connotation of insomnia.

As Elizabeth Bronfen has observed, the term *nuit blanche* describes the insomniac's awareness that respite from mental and bodily fatigue are nowhere near, forcing us instead "to endure a state of body and mind that severs [us] from the consciousness of the day, even while making it impossible to work through psychic residues of the past day at that other scene, the

unconscious.”¹²² This allusion to insomnia’s liminality ties the bodies’ deathlessness to persisting in a phenomenal world with diminished alertness or presence, and without any withdrawal in sleep. Such a condition of burnt out perpetuity reflects misgivings about digital images’ attenuated relation to physical reality and connects this anxiety to apprehensions regarding digital media’s nonstop coordination and oversight of our actions. Thus, as a heuristic device, deathlessness supplants film and media theory’s obsessive interest in the death of specific apparatuses and viewing cultures, directing our attention instead to the modes of insight cinema might offer in response to algorithmic tactics mining and storing our activities into permanent databases. By gesturing towards the weariness of interminable duration, deathlessness offers affective density to a paranoid sense of living within networks of social control that seem to offer no escape or ending.¹²³ At the same time, however, the film demonstrates a commitment to the cinematic image’s capacity to reveal our relation to the world. As we will see, this catecheted energy towards cinema’s futurity is developed through the metaphorical figuration of father and daughter relations that recur throughout the film.

Shame/Ideality, and Father–Daughter Genealogies

Holy Motors takes place over twenty–four hours and its darkening sky registers the cyclical progress of morning to night to reflect the continuity of lived duration. However, there is a notably elongated temporal ellipsis between the appointment at Père Lachaise cemetery and the next job in a non–descript residential neighborhood. The former sequence takes place during the day but ends with Monsieur Merde falling asleep in a subterranean cave whose enclosure prevents natural light to index time’s progression. Once we see Oscar at his next rendez–vous it is late in the evening, as both nocturnal darkness and the events of the next appointment make unequivocally clear. Oscar now plays the role of a father on his way to pick up his adolescent daughter, Angèle, from her “first teenage party” with all it symbolizes of the first tentative steps

¹²² Elizabeth Bronfen, *Night Passages: Philosophy, Literature, and Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 160.

¹²³ Carax quoted in Lim, “A Farewell to Celluloid.”

towards sexual maturity. As soon as she enters her father's car, Angèle reports that she navigated the party successfully and danced with a series of boys. Her father is clearly proud, rehearsing the benign paternal jealousy of this formulaic scenario. But this confirming feeling is fractured by the unexpected phone call he receives from his daughter's friend. Unlike Angèle, she is still at the party where she fit in effortlessly and calls to make sure her companion is okay after she noticed her abrupt disappearance. Not only does this call expose Angèle's story as a lie but it renders her social ineptness all the more pathetic against her friend's success. Far from proving her command of adolescence's rewarded poses, Angèle's social performance at the party was an embarrassing flop. She appears ashamed by her awkwardness and her perpetually frustrated attempts to be accepted. But in what Jacqueline Rose describes as shame's curious tautology she also feels shame for her shame, pressuring her to conjure this false scenario to her father.¹²⁴

This sequence is stylistically and tonally distinct from the rest of the film – privileging a naturalistic *mise-en-scène* over a baroque extravagance and the performative conventions of psychological transparency above the enigmatic character of Oscar's other appointments. As if to mark its peculiarity within a given sequence, this appointment begins with a deep-focus, establishing shot that frames the white limousine in the middle ground as it parks underneath an overpass bridge. The shot is organized around a schematically graphic design that insistently reiterates its geometric parameters in the recurring rectilinear figures formed by the railings, the bridge, and the limousine's compositional play of long horizontal axes against shorter vertical lines. The street beneath the bridge, for instance, bifurcates the image into a clear foreground, background and middle ground while the supportive beam of the bridge and the overpass opens into a distinct pocket of rectangular space within the visual field that redoubles the shape of the cinematic frame itself. This sense of obsessive spatial compartmentalization not only particularizes this space as a specific place, as the curiously legible street plaque on the bridge's beam makes evident. But the shot's attentiveness to the formal topography of the image's

¹²⁴ Jacqueline Rose, *On Not Being Able to Sleep*, 1.

ground, its explicit delineation of metrics of proximity and distance, draws our eye to the dramatic diagonal axis of Oscar's movement from the limousine in the middle ground to the smaller car that emerges as the camera shifts to follow Oscar's body. The shot's meticulous and visually striking geometry appoints the otherwise unremarkable act of walking as the crossing of a symbolic threshold – from the luxury of the limousine to the modesty of the beat-up car, from the limousine's glass-tinted sense of enclosure to the car's comparative transparency, from the preceding atmospherics of daytime to nighttime and, encompassing all these dynamics, from an experience of foreclosure to aperture.

This sequence is also the first night-exterior shot to attune the viewer to the film's prevalently nocturnal aesthetic, since as Champetier observed, "Practically the entire film was filmed at night-time."¹²⁵ The scene's precise and systematic spatial grammar, its relay of the urban architecture's material density on one hand lavishly showcases the Red EPIC's rendering of visual details in the night. Yet it is precisely this visual sharpness that brings into relief areas of still impenetrable opacity. But while darkness is the most notable and obvious dimension of the night, this nocturnal image is also suffused by directional and fill light, as well as the available sources of urban illumination such as street lamps. Far from inconspicuous or diffuse, this kind of urban light does not register as translucently white or diaphanous but casts a visibly sallow presence owing to mercury and sodium vapors that in turn casts a strikingly yellow layer on the spaces and objects it reaches. This same kind of yellow light can be seen in several key moments throughout the film – Jean and Oscar walking towards La Samaritaine or Oscar crossing the street in a balaklava to assassinate the banker. Champetier has described her relationship to this potentially unflattering and nontelegenic light as one of "compliance" while also

¹²⁵ Caroline Champetier, "Cinematographer Caroline Champetier, AFC, discusses her work on "Holy Motors" by Léos Carax," *AFC*, 18 July 2012, <http://www.afcinema.com/Cinematographer-Caroline-Champetier-AFC-discusses-her-work-on-Holy-Motors-by-Leos-Carax.html?lang=fr>.

noting that it is an often overlooked component of the physical reality that “makes Paris at night.”¹²⁶

By describing a particular quality of light as an integral component of the city’s topography and character, whose properties, moreover, can be shaped or yielded like a material substance (the light’s “compliance”), Champetier calls attention the atmospheric quality of light as an obdurate force or substantial presence in its own right. Extending a material status to light thus runs counter to an association of luminosity as colorless or merely transparent, a matterless vector of transmission and inscription. By means of comparison, in Eugenie Brinkema’s discussion of the formal problematics of light in Michael Haneke’s *Funny Games* she describes the light cast by a knocked lamp as “illumination [that] shows itself instead of presencing objects and the world.”¹²⁷ The strikingly yellow coloration of urban light in *Holy Motors*, in contrast, brings into visibility objects and bodies in the world while simultaneously announcing its own mediating presence through its materialized phosphorescence and particularized transparency. Its recurrence as an expressive layer to the image throughout the film appears polyvalent in relation to its environment. Yellow light presences objects and bodies but also penetrates, subtends and saturates them. Its radiance possesses a spectral quality – oscillating between substantiality and substancelessness that registers affectively as a kind of hauntedness.

Once Oscar starts driving the car, its spatial interior appears far more permeable than the limousine’s sealed enclosure from external light. As the father drives rapidly through Paris, the darkness of the nighttime city penetrates the vehicle’s interior with indistinct patterns of urban light that appear blurred through the windows. Oscar’s driving alters his body’s sensory schema, and our proprioceptive relation to him, through the speed of his automobile that seems heightened by the diegetic music’s unpredictable shifts across harmonies and musical genres. The windows’ transparency also ensures that the car’s movement exposes and connects Oscar’s

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 108.

body with the atmospheric and environmental phenomena of the outside world, in stark contrast to the limousine whose ludicrously vast interior seems not only impenetrable to its external environment but also spatially incompatible with the vehicle's determinate shape. This impression of a porous "vessel" extends from the vehicle to the father's embodiment as his smoking materializes his breath's movement from the inside to the outside of his body. As darkness in cinema challenges the models of spectatorship limited to vision, the image of cigarette smoke – its wispy contours all the more discernible in the night – animates haptic, taste and smell perception through what Laura Marks has described as the "embodied response" activated by sensory memory.¹²⁸

In *The Smoking Book*, Lesley Stern's hybrid memoir and cultural study of smoking, she observes that "when a cigarette is consumed, smoke is produced, what comes in goes out...but what takes place between the going and the coming, between the inside and outside, between figure and ground, object and landscape – what entangled conversions eventuate?"¹²⁹ Smoke's movement does not constitute a one way passage from inside to outside but becomes rather a fluid variable that infiltrates the lungs, gets exhaled, and once consumed is then reabsorbed by the body and its surroundings as odor and stain, leaving residues of toxicity and craving in its wake. By moving between the body and its environment through different material and sensory registers, and across sensations of pleasure and malignity, smoke not only traverses thresholds of interiority and surface. In the process, it also unsettles their felt distinctions, entailing flesh in a continuum not only with nonhuman materiality but also with the elusive physicality of air and chemicals.

The exceptional sense of interabsorption between exterior and internal spaces distinguishes this scene at the level not only of mise-en-scène but also in terms of its edited coordination of different places. Before the narrative establishes Angèle as the daughter to the driver played by Oscar, a brief medium shot reveals her isolated figure pouring gold glitter over

¹²⁸ Marks, *The Skin of The Film*, xvii.

¹²⁹ Lesley Stern, *The Smoking Book* (Chicago: Chicago University Press), 213.

herself. There is a hallucinatory quality to this “insert” as none of the other appointments throughout the film feature shots of characters outside of spaces Oscar does not directly inhabit. The enigmatic quality of this apparition establishes in aesthetic terms the sequence’s driving concern with dynamics of permeability and openness that it maps out in terms of both affect (intergenerational and cross–generational) and cinematic materiality. Moreover, the shot invites us to look for the remnants of this glitter once the girl reunites with her father. It is only after Angèle’s ruse is discovered, in fact, that we realize how that shot is narratively motivated: Angèle locked herself in the bathroom out of the anxiety and shame of social exclusion and the dusting of gold glitter on her body “authenticates” her false account. But this belated knowledge does not limit the resonance of the shot’s stylized and enigmatic visuality into pure plot, owing to the surplus of cinematic and material associations aroused by the image of glitter. Suggesting both luxury and its mass–produced approximation, glitter calls attention to the surface of the image, or the image as surface, as its residual glimmer calls attention to macro–sensorial perception in the dark enabled by the HD image. Glitter also denotes a cheap surrogate for gold dust suggesting the relation between fake and authentic. If Angèle’s shamed and awkward bearing calls attention to the dispersal of glitter across her body, it thus also alludes to a sequence of structural binaries at the core of recent debates in film studies – stylized composition and unvarnished realism, surface and depth, celluloid and digital.

As José Esteban Muñoz has argued, dancing can threaten or at least unsettle normative organizations of the social, as gestic movements between dancers also act as intersubjective negotiations of corporeal surfaces, allowing for the affective exchange of foreign energy between bodies that alters how they are imagined individually and in relation to each other.¹³⁰ By that same token, however, these dynamics can also be punitive and normativizing; particularly when dancing’s potential alliance with self–dissolution is instead harnessed towards normative social rituals. Dancing, particularly in the context of sanctioned teenage parties, often romances and

¹³⁰ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Utopia* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

libidinizes the reproduction of conventional gendered roles, as is evident in the father's conviction that these seemingly benign protocols initiate distinctions between proper and improper identities. The scene therefore reverses the evidentiary status typically assigned to materiality (over and above the insubstantial), as here the gold dust does not symbolize the possession of any sort of attribute but instead marks and shames Angèle's distance from the very "identity" the glitter was meant to fabricate. Its residues glimmer on her skin as an unsuccessful surrogate to the legitimating but impalpable quality of affect associated with binding successfully with the approval of other boys and girls. As evidence of her failure, the gold dust also expresses her ongoing and unresolved desire to stay proximate, however deceptively, to the valorizing and purely symbolic luster which the glitter abstractly registers.

The gold dust, moreover, does not form a secondary skin around Angèle, Goldfinger style. Its residues on her forehead and temple are glimpsed intermittently rather than fully or possessively seen. They appear like granular details on a nocturnal visual field whose fleeting quality arrests perception. Captivating the eye with their intermittent visibility, the residual dust suggests an optical field beneath the range of habitual perception specific to the hyperphotographic range of digital cameras. While glitter denotes a commodified aesthetic of hyper-stylized surfaces evoking the visual mandate of *le cinéma du look*, its residual trace on Angèle's face appears too fine and fleeting for her close-ups to achieve the status of full-fledged spectacle. But the glimpses of gold nonetheless impart an enigmatic, uncodified meaning that sets these images apart from conventional or habitual configurations of vision. Flashing in and out of view, the gold's intermittent visibility suggests an oscillating movement between the surface and depth of Angèle's skin as well as the inner and outer limits of the optical field. In the process, it also calls attention to how technologically-mediated vision structures and expands our apprehension of physical reality. In keeping with the film's insistent interrogation of the digital, the intermittent visibility of gold particles in nocturnal shadows announces a macro-sensorial precision in lowlight conditions associated, and arguably specific to, HD digital aesthetics.

There is a double valence to this cinematic image: its surface appearance reveals a space of striking and determinate forms yet the expansive presence of darkness and the barely visible residues of glitter gestures towards an indeterminate or occluded dimension of significance outside the remit of the optical. While darkness and shadows have long functioned as symbols for phantasmatic or subconscious meaning, the dispersive, dust-like consistency of glitter evokes the transient and chimerical temporality of matter as another phenomenon elusive to the naked eye. Steven Connor has addressed the particular “material imagination” that different kinds of dust – from dirt to pollen to glitter – evokes as “the extra surge of transformative power than can be produced by grinding things down to their finest and most undifferentiated form.”¹³¹ Like nighttime, dust therefore materializes the impression of temporal belatedness, the enduring presence in an amorphous and diffusely unsettled state of once integral forms that have since been eclipsed or decomposed. In a film whose striking visuals overtly thematize the transition from analog to digital, the scattered presence of granular particles on Angèle’s skin might also allude to the visual texture of grain, and the elemental composition of analog film that haunts *Holy Motors* with its absence. Grain’s optical layer corresponds to the crystals dispersed randomly on a film frame whose variable size and number determines the resolution of the image and its capacity to render detail. Instead of the crystals and metals of film, *Holy Motors*’ digital aesthetic achieves its resolution through pixels fixed to a grid. Approximating the random dispersal of grain on a film frame rather than the structured stasis of the pixel, the gold dust symbolically marks the absence of the analog image’s constitutive materiality. In doing so, it links this absence to another form of symbolic “lack,” the ideality to which the daughter aspired and whose approximation and failure the glitter simultaneously registers.

The visibility of the minute particles of glitter in the dark, however, expresses the detail and resolution in low light conditions that the Red EPIC 4K digital camera can produce. In other words, by gesturing towards what Rothöler calls “the lingering existence of an old visual

¹³¹ Steven Connor, “Pulverulence,” *Cabinet*, no.35 (Fall 2009) <http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/35/connor.php>.

prototype” through the very digital tools supposedly accelerating their endangerment, the scene inducts us towards the expressive possibilities of high–definition digital aesthetics even as it expresses a nostalgic sense of loss for analog film.¹³² The particles of glitter on Angèle’s face accentuate the Red EPIC’s precision of detail, calling attention not only to themselves but to the optical texture of their surrounding environment – Angèle’s hair matted with sweat and the moisture on the bridge of her nose and just above her lips. Neither wet nor dry, the filmic image reveals this intermediate juncture of “sweatiness” with surprising sharpness, a liminal state that exists between the glands and the surface of the skin, between atmosphere and embodiment, materiality and evaporation, and which is rarely described with such minute accuracy in nighttime images. As Connor notes “The dust formed of previously hard substances is often believed to retain the force or properties of the originals.”¹³³ As Angèle’s glitter emulates the diffuse sheen of gold dust and its associations with fantasy and incantation, we might also say that in retaining some of the “force” of the analog image, *Holy Motors*’ digital aesthetic also strives for a new sort of magic. As tiny details on the optical field that are shiny and captivating while also only partly perceptible, the particles of glitter paradoxically register different valences of excess – the optical unconscious “in excess” of the habitually visible, the decorative excess glitter conventionally denotes, as well as levels of meaning – affective, psychic and material – that are always in excess of the image’s informational or symbolic semantics.

While most of Oscar’s “appointments” describe scenarios that can be easily read as meditations on media history – from references to slapstick in the scene at Père Lachaise cemetery to the CGI sequence in the motion capture studio – the relationship between this scene in the car and issues of technological emergence and obsolescence remains decidedly more opaque. The film critic and scholar Lauren Bliss has noted, however, that this scene foregrounds the thread of father–daughter filiation running across the movie, a motif connecting Angèle to “popular culture’s antipodal daughter” Kylie Minogue, as well as to Édith Scob whose role in *Eyes*

¹³² Rothöler, “Where Film Drops Off,” 149.

¹³³ Connor, “Pulverulence.”

Without a Face as a woman inadvertently disfigured by her serial killer father provides one of *Holy Motors*' most memorable visual allusions.¹³⁴ We might also include two other figures to Bliss' list: the niece in the deathbed scene who mourns the passing of a paternal uncle, another cinematic reference to Luis Buñuel's *Viridiana*, and Carax's own daughter whose close-up anchors the film's transition from the dream palace in the opening to Oscar's first appointment. As Carax's only child with Golubeva, her presence becomes yet another instance inscribing the actress' death into the film, an absence that this sequence develops even further when it invokes the figure of the absent mother into a kind of excessive presence. As the dad argues with Angèle, it emerges that his wife embodies an ideal of perfection which their daughter believes she can never adequately fulfill as she "takes after her father."

Through its alignment with the film's intertextual and extratextual movement, dynamics of familial filiation in *Holy Motors* contribute to the film's overwhelming sense of an epochal and generational transition, mobilizing the trope of familial resemblance to ask how, and in what forms, the cinematic past might persist into the future. This familial trope's persistence throughout the film brings into view how kinship models recurrently function as metaphors for cinema – through the lateral axis of contemporary 'waves' imagined as brother–or more rarely–sisterhoods, as well as vertical lines of generational influence and descent. For Rodowick, the dispersive movement of shared biological traits across generations analogizes how emergent mediums inherit their attributes from a combination of pre–existing media, such that "moving–image media are related more by a logic of Wittgensteinian family resemblances than by clear and essential differences."¹³⁵ The gendered expectations and cultural norms such familial structures imply and reproduce, however, remain undertheorized in current debates on media genealogy as they relate to the passage from analog to digital cinema. In "recalling the importance of the maternal register within cinematic discourse," Lucy Fischer identifies how the language of childbirth,

¹³⁴ Lauren Bliss, "A Prayer for Daughters – Hail Holy Motors: A Spontaneous Collective: Part 2" *Lola*, Issue 3: Masks (September 2012), http://www.lolajournal.com/3/hail_holy_motors_2.html.

¹³⁵ Rodowick, *Virtual Life*, 87.

allusions to the womb, parturition, conception, birth, pervade descriptions of media geneology and film production, specifically in relation to instances of technological emergence and transition.¹³⁶ However, at the same time, she observes that the subjectivity of motherhood remains circumscribed in film theory to genres that explicitly thematize this position, such as melodrama, unlike the omnipresent and thus superstructural 'law of the father.' While discourses on motherhood have played a pivotal role in film theory's engagement with genre, sound, and language, such feminist and pioneering work – as Karen Redrobe has recently argued – has been sidelined in current debates in film studies that grapple with the crisis or revolution of digital media, despite the enduring tendency to invoke the family as a metaphor for media geneology.¹³⁷ This discursive crab-walk in relation to gender seems particularly striking given how motherhood, as Fischer argues, has always thematized "a site of 'crisis'" – which is precisely the language routinely invoked to describe digital media's profound restructuring of contemporary filmmaking and distribution.¹³⁸ Given how discussions of generational passage and perpetuation persist in contemporary debates on cinematic ontology, such a critical excision implicitly reinstates a patrilinear economy as a global, immutable and foundational force, while sidelining the maternal as the particularized, and therefore negligible and decadent, terrain of film theory.

However, *Holy Motors'* emphasis on the father-daughter axis is not to the exclusion of the maternal but is rather in alliance with it. The film evokes the mother's her absence not only in this "appointment" but also in the photo of the deceased Golubeva at the film's conclusion, and in the preceding scene where the model Kay M (Eva Mendes) acts as an ill-fitting maternal surrogate to Monsieur Merde, singing him a lullaby in a Pietá-like composition while he sports a conspicuously unremarkable erection (conspicuous precisely because it is neither art cinema's flaccid cock nor pornography's enormous phallus). The film's stress on father-daughter relations,

¹³⁶ Lucy Fischer, *Cinematernity: Film, Motherhood, Genre* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 1996.

¹³⁷ Karen Redrobe, "Kinematics: Adopted Methods, Incestuous Intellectuals, and Ineffable Relations," Keynote Lecture, University of Pittsburgh Film Studies Conference: Family Ties: Kinship, Collaboration, and Power in Film and Media Conference, October 1, 2016.

¹³⁸ Fischer, *Cinematernity*, 30.

in other words, does not simply displace or annul the symbolic mother but it rather brings her structural function as a “missing” third term into relief – and implicitly asks where the mother has disappeared in our thinking of genealogical sequence in cinema.

This particular triangulation of family – one present and the other dead – can be normatively read as a culturally “diminished” form of kinship in its incomplete and therefore oblique relation to the iconic image of the nuclear family. While sons have been culturally positioned as essential for patriarchal succession, the daughter’s futurity, in contrast, has been historically imagined, particularly in psychoanalysis and structural anthropology, as perpetuating not her own biological line of descent but that of an external familial structure into which she is absorbed by marriage. A mother’s absence instead implies within the terms of this cultural imaginary a lack of domesticated and affective labor that would provide the family with its emotional core and symbolic coherence. Within a teleology that naturalizes cultural continuity as heterosexual reproduction, a family composed of a father, daughter and a dead mother is of course still legible within its symbolic terms – but in a somewhat more unsettled or diminished form. Such an oblique remove from the idealized norm of the family might appear modest and unassuming. However, its repeated figuration in the film still makes visible, while also troubling, the paternalistic sense of generational sequence embedded in the discourse of film ontology that acts as the film’s conceptual ground. Thus, *Holy Motors* opens a triangular field of resonance between its density of intertextual allusions, its melancholic homage to vanishing film practices, and the haunted space of the lost or absent mother. These positions of temporal belatedness, of witnessing the end of both a cultural or biographical lifespan, are thematized and unified by the lateness associated with the night – the microcosm of a day standing in for the macroscale of a life and even an epoch. However, while the night in the twentieth-century has been commonly associated with a time for withdrawal from consciousness, a parenthetical space for nonactivity necessary for the day-to-day reproduction of the social, in *Holy Motors* the night is a space of inhabitation, of constant labor and alleatory encounters that allows for a closer scrutiny to the terms through which life is reproduced as daily experience.

As soon as Angèle alludes to her multiple dance partners, the obvious contentment beneath her father's fictive jealousy expresses his satisfaction with the promise of social coherence newly available to his family. The father happily underscores his displacement by any of his daughters' imagined suitors. Far from implying his erasure, this relinquishment acts as the structural imperative for the generational legibility he desires. Angèle's "success" in attracting the interest of boys codes her into valorized gender norms, allowing her father to intuit a future that will translate their family lineage into culturally stabilizing terms. Angèle's fun at the party suggests her capacity to flourish within normative modes of intimacy and sociality, implying a future of free and painless movement within the confirming frameworks of generational sequence and stability. To her father, evidence of this belonging invests the past her parents occupy in relation to such a future with a sense of historical fullness and significance.¹³⁹ By forecasting the generic ideality of normative womanhood in the present, the daughter validates and redeems even the more unresolved and disorderly aspects of her parents' lives, as it simplifies their histories as essential components to the ennobling and "timeless" narrative of reproductive continuity. When Angèle's deception is revealed, the father angrily attempts to repair this fissured sense of generational and futural legibility at the more immediate level of his daughter's deception but also in relation to the family's right to be seen and read within legitimating social frameworks; unobstructed by misfitting, negativity or even the desire for better alternatives. The father understands these normative intimacies not as aspirational cultural practices but as natural and synchronic to Angèle's desires and desirability and therefore immanent to her very bodily constitution. For her father, Angèle's social belonging, in fact, is fundamentally a question of physical resemblance and genetic inheritance, and narrowly limited towards the approval of boys. When he grills her on why she did not dance but instead hid in the bathroom, she responds that boys don't like her as she is not attractive. "Stop it," he admonishes, refusing her reading "One

¹³⁹ My reading of affective "fullness" and symbolic adequation with regards to the intergenerational repetition of norm draw on literature I discuss more extensively in earlier parts of the chapter via Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); Kaja Silverman, *Threshold of the Visible World* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

day, you'll be attractive all right – like your mother.” The father thus frames his daughter's ideality as the already determined outcome of an ordinal sequence predicated on the presumption of physical likeness that undergirds ideas around gendered lineage. But Angèle refutes this reading strategy, proposing her legibility in terms of her loved but clearly unideal father, with his beat-up car and air of exhaustion, rather than her off-screen but venerated mother: “People say I take after you,” she responds. This cross-sex filiation does not refuse resemblance as the term through which generational continuity becomes visible. Rather, it invites us to consider the less articulated dynamic of physical resemblance across gendered lines as a symbol of less legible trajectories of continuity. Familial likeness in these cross-sex dyads, in fact, are more uncertain as they do not imply the reiterative reproduction of norms and roles but thematize, like the night, a more opaque and culturally inarticulable horizon.

As a site of generational sequencing and passage, the father–daughter dyad is thus critical in reading the film's thematic preoccupation with the night as a transitional timespace wherein overlooked and deviant practices coexist with everyday activities and cyclical phenomena. This familial relation, however, also refines our understanding of the film's overarching preoccupation with media genealogy through a symbolic analogy wherein daughters are to fathers as new digital media are to older analog prototypes. The work of British video artist Tacita Dean is another notable corpus that employs father–daughter relations to symbolize cycles of media transition, emergence and outphasing. In many of her filmic portrait works, for example, Dean captures artistic forefathers into whom she projects an overt paternal identification, a reverence that coincides with her expressive display of both celluloid film's familiar and underexplored aesthetic attributes. For Dean, the uncertainty inherent to the symbolic asymmetry between father–daughter, however, gestures toward the imperiled presence of film in the future, casting her resistance to digital media as a kind of daughter's duty against the odds. But in *Holy Motors* the daughter is instead closely aligned with a new digital image whose “legitimacy,” to extend the patriarchal metaphor even further, gets authorized by her cultural and formal obedience to the aesthetic and perceptual conventions of celluloid film. D.N. Rodowick's

melancholic meditations on the disappearance of film stock, for instance, approves of digital video if it can simulate the isomorphic indexicality of film. Likewise, in *What Cinema Is!*, Dudley articulates a film aesthetic that discovers and displays the external world, rather than manipulating its appearance, and which ultimately “can coexist with and profit from new technologies.”¹⁴⁰ Given the waning of a medium-based ontology, mapping the historical and sociocultural terms for filmmaking’s persistence across technological change is indubitably an urgent imperative for film producers, archivists, and scholars alike. But these discourses can at times privilege and prioritize adherence to existing perceptual and aesthetic standards in a way that neglects the need for phenomenologically and epistemologically-oriented accounts of the digital image’s aesthetic specificities.

Surveying a breadth of critical debates on the transition between analog and the digital, Giovanna Fossati provides a useful synthesis of these responses as “stretching between two perspectives: one that identifies the advent of digital technology as a radical change in the nature of the medium, and the other that inscribes digital technology in a broader media landscape where film is one of the participants.”¹⁴¹ The father–daughter metaphor in *Holy Motors*, therefore, enables us to think of media geneology generationally in a way that sustains, rather than resolves, dialectical tensions between continuity and rupture, obedience and betrayal. As an optic to think through the transitional movement between media, familial resemblance symbolizes the constitutive connections between older and newer cinematic forms while also acknowledging that they are creative tools which belong in multiple technological genealogies that do not always overlap. Even more specifically, the film’s focus on the father–daughter line of filiation and its symbolic indeterminacy puts pressure on our assumptions regarding how genealogies are rendered visible in the first place, since this familial axis rarely structures how extended generational sequences are organized. As *Holy Motors*, and this scene in particular, frequently

¹⁴⁰ Rodowick, *Virtual Life*, 37; Andrew, *What Cinema*, 7.

¹⁴¹ Giovanna Fossati, *From Grain to Pixel: The Archival Life of Film in Transition* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 16.

positions paternal authority as prohibitive and domesticating to daughters, at times the movie even suggests that the digital's divergences from analog film act as liberating forms of parental disobedience that might re-envision cinema's relation to the world in surprising and aleatory ways.

Masks

By means of conclusion, I return to a moment in *Holy Motors* when its dynamics of spectatorial subjectivity mirrored in the film's moments of spectacular opacity are most explicitly foregrounded – the film's final scenes tracking the movements of the enigmatic Céline. After leaving Oscar for his last appointment of the day, Céline drives through semi-empty suburban streets to return the limousine to the company's depot. A cluster of returning limousines creates a brief gridlock in front of the garage entrance, allowing us to stare at the company's signage, starkly lit in neon against the nocturnal darkness. Rendered virtually, the lettering spells out the movie's title (or almost – the second *o* of *motors* is only partially lit, its sickle shape symbolizing the waning energy of the returning drivers and hints at the unspecified financial stress of the enterprise for which they work). Once she has parked, Céline unpins her chignon, shaking her head so her blonde hair falls evenly over her shoulders before carefully placing a latex mask on her face. As she gets ready to leave, she makes a call on her smartphone informing whoever might be on the other line that she is on her way home. This gesture takes on an uncanny dimension due to the disjunction between Céline's marvelously strange appearance and our familiarity with such prosaic moments as mere reflexes in a cycle of habitual routine. But we are also invited to read this scene as an inversion of our expectations as they relate to embodied screen performance. For at the very moment in which the reserved and mostly taciturn chauffeur reveals something of her private life, her features are effaced by the mask's generic contours.

By obscuring her individual appearance, Céline's process of disguise draws attention instead to the more general status of the facial image in cinema. Intimately associated with close-up techniques that magnify and isolate it from corporeal and temporal continuums, the allure of

the facial image has been extensively discussed in film theory by Bela Balasz to Gilles Deleuze and Mary Ann Doane as a highly equivocal surface – simultaneously the locus of subjectivity and an irreducible opacity. For while cinema amplifies a face's individual particularities, it also registers its most minute movements, pointing to an interiority it can never adequately or exhaustively symbolize. This inexpressive mask, in fact, is as close as *Holy Motors* comes to articulating a sphere of private intimacy for Céline, as if aiming to overwrite a knowable interiority as the standard for an adequately realized identity. But the film's final moments could also entertain another, more radical, possibility: that certain modes of illegibility might in fact gesture to a new kind of social presence, one that refuses the legitimating authority of normative structures and practices for recognition.

This act of self-effacement is also a moment of unabashed cinephilia alluding to actress Edith Scob's most famous role in George Franju's horror film *Eyes Without a Face* (1960), produced more than fifty years before *Holy Motors*. In this film, Scob plays a surgeon's daughter whose porcelain mask conceals a face disfigured by an accident for which her father was responsible. Maniacally obsessed with reversing this damage, her father kidnaps and murders young women in an attempt to graph their features on to his daughter's ravaged face. The mask initially acts as an interface between the spectator and a horror so unsettling it exceeds symbolization. But as the daughter's body continuously rejects the foreign tissue from the murdered women, the mask gradually comes to signify a state of perpetual immanence, a blankness irreconcilable with the social injunction to be adequately intelligible to others. By the film's conclusion, in fact, the daughter decides to let this vacancy be. She puts an end to her father's violence by allowing him to be mauled to death by dogs she sets free from cages so she can walk out into the night, relinquishing any hope of a confirming reciprocity with any viable norm for recognition. As the masked Céline leaves *Holy Motors*' depot, Scob evokes that earlier film's iconic finale, reanimating the implicit proposal of her mask's insistent blankness – that the recognition of the self's irresolvable incoherence and the impossibility of ever fully 'appearing' to oneself or to another is an unending ethical stance that never ceases to make more areas of

psychic life elusive and unintelligible. This allusion creates a temporal bifurcation that alludes to multiple configurations of the filmic image: an indexical “mask” which embalmed Scob’s youthful likeness more than forty years ago, a homonym for a device used to reduce the vertical or horizontal extension of a lens, the newly digital “plasticity” vis-a-vis the simultaneous fragility and hardness of its predecessor, a surface for duplicity and concealment as per *le cinéma du look*. But it is the unique affectivity of this image that reaffirms the photographic basis of film as a medium of loss that brings the past into view across the irreducible distance of time, tracing with a sense of both reverence and tenderness the underrealized potential of Scob’s respected though uneven career through its evocation of its point of origin fifty-two years ago. It is this purely virtual dimension of her past and being that appears to animate her luminescence throughout the film, amorously detailed in close-up, binding her in an impersonal intimacy with Carax’s double, Oscar, for the things that could have happened after *Lovers on the Bridge* but ultimately never materialized.

This extratextual dimension of Scob’s career converges and expands with the movie’s exploration of nocturnal darkness Céline embodies throughout the film. For instance, as she leaves the depot dressed in a black trench coat, her hair loosened, she conjures the archetypal image of a femme fatale in a film noir, figures at home in the marginality and estrangement afforded by the night. Moreover, her name derives from Selina the Greek goddess of the moon (a name she shares, of course, with catwoman), a source of diffuse reflection mirroring her unimposing solicitude throughout the movie. But the name also references one of Carax’s favorite authors, Louis Ferdinand Céline, the author of *Journey to End of the Night* and whose real last name, Destouches was not coincidentally that of Juliette Binoche’s off-screen lover in *Lovers of the Bridge*.¹⁴² Scob, in fact, was also cast in that earlier film, but her part was ultimately cut out and also left unseen. Like the materialization of nocturnal darkness in *Holy Motors*, Céline’s mask does not only express a dialectic of such absence in presence but it also calls attention to its

¹⁴² Carax’s affinity is well-documented. See Fergus Daly and Gavin Dowd, *Leos Carax* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 19.

status as interface, visualizing a threshold between visibility and invisibility, between being and nonbeing as something spectacular – a limit to vision that casts off its subservience to more readily perceptible phenomena in order to emerge as an object of supreme, if not quite autonomous, aesthetic regard.

Both visually outrageous yet inscrutable, Céline cuts a figure of poised lassitude as she walks away from the depot in a movement evocative of one of the earliest moments of photochemical film's history: the workers leaving the Lumiere factory to what Sean Cubitt has called "the immediately accessible utopia of their time off."¹⁴³ But unlike the workers of the staunchly syndicalist Lumiere brothers' factory leaving for their noontime remission, Céline walks out by herself in the middle of the night following a grueling shift of give or take twelve-hours. The opposing affective tenors of each scene – one from celluloid film's emergence the other from the beginning of its end – bring into relief the ruinous effects of intensifying capitalist practices in transforming our experience of time in uninflected cycles of production and consumption. But Carax seems to revive the Lumiere brothers' formative and self-reflective instance of documenting the world to align *Holy Motors* with early cinema's emergent utopian capabilities; a gesture that reconciles a mourning for what has been left behind with a steadfast purpose in engaging what might lie ahead.

Lastly, the sense of haptic materiality of Céline's latex mask is one such possible gesture: intensifying the dynamics of spectacular opacity the night she symbolizes registers throughout *Holy Motors*, figuring a defamiliarization of perceptual territory that in displacing a field of vision replaces it not with blindness but with surface sensory affects untethered to a resolutely readable image – a dynamic previously seen with the sheen of the limousines cars, the model's veil, the assassin's balaklava, but most of all in the film's expansive nightscapes. The nocturnal aesthetics of *Holy Motors* evoke embodied experiences of partial knowledge and indefinite vision that resonate with a world whose physical and political contours are increasingly shaped by powerful

¹⁴³ Sean Cubitt, *The Cinema Effect* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 32.

actualities eluding figuration – diffuse operations of digital surveillance, regulatory biometrics, and the psychic vicissitudes of political life. In engendering a film aesthetic that affirms vision not despite but because of its partiality, *Holy Motors* mobilizes night as an enduring symbol for new thresholds of experience that nonetheless take into account the limits of enlightenment thinking, thus resonating with Jacqueline Rose’s call that instead of “the idea of light triumphing over darkness... confronting dark with dark might be the more creative path.”¹⁴⁴ Contra the regulatory ontologies of recent film theory, *Holy Motors* nocturnal images enable the oscillation of conflicting terms – a surface effect and a structural component, an opacity that is also a spectacle, a mode of realism that discloses multiple virtualities.

¹⁴⁴ Jacqueline Rose, *Women in Dark Times* (New York, London: Bloomsbury, 2015), xii.

CRUISING FOR DADS

Throughout this study, Claire Denis' *35 Shots of Rum* might appear like the exception to how the night routinely challenges conventional ethics in Denis' films. Unlike *Trouble Every Day* (2001), *Friday Night* (2002), *Bastards* (2013), or the aforementioned *I Can't Sleep* (1994), all of which share a prevailing nocturnal setting, *35 Shots of Rum* (hereafter *35 Shots*) does not stage scenes in which normative prohibitions are violated through either transgressive violence or overt sexual desire. While the film's characters often work late into the night, and its celebrated dance sequence features a song heralding the night in its title ("Nightshift" by the Commodores), *35 Shots*' narrative concern with familial and domestic attachments, its unhurried pace and tranquil tenor, might seem to offer the night as a space in which normative familial intimacies are not only routinely performed but also repeatedly idealized. The critical discourse surrounding *35 Shots*, in fact, habitually foregrounds the film's seemingly affirmative position towards immediate, biological kinship,¹⁴⁵ noting how Denis expresses the amative dynamic between father and daughter both textually (in the film's story) and extra-textually, as *35 Shots* revisits and rewrites Yasujiro Ozu's *Late Spring* (晩春 *Banshun*, 1949) (a creative homage interpreted, not least of all by Denis herself, in terms of filial debt and devotion).¹⁴⁶

This citational hailing of Ozu as an intertextual father partakes in what several critics, such as Rosalind Galt and Patricia White, have identified as Denis' self-reflexive inscription of her own auteurial subjectivity into the discourse of world cinema.¹⁴⁷ As a critical subfield in film

¹⁴⁵ See, in particular, James S. Williams, "Beyond the Other: Grafting Relations in the Films of Claire Denis," in *Intimacy on the Border: The Films of Claire Denis*, ed. Marjorie Vecchio (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 91–107 and James S. Williams, "Romancing the Father in Claire Denis's *35 Shots of Rum*" *Film Quarterly*, 63, no.2 (Winter 2009): 44–50.

¹⁴⁶ For Claire Denis' thoughts on Ozu see in particular Kevin Lee, "Spectacularly Intimate: An Interview with Claire Denis," *Mubi Notebook Interview*, 2 April 2009, <https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/spectacularly-intimate-an-interview-with-claire-denis> and an online interview with Lea Rinaldi, "35 RHUMS de Claire Denis et Alex Descas, par Léa Rinaldi," *Lea Rinandli*, February 25, 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6eeBkCX8_cU in which she compares Ozu to her grandfather.

¹⁴⁷ Rosalind Galt, "Claire Denis and The World Cinema of Refusal," *SubStance* 42, no. 1 (2014): 96–108; Patricia White, "Pink Material: White Womanhood and the Colonial Imaginary of World

studies, the conceptual scope of this category holds commercial contexts of production and exhibition (the economic and cultural authority of film festival circuits, multinational funding structures etc.) in dialogue with questions of aesthetics, production, and reception. While obviously broad in scope, it is not indiscriminate, historically designating film productions that display both a greater commitment to aesthetic experimentation, political themes, or innovative channels of distribution¹⁴⁸ in opposition to a commercial mainstream typically, and often reductively, linked to Hollywood and often national popular cinema (with the exception of Bollywood and Nollywood).¹⁴⁹ While keeping the notion of “world cinema” as a critical locus of unsettled interrogation, in this study I use it to designate specific textual and discursive sites which overtly thematize the relationship between the national and the geopolitical.

As a result, Denis’ claim of Ozu as a father figure condenses and reflects how cinema’s transnational flows have created an international film culture that is networked both synchronically, through the contemporaneous exchanges between international filmmakers and cultures, but also intergenerationally, as the commercial and academic institutionalization of these cinematic migrations have inevitably shaped subsequent iterations of national and transnational film culture and production. Moreover, *35 Shots*’ scalar reconfiguration of such cross-cultural movements into an intimate familial idiom also thematizes how world cinema expresses, on both narrative and compositional levels, the complex relations underpinning globalization in lived, and often highly localized, contexts of everyday life. This exploration of the worldly through a quotidian and intimate microcosm evinces how the transnational circuitry of capital constrains and

Cinema Authorship” in *The Routledge Companion to Cinema & Gender*, eds. Kristin Lené et. al (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 214–226.

¹⁴⁸ Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt, *Queer Cinema in the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 15.

¹⁴⁹ The discursive articulation of world cinema is extensive, and a more thorough-going account of the many ramifications in this debate is covered more extensively in this study’s introduction. For the purposes of the discursive coordinates I cite here, see in particular David Bordwell, “Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice,” *Film Criticism* 4 (1979): 56–64; Thomas Elsaesser, *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005); Shekhar Desphande and Meta Mazaj, *World Cinema: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2018).

shapes our social and affective spaces. But at the same time, it also recognizes how, according to Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt, “the cooptation of cinematic worlds to neocolonial fantasies and consumer capitalist effects is never achieved with completeness.”¹⁵⁰

The film’s concern with migration across national borders is further evinced in the diasporic lineage of the family at the center of the film, and the local community that surrounds them. They are not only predominantly black but their African and Caribbean heritage is thematized through scattered elements of the film’s mise-en-scene – food, decorative objects, background music – rather than through explicit narrative conflicts or overt political allegories. In other words, the varying textures of black diasporic existence in *35 Shots* are not in antagonistic tension to the characters’ French citizenship but are unremarkably diffused and integrated into the generic ambience of their settled existence. Critical responses to the film that engage its diasporic social relations, however, often omit mentioning the night, treating it as a detail of the film’s setting rather than as a structural, affective, or conceptual dynamic on par with – as well as materially penetrating and reshaping – its relational arrangements. By bringing a critical analysis of the night into the film’s more overtly foregrounded concern with diasporic kinship – and global intertextuality as a mirror to said kinship – I aim to undo a dualist structure appointing human interactions as sites of eventful agency and atmospheric phenomena as passive or inert background elements. Thinking kinship with and through the night also upturns these individual dynamics repeated and more intuitive treatment as purely thematic components of a film rather than as conceptual categories and formal operations that organize collective social practices and life narratives.

While Denis’ previous films have frequently explored the afterlives of French colonialism in West Africa and the Caribbean, *35 Shots*’ linkage of black diasporic genealogies to a citation of an East Asian influence implicitly invites a comparative reading between the Black Atlantic and

¹⁵⁰ Schoonover and Galt, *Queer Cinema*, 26.

Asian transnationalism.¹⁵¹ By positioning these different cultural vectors through distinct narrative and intertextual strata, Denis keeps the specificities of their different diasporic lineages in tension, without, however renouncing an analysis of their shared political and symbolic correspondences across their obvious incommensurabilities. A similarly hybrid approach to engaging the global is evident across the work of several directors associated with global auteurism, given how their expressive subjectivity has been framed and enabled by the discursive and economic circuits of world cinema's global networks in terms of both production (transnational funding schemes), exhibition (film festivals), and reception (film criticism, academic institutions, and museum retrospectives).

In her analysis of Wong Kar-wai's cross-cultural citations, for instance, Jean Ma argues that transnational intertextuality gives rise to a worldly mode of address in which "the displacement of the straightforward sequence of past-present-future by an ambiguous temporality linked to the conditional tense brings with it the phantom presence of other possible storylines issuing from the 'if.'"¹⁵² Because of the spectral register of its resonance, the transnational intertextuality in Wong's films, Ma argues, materializes an ambience that evokes the "history of interchange between Hong Kong and Latin America, to a large extent mediated by the Philippines, within a transpacific cultural nexus."¹⁵³ Through the atmosphere conjured by these fleeting transnational citations, Wong thus reflects Hong Kong's impossible relationship to the rhetoric of an underlying, and putatively stable, national origin, given the nation state's entanglement with networks of colonialism and global trade.

The sense of plural global itineraries evinced through Wong's films make clear that Hong Kong is but the most conspicuous example of how any nation state's formation is interdependent with transnational histories of exploitation and exchange. However, the visible remnants of these

¹⁵¹ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 18.

¹⁵² Jean Ma, *Melancholy Drift: Marking Time in Chinese Cinema* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 144.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 146.

historical entanglements have done little to diminish the centrality of unadulterated cultural origin fantasies to nationalist narratives within certain diasporic discourses. Stuart Hall attributes the abiding power of this rhetoric to the political workings of affect, as the fantasy of a motherland as an unbreached origin offers a sense of “imaginary coherence and plenitude” that guarantees the binding emotional dimensions for collective citizenship across conditions of geopolitical dispersal.¹⁵⁴ In a similar vein, scholars working at the interface of transnationalism and queer politics, such as David Eng, Gayatri Gopinath, and Martin F. Manalasan, have analyzed how diasporic imaginaries are often intimately conjoined to nationalist fantasies of a lost and romanticized wholeness that is culturally reinforced around the image of heterosexual kinship norms.¹⁵⁵ Gopinath for instance, surveys how “the reconfiguration of the relation between diaspora and nation”¹⁵⁶ legislates and naturalizes the heterosexual family, and more specifically patrilineal genealogy, as the repository for tradition as such, engendering a “logic that situates the terms ‘queer’ and ‘diaspora’ as dependent on the originality of ‘heterosexuality’ and ‘nation.’”¹⁵⁷

Given *35 Shots*’ highly cathected figuration of the father, and the striking absence of queer subjectivities so closely associated with Denis’ other films, we might assume that this film positions the patrilineal bloodline as the privileged term through which diasporic genealogies accrue recognition and symbolic value. In such a reading, this logic would consolidate a valuative hierarchy in which nonnuclear, nonreproductive, or nonfamilial diasporic arrangements are treated as marginal or deficient. However, the figuration of paternal descent not only through the

¹⁵⁴ Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” in *Colonial Discourse & Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Laura Chrisman and Patrick Williams (West Midlands: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), 225.

¹⁵⁵ David Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Martin F. Manalasan, *Cultural Compass: Ethnographic Explorations of Asian America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010).

¹⁵⁶ Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 189

¹⁵⁷ Eugenie Brinkema, “A Mother Is a Form of Time: ‘Gilmore Girls’ and the Elasticity of In-Finitude,” *Discourse* 34, No. 1 (Winter 2012): 13.

film's narrative but around the proliferation of global intertexts, ensures that its putative integrity is repeatedly undermined by the alternative narratives issuing, to cite Ma again, "from the 'if.'"

Given intertextuality's concern with inherited resemblance, *35 Shots* lays bare how the overt performance of citation is always loaded with a familial fantasmatic. However, as Eugenie Brinkema has observed "the signs of intertextuality – the blurring of boundaries, the flow and movement between two forms, the devouring of texts through iteration" can also push the familialism this logic suggests into the obscene limits of its intelligibility.¹⁵⁸ Addressing the incessant speed and profusion of references in the American television show, *Gilmore Girls*, Brinkema argues that the show's excessive allusions question "what it means to be a little too close, about the problem of boundaries and the impossibility sometimes with family, with texts and ... knowing where one structure ends and the other starts."¹⁵⁹ When *Gilmore Girls* itself becomes a citation parodied in a show that actualizes its latent incestuousness, the "teasing dance between distance and closeness ends with ... becoming overproximate – incestuous collapse becomes textual collapse... when sexual and textual differences are elided, nothing less than the normative familial foundations of television are at stake."¹⁶⁰

Although Brinkema directs her argument to the teeming seriality of television, her observations on intertextuality's symbolic congruence with incest can also apply to the workings of allusion in *35 Shots*, where citational merging is offered as a sign of father–daughter intimacy. The intertextual transposition of one discrete work into another mirrors and reinforces the breaching of generational distinctions that *35 Shots* develops in its narrative register and which, in turn, reactivates the central social tension at the core of Ozu's film. In fact, Denis repeatedly forecasts the impression that an erotic or amative component might underlie the bond between father and daughter in *35 Shots* through the choreography of gestures that parlay their everyday dynamics. Initially, the daughter's domestic chores around the house misidentify her as her

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 6.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 5.

father's much younger wife (we learn, much later in the film, that her mother is deceased), and yet even when this equivocation is clarified, her closeness to her father is relayed through lingering shots of their extended caresses and smoldering gazes, conjuring the possibility of a veiled desire. This suggestion culminates in an enigmatic yet visually captivating scene in which the father and daughter's corporeal rhythms become enmeshed as they ride the same horse (an image that also served as the film's primary publicity shot in France). Similarly, the dramatic developments in *Late Spring* are initiated by the daughter's refusal to marry, owing to her preference to live alongside her widowed father in a domestic arrangement replicating the traditional gender roles of a married couple.

Despite the impulse to interpret signs of the concealed and illicit as the driving force of subjectivity and social relations, a method described by its detractors as paranoid or symptomatic, the incestuous character of filial bonds in both *35 Shots* and *Late Spring* is never conclusively proven. In Sharon Marcus' influential study, *Between Women*, she argues against the drive to center signs that correspond indeterminately to historically taboo structures of subjectivity, specifically as evidence of their repressed but underlying presence. In direct opposition to Fredric Jameson's belief that criticism should function as a "diagnostic revelation of terms or nodal points implicit in the ideological system which have, however, remained unrealized in the surface of the text," Marcus pushes back on the scholarly tendency to read female friendship between women in Victorian England as compensatory surrogates for lesbian desire.¹⁶¹ By interpreting earlier social relations as mere precursors or lesser alternatives to contemporary configurations of queer social life, this symptomatic mode of interpretation, she argues, works to flatten and silence the complex nuances and heterogeneous forms attachments between women have historically assumed. In this book, Marcus proposes "just reading" as an alternative interpretive relation to texts (re-developed and re-tooled as "surface reading" in a

¹⁶¹ Fredric Jameson quoted in Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 74.

much discussed essay co-written with Stephen Best).¹⁶² This method prioritizes a text's manifest, as opposed to latent, attributes in order to avoid situating its formal characteristics or sensuous immediacy within predetermined frameworks of legibility. In doing so, Marcus argues that the specific and unfamiliar social configurations these texts relay might acquire a descriptive density that expands, rather than merely reiterates, existing assumptions regarding the contours nonnormative relations can assume.

However, by returning to Ma's description of intertextuality as both a symbolic structure and mode of address, we find an aesthetic context in which attendance to both latent and manifest readings are not only integrated, but where the distinction between these terms appear blurred. In Ma's description, intertextuality is spatially conceived not in terms of a distinctive tier – a stratum, a ground, a supplemental level – that runs parallel to a text's narrative. Citational space is rather a "phantom presence" – a surrounding swarm of potential meanings, some of which are legible to the spectator, while others are intuited rather than deciphered, and are thus indeterminately felt as an atmospheric pressure on the diegetic environment.¹⁶³ Similarly, as Brinkema helps us to see, the incestuous cast on intertextuality as a system of signification does not simply demystify incestuous desire as the underlying and pregiven source of auterual interconnections and succession. Rather, in both *35 Shots* and *Late Spring*, the potential of an incestuous reading – as anti-structural, as the vanishing point of intelligible kinship – conscripts attention to the competing and normatively incompatible temporalities of transmission at play in intertextual networks. For while citational networks make the generational inheritance of narrative and aesthetic lineages visible, they also bring preceding and subsequent works into contact in such a way that their textual integrities are mutually breached, a process of interpenetration that transforms and expands their mutual meanings. Such a mode of textual congress grants symbolic

¹⁶² Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): 1–21.

¹⁶³ Jean Ma, *Melancholy Drift*, 92.

authority to the “parental text” while simultaneously challenging the symbolic fixity upon which normative conceptions of familial authority rely.

While a diverse range of crossgenerational intimacies might also induce a similar kind of transformative contact, the specter of incest in *35 Shots*’ narrative gestures towards the difficulty of imagining and identifying formations that challenge the linear economies of patrilinear descent that anthropological, legal, and psychoanalytic discourses position as the core of sociality as such. In other words, while intertextuality might act as a sign for actualized incest (as it does in Tsai Ming-liang’s *The River* or Bernardo Bertolucci’s *The Dreamers*), an indeterminate *suspicion* of incest registers normative anxieties by naming, or naming too quickly, vertical relations that begin to be muddled by modes of exchange and reciprocity we associate with the lateral, and which, as a result, read as structural aberrations to normative kinship’s inviolable axes. These relational modes default from sanctioned and valued life–narratives predicated on familial reproduction (what Sara Ahmed calls “the demand that we return the gift of the line by extending that line”) which include, but cannot be limited to, real incestuous desire.¹⁶⁴ In both *35 Shots of Rum* and *Late Spring*, the *threat* of incest – and arguably, despite or because of its prohibition, the discursive *prestige* of incest – calls attention not only to the enigmatic attachment between father and daughter, but also to the presence of peripheral characters whose nonnormative subject positions read as failed ways of life: in *Late Spring*, Noriko’s divorced friend, Aya (Yumeji Tsukokia) and in *35 Shots*, two unmarried characters, Rene (Julieth Mars Touissant), a driver on the brink of retirement who is severely depressed and later commits suicide, as well as Gabrielle (Nicole Dogué), a taxi driver who acts as a maternal surrogate for the film’s daughter figure and still holds a flame for her former lover, Lionel.

Thus, while Denis never explicitly parses an incestuous dynamic in her film, her sensual figuration of the everyday gestures between father and daughter teasingly circulates this unverified reading as something potentially but not conclusively at play. In fact, assuming that the

¹⁶⁴ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 17.

suggestion of incest implies its definitive naming as the primal and driving source of desire is at odds with how Denis' film ceaselessly eschews a consolidated ground of meaning, as the refractive mobility of the film's intertexts gives rise to an overall ambience of uncertainty. As a result, *35 Shots* seems more interested, rather, in incest's emblematic association with the socially inadmissible as such, as its spectral movement across the film does not point to either its repressed inherence or its purely phantasmatic projection. Instead, the permeating vagueness of an incestuous reading in the film wells its potential as an underlying force, so that the film is charged with a saturating and provocative indeterminacy inciting us to question the symbolic systems authorizing certain life narratives as legitimate while casting other relational forms as aberrant, wanting, or incomplete.

If intertextuality blurs boundary distinctions and dramatizes conventionally elided processes of generational transmission and continuity, these trademarks are visually reflected and thematized by the film's rendering of the night. But in acting as a metaphor for citational imbrication, the night also attunes us to allusion's specific textural quality. For while the film's "parental" lineage with Ozu structures its more realized citational axis, attention to this dyad has also occluded the valence of other paternal hailings the film pursues with a more fleeting commitment. Across its diegetic itinerary, the alternate fathers the film encounters include Reiner Werner Fassbinder, Djibril Diop Mambety, Jean Renoir, and expanding this nexus to a transmedial and interdisciplinary arena, Frantz Fanon, Joseph Stiglitz, Marvin Gaye, and Jackie Wilson. Admittedly, these connections materialize through different degrees of realization – some so briefly as to render their status as citation barely perceptible. And yet it is precisely their varied gradations of dissipated visibility that propels such allusions, both oblique and manifest, into an immersive, night-like atmosphere rather than a determinate nexus. As Ben Anderson notes, in fact, an atmospheric quality is obtained precisely by "[expressing] something vague. Something, an ill-defined indefinite something, that exceeds rational explanation and clear figuration.

Something that hesitates at the edge of the unsayable.”¹⁶⁵ In this way, the night’s darkness visually expresses and thematically redoubles the opacity of allusion in *35 Shots*, an indeterminacy deriving not from the sheer vastness of citation, as in *Holy Motors*, but rather from the ambiguous and fleeting manner in which intertexts presence themselves only to vanish throughout the diegesis. The ebbs and flows of citation, and their vacillation between visibility and invisibility, gives rise to a tonal atmosphere that can be read both meteorologically (the darkness of the night, the sensate quality of air) but also in terms of sociality’s affective substrate since, as Anderson goes on to note, “atmospheres are perpetually forming and deforming, appearing and disappearing, as bodies enter into relation with one another.”¹⁶⁶ Through the lens of *35 Shots*’ nocturnal atmosphere, two axes of cinematic meaning which are rarely viewed as working in accordance with each other – cinematography and textual citation – do not only interact but also come to reflect each other.

As a result, the film’s casual appraisal of dimly conceived, parental intertexts creates a loitering procession of fleeting intimacies that asks to be read, I argue, through the diffuse sociability of sexual cruising, a form of public culture that is prevalently enacted at night. In other words, I want to suggest that *35 Shots* is a film that is ceaselessly cruising for dads.

By invoking cruising as both a dynamic ordinal network for the film’s allusions as well as the correlating frame for its legibility, I also wish to underscore several registers of belatedness encrypted into this model of sociability, an untimeliness with which the night is symbolically associated. On the most literal level, cruising has historically taken place at night in parks, piers, and public toilets, when a cover of darkness suspends these spaces’ regular and permitted functions and occludes these intimate and often illicit practices from the surveilling gaze of policing authorities. But on a more meta–discursive level, cruising, in this contemporary moment, is also viewed as a practice rendered obsolete by more permissive attitudes towards homosexual sex, and the displacement of public sex culture into online digital apps. As Shaka McGlotten

¹⁶⁵ Ben Anderson, “Affective Atmospheres,” *Emotion, Space and Society* 2, no.2 (2009): 78.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 79.

poignantly observes, “though new media affords the possibility of cruising, this is limited to the context of personal choices and consumerist self-styling. Hookup sites and cruising apps reduce social worlds of public sex to bad faith erotic free markets; they are in bad faith because like the neoliberal economies in which they are situated, the benefits of the market tend to accrete to the very few—namely, well to do, young, and very often white, men.”¹⁶⁷

As McGlotten explains, therefore, cruising’s remediation into online platforms is only vestigially related to its putative origins in face-to-face public culture, in such a way that renders their temporal and phenomenological operations radically dissimilar. Online cruising hinges on the packaging of one’s bodily and social attributes in highly atomized and particularized profiles. Through these channels, sexual interest is manifestly legible (although by no means guaranteed) on the surface of the apps’ visual platforms rather than equivocally intimated in specific gestures and environments. These apps’ interfaces, moreover, organize profiles of potential partners according to their proximity to each other using geolocational technologies that allow any user to filter out “undesirable” attributes of age, race, weight, and height when browsing for sexual partners. Online cruising reifies rather than obfuscates a typologized notion of the individual. Here, the visualization of various potential hook-ups is predominantly steered towards the end-oriented pursuit of a single partner, however brief the liaison. Cruising in public spaces, in contrast, involves immersion in contingent encounters, as one moves through dark spaces that may or may not conceal receptive lovers, and where one must decode silent gestures and body language to distinguish reciprocal interest from the sinister intent of a mugger, a homophobe, or a cop. Moreover, more often than not, sexual pursuit in these contexts tends to be disseminated across multiple, dimly discerned partners, either simultaneously or one after the other; and the registration of potential but unrealized lovers, whom we decline, or lose to others due to bad timing or bad luck, are incorporated into a dispersive sense of interconnectedness that exceeds

¹⁶⁷ Shaka McGlotten, *Virtual Intimacies: Media, Affect, and Queer Sociality* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2013), 5.

discrete sex acts or the individual bodies with which one ends up being intimate.¹⁶⁸

In her analysis of cruising in the films of Tsai Ming-liang, Ma observes, in fact, that “the motif of cruising not only activates a dialectic of connection and isolation but also serves as a means for mapping the permutations of an elusive and unruly body. This failure and uncoordination of bodies, moreover, does not mark an endpoint of intimacies and relationships, but rather functions as a means of mapping states of watching, waiting, lingering, longing, and missing that detach from the situational contexts of plotline to emerge in all of their ambiguity.”¹⁶⁹ Thus, cruising as both a lived practice and as a narrative and thematic device can serve as what José Esteban Muñoz calls a “socially symbolic performative dimension,” that supplants a singular and synchronic plotline with a heterogeneous and contingent sense of time, wherein one narrative itinerary simultaneously discloses other paths that might have been pursued but were not, evincing a libidinally-charged atmosphere where actualized trajectories are coterminous with purely virtual ones.¹⁷⁰

The temporal and symbolic operations of cruising that I have surveyed are more or less familiar to even the most casual reader of queer theory. As a hermeneutical device, it has been richly elaborated and discussed by the aforementioned Bersani, Dean, Ma, McGlotten, and Muñoz, as well as in the writings of Tan Hoang Nguyen and Michael Trask, among many others.¹⁷¹ Thus, we might ask whether a third valence of belatedness in cruising registers a reasonable suspicion regarding whether there is anything interesting left to say about public gay sex, beyond its welcomed revival as an alternative to the algorithmically-mediated eros of current

¹⁶⁸ See Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave?: And Other Essays* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2010) and Tim Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

¹⁶⁹ Jean Ma, *Melancholy Drift*, 107.

¹⁷⁰ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 83.

¹⁷¹ Hoang Nguyen, *A View from the Bottom: Asian American Masculinity and Sexual Representation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); Michael Trask, *Cruising Modernism: Class and Sexuality in American Literature and Social Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

gay sex culture, or to socially sanctioned forms of intimacy, like monogamous coupledness (which is also not to say that there is anything intrinsically misguided, uncomplicated, or impoverished about these forms of attachment).¹⁷² Instead, what strikes us as surprising about Denis' use of this form of sexual sociability in *35 Shots* is its total absence as a narrative motif in the diegesis – nothing about the film's plot evokes anything that suggests gay lifeworlds, even remotely. Cruising is thus rezoned as a component of a film's "content," as it was in *I Can't Sleep*, and functions exclusively as a formal framing device for the film's intertextual network. This transposition of cruising from content to formal structure does not neutralize this practice of its sexual charge, but redirects its libidinal economy from determinate contexts towards an interrogation of the unacknowledged desire often encoded in the range of institutional, cultural, and formal relations that shape world cinema.

Through the lens of cruising, then, the film invites us to read the uneven distribution of influence and resources certain national cinemas enjoy over others not only in terms of economic or geopolitical agendas but also in relation to our erotic complicity in the discursive practices and institutional narratives they put into place, particularly the paternal reverence underwriting the masculine star-system and commercial category of auteurship. But even more specifically, as a lens into transnational cinema, cruising in *35 Shots* questions two aspects of world cinema's discursive construction that are provocatively incompatible or out-of-place with prevailing conceptions of sexual homosociality: the reproduction of patriarchal genealogies (love of the father cast not just as incestuous desire but as promiscuous desire) and, perhaps even more provocatively, female auteurship (women as the ultimate non-participants in the male-to-male configurations of public gay sex).

This is not the first time Denis has turned to cruising, even outside of male-to-male configurations, as a motif in her films as in *I Can't Sleep* (1994), and she has consistently been

¹⁷² For instance, Rich Juzwiak, "The Slutty Resurgence of New York's Underground Sex Parties," *Jezebel*, September 21, 2017, <https://jezebel.com/the-slutty-resurgence-of-new-yorks-underground-gay-sex-1800953101>.

interest in incest in films like *Nenette and Boni* (1996) and *Bastards* (2013). And to the cinephile of global film to which her work is ideally addressed, in its citational frenzy, her hailing of Fassbinder as one of her cruised dads also conjures the memory of Elvira in *A Year with 13 Moons* (1978), the transgender woman whom we see in the film's opening cruising a park at dawn (we can only assume that the scene was filmed in the early hours of the morning rather than at night due to photochemical film's limited range in low-light conditions). In the film's opening sequence, Elvira's sexual encounter with a john goes memorably awry. Once her trick discovers she does not have a penis, he enlists other gay trade in the park to beat her as punishment for interloping a milieu where "she does not belong." These references, both autocitational and intertextual, substantiate and contextualize cruising as a motif that underpins Denis' oeuvre, but they also forecast its operations as a critical lens into the gendered exclusions underpinning the institutional circuitry of world cinema that *35 Shots* thematizes.

This reading thus breaks with the general interpretive consensus around the film that view its tenderness towards the family as an endorsement of its social and symbolic functions. For instance, James Williams sees Denis' reflexive inscription of her auteurial subjectivity in *35 Shots* as an affirmative acceptance of paternal authority. What distinguishes this film from other works in Denis corpus, he argues, is "the primacy and respect accorded to the paternal figure."¹⁷³ In his view, the film valorizes paternal authority through Denis' doting reprisal of Ozu's *Late Spring*, a filial homage that is textually reflected and redoubled in the harmonious affection between Lionel and Joséphine. However, Williams sanitizes *Late Spring's* complex rendering of father-daughter affection, as the film describes this bond as so intimate and so marriage-like that it risks muddling the temporal loops on which generational succession and socially viable kinship relies. The anomalous form father-daughter love takes in *Late Spring* does not necessarily spell the underlying "truth" of incestuous attraction between Noriko and Shukichi, but it nonetheless suggests a troubling unintelligibility that its protagonists are pressured to redirect towards

¹⁷³ Williams, "Romancing the Father," 45.

compensatory forms of adequate social legibility. Similarly, incest is not conclusively evinced in *35 Shots*. However, Denis' own explicit fascination with incest in many of her films, steers us inevitably towards this very possibility. In other words, neither of these films offers the dutiful daughter's inheritance of paternal love as an untroubled and "purposeful accommodation of social forms and laws."¹⁷⁴ The relations described in each film are instead encrypted with an intimate but indeterminately troublesome valence that threatens the vertical alignment and prohibition of incest that paternal law demands and enforces.

Galt specifically challenges Williams' reading of the film, observing how he dismisses the fissures and divagations in the putative seamlessness of the text. In addition to numerous scenes in which nocturnal darkness repeatedly stymies the smooth progress of the characters' schedules, she calls attention to a scene in which Jo and her classmates have a vigorous debate on third-world debt through the lens of Stiglitz, Fanon, and more obliquely, Jean Renoir. As the sequence's rapid and heated exchange of overtly politicized dialogue is in stark contrast to the largely taciturn and serene mood of most of the film, Williams deems it an extraneous diversion and an aesthetic misstep within the film's unifying logic of integrated and harmonious paternalism. "For Williams, Denis is a dutiful daughter, paying homage to Ozu and to cinema as patriarchal inheritance," Galt argues, "But this patriarchal inheritance is the same as the liberal inheritance—the French educational patrimony—that the students reject, and the same as the colonial inheritance we see framed in the all-black classroom. A queer critique of this gender conservatism connects the intersecting references to these liberal patrimonies and yet performs refusals of them."¹⁷⁵ My analysis is aligned with Galt's reading of the film as one of patrimonial refusal. But while she underscores moments of economic precarity, budget cuts, and infrastructural collapse, my interpretation centers instead on how the film enacts its critique of paternal authority through a paradoxical strategy. Rather than withdraw paternal attachment, this libidinal desire is multiplied and redistributed across an aleatory procession of paternal figures, a

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Rosalind Galt, "World Cinema of Refusal," 101.

strategy that reorients the paternal signifier from a singular and immobilized source of omnipotent authority into a contingent variable within a broader network of relations.

In other words, by hyperbolizing and serializing auterial forefathers through the conceit of incestuous cruising, Denis thematizes the masculinist and geopolitical interests that structure her “auteurial self” within world cinema. As numerous critics have noted, Denis is one of the few female auteurs, alongside Jane Campion, Agnes Varda, and more recently, Sofia Coppola and Kelly Reichardt, who have garnered repeated and reliable access to prestigious European film festivals. Drawing on and expanding Thomas Elsaesser’s research on this domain, Patricia White has surveyed the gendered mechanisms through which these networks manage the terms of visibility, funding, and distribution in their capacity to “confer cultural value and rework discourses of authorship and nation in the context of global cultural flows and Hollywood’s continued dominance.”¹⁷⁶ In particular, White calls attention to the way in which the channels of access for women auteurs in these discourses and institutions often depend on the commodification of their practice “in humanist terms ... [recasting them] as exemplars of expressive sensibility, risk, the human spirit, or local color.”¹⁷⁷

Through her films’ elliptic structures, violent thematics, and transnational vagrancy, Denis’ corpus has refused the terms of a humanist paradigm grounded in a transparent sense of cultural representativeness. But at the same time, her preoccupation with violence, experimental aesthetics, and her oft-noted concern with ethics has been routinely studied and legitimated as worthy of critical inquiry through precedents put into place by a male establishment of canonized auteurs and theorists. In the critical reception of her work, then, it is as if her narrative concerns with the experience of women is recuperated and excused by her “inheritance” of a cinematic ethos grounded in philosophical commitments authorized by cinematic and philosophical forefathers. As Karen Redrobe has recently pointed out, the inclusion of Denis in certain

¹⁷⁶ Patricia White, *Women’s Cinema, World Cinema: Projecting Contemporary Feminisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 32.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 69.

discourses of global auteurship is often attributed to her work's overt dialogue with philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, whose ideas her films are often viewed as transcribing into aesthetic form while ignoring how they generate their own form of theoretical inquiry.¹⁷⁸ Like Redrobe, Galt also notes how Denis' visibility within institutional discourses of world cinema is often linked to the French philosopher. But she also alerts us to how these critical appraisals largely ignore the aesthetic strategies through which Denis "takes up [Nancy's] offer to view the image without suspicion, as a mode of experiencing the world" while nonetheless "[overthrowing] Nancy's denigration of the ornamental and the chromatic" in her film's "pictorial compositions and aestheticized cinematography."¹⁷⁹ In the journalism and academic work on Denis, moreover, writers still tend to routinely list her earlier work experience as an assistant director for Dušan Makavejev, Costa-Gavras, Eduardo de Gregorio and, in particular, Jim Jarmusch and Wim Wenders, as if there is still the need to bolster her credentials despite what is by now an indisputably eminent and widely-discussed career.¹⁸⁰ In other words, while the critical reception of Dennis has appointed her with considerable institutional cachet, it also routinely constrains the political and theoretical scope of her cinema through the frame of "a dutiful daughter." Through this positionality, her films' aesthetic and critical merit is conferred with cultural capital if it is viewed as an extension of film culture's paternal genealogy. And in a perverse way, that genealogy's reproduction by a woman is seen as confirming a masculine regime of meaning and value as a natural and ideological given, thus foreclosing a more challenging reading of her films as reflexive and contestatory

¹⁷⁸ Karen Redrobe, "Thinking Like a Holy Girl: Feminism, Auteurship, and the Kinematics of Lucrecia Martel," Colloquium Talk, Philadelphia, PA, September 22, 2017. Here Redrobe is specifically addressing the collection Seung-hoon Jeong and Jeremi Szaniawski, eds., *The Global Auteur: The Politics of Authorship in 21st Century Cinema* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016).

¹⁷⁹ Rosalind Galt, *Pretty: Film and the Decorative Image* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 303.

¹⁸⁰ See for instance, David Thomson, "Claire Denis," *The Guardian: Biographical Dictionary of Film*, July 8, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2010/jul/08/claire-denis-david-thomson>. Thomson's assessment begins with the telling subheading: "Denis is in the tradition of Rivette, Renoir and Vigo, who found a way of unpeeling the real to discover inner meanings."

works that require us to imagine the discursive construction of cinema differently.

By transposing the patrifocal conditions of world cinema's institutional norms into the taboo arena not just of incest but also of promiscuous, repeated, and possibly anonymous incest, *35 Shots* denaturalizes the patriarchal regimes of influence and value in world cinema, while also making the terms of its circulation and reproduction visible. Invoking the contingency intrinsic to cruising, *35 Shots* recontextualizes the proper, "timeless," and institutionalized homosociality of patrimonial prestige – cinema's fathers (and their correlating "bloodlines") – through the comparative frame of an improper and contingent form of homosociality – the nocturnal counterpublic of random gay sex. Through the distorted reflection of one intractable domain into an alternative and ephemeral social system, the legitimating auteurial model of the "dutiful daughter" is thus recast into the "incongruous" figure of a woman cruising among a gang of more-or-less interchangeable johns (a conceit that nonetheless accounts for how certain encounters in these contexts, for all their anonymity, leave particularized mnemonic imprints and degrees of satisfaction and thus instate their own libidinal hierarchies). This feminized incestuous cruiser defiantly positions herself in a libidinal economy of male-to-male relations albeit in a mode that is not culturally sanctioned. Through this prism, she provokes scrutiny towards off-recognized and exclusionary systems of gendered recognition and value through which the patrimonial heritage of world cinema reproduces itself.

This aberrant and "impossible" positionality is clearly metaphoric. It does not mobilize for female inclusion in gay sexual cruising, nor am I suggesting or diminishing the political necessity of social spheres that remain exclusive to particular minoritarian subjects. Instead, I want to suggest that by rearranging the putative timelessness of patrilinear social arrangements into the rhythmic contingency of cruising, *35 Shots* dissolves and disseminates the rigid and overdetermined structures of patrimonial inheritance, exposing its constrictive terms of inclusion and participation in order to set the stage for more expansive systems of inter- and intra-generational affiliation. As a marginal, improvisatory, and often furtive mode of social assembly,

the liminality of nocturnal cruising is not invoked here as an actualizable utopia. It is instead hailed in the film as a meta-discourse through which the hegemonic norms of a more established system come into salient relief. For Bersani, in fact, cruising is not a virtue in and of itself, and he is explicitly skeptical about the sense of moral superiority it can incite in its practitioners. As a form of congress that takes place, more often than not, in nocturnal darkness, cruising's movement across anonymous, which is to say, inconclusively known, partners interests Bersani in its intimation of a sociability that is not predicated on acquisitive possession, but instead evinces a "willingness to be less—a certain kind of ascetic disposition—[that] introduces us (perhaps reintroduces us) to the pleasure of rhythmmed being."¹⁸¹ Thus, the "sexual sociability of cruising" can serve as a preliminary model for what he views as "an ecological ethics, one in which the subject, having willed its own lessness, can live less invasively in the world."¹⁸² 35 *Shots* is indeed interested in modes of fulfilling belonging that are not predicated on amative love and monogamous possession but rather on a diffuse but also sustaining sense of sensual congress with one's social and physical environment. But on a more meta-reflexive level, the rhythmmed being Bersani identifies in cruising might also act as a diagnostic frame through which to revise the institutional and cultural networks through which world cinema circulates.

In an entirely different context, for instance, Caroline Levine turns to rhythm as a formal property that exposes the naturalized givenness of institutions, particularly those that present themselves as monolithic and timeless, and which thus appear outside the scope of rearrangement. "*Institutions preserve forms*," Levine argues, "their repetitive rhythms over time afford stability. Indeed, the recurrence of the same forms over time is essential to the work of institutional organization.... If multiple institutions structure our experience, if these various institutions have emerged out of different cultural circumstances, and if their forms remain relatively stable through repetition over time, then the different values that produced those ways

¹⁸¹ Leo Bersani, "Sociability and Cruising," 132.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 133.

of organizing people and ideas actually persist in the forms of the institutions themselves.”¹⁸³ To prove her point, Levine offers a dazzling reading of the diachronic temporalities that are immanent yet repressed within the rigid timetables of the University’s organization:

It is not only the academic timetable that registers the endurance of multiple institutional pasts. When we collect our pay stubs, we are working in a late nineteenth-century bureaucracy; when we petition the dean and then the provost, we are calling up an eighth-century model of monastic administration; when we attend conferences and symposia, we are drawing on institutional traditions that range from ancient drinking parties to assemblies of dissenting church delegates; when we open up our computer desktops, we are using a twenty-first-century technology, but one that itself swallows up and incorporates a whole range of technologies used by earlier generations—the writing desk, the file cabinet, the typewriter, the calculator, the balance sheet, the messenger boy, the postal system, and the photography lab, among others.¹⁸⁴

Here, Levine is not merely reiterating the important but perhaps prosaic notion that any given societal form contains sedimented histories. But rather, she extends Judith Butler’s famous concept of performativity from the domain of cultural self-presentation to the question of how institutions are coordinated but also potentially disorganized and renegotiated. Her point, then, is to underscore how “institutions persist and survive through repetition—through the citation of rules and the performance of practices—they are never present as such. They are materialized across time, through performative processes that cite prior events in every moment of their instantiation.”¹⁸⁵ In the context of *35 Shots*, the rhythmized being that cruising reflectively thematizes exposes how institutional positionalities, even those that appear to progress from contained and normative lines of cultural transmission, can never be “temporally discrete or coherent.”¹⁸⁶ We can thus view the film’s turn to cruising not as a perversion of a natural order. Instead, in a reversal of this formula, the film argues that it is our interpellation into patrimonial heredity that parlays the false and mystifying impression that social presence must be limited to a singular and determinate lifepath. For Denis, the rhythmized being of cruising would thus draw us into congress with an “ontological ground” that has been occluded by paternal norms and

¹⁸³ Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 116.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 117.

conventions, recasting our historical and subjective situatedness as labile but containing “forms” for multitudinous points of origin and lines of influence.

Thus, by critiquing how the legitimacy of female cineastes is often discursively constructed around patrimonial obedience, Denis also revises prevailing conceptions of auteurship, reframing this category from what White describes as a “[discourse] of exceptional individual achievement” into a permeable entity traversed by a broader constellation of transnational itineraries, both determinately legible but often intermittently opaque.¹⁸⁷ By divesting auteurship as a discourse of exalted individuality or prestigious inheritance, the film also traces it as an aleatory movement across conscious and unconscious influences, giving rise to an alternative approach to this category akin to what Tim Dean describes as impersonal intimacy, “a discipline of challenging to the point of dissolution an individual’s boundaries, in order to achieve boundlessness.”¹⁸⁸ While many of the film’s intertextual attachments are manifest, and indeed intimately felt and known, the loitering cadence of the film across nebulous allusions leaves open the possibility that we are in the presence of an indeterminately vast citational field beyond what we are equipped or trained to recognize. In doing so, it calls attention not only to the atmospheric conditions that enable or impede our vision but also the historical, ideological, and economic economies of cultural value that shape and constrain our frames of recognition. In other words, the film’s inscription of auteorial subjectivity through its movement across intertextual allusions never achieves a sense of determinate closure, reflecting how the cruising body is repeatedly breached by multiple, dimly conceived intimacies that are both actualized but also sometimes only virtual, potential trajectories that are inconclusively glimpsed but ultimately unrealized. Part of the compulsive and masochistic pleasure of cruising, in fact, is returning to the scene of the crime in the hope of reencountering that one, elusive experience we feel, but can never conclusively know, we missed out on, in an endless and paranoid delirium of missing out.

In this way, the film’s nocturnal images rendered through the velvety tonalities of 35mm,

¹⁸⁷ Patricia White, *Women’s Cinema, World Cinema*, 115.

¹⁸⁸ Tim Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 46–47.

are symbolically linked to intertextuality and cruising as fields that blur discrete distinctions. As a lens of attunement, the night points us to the terms of legibility and interpretation the film establishes. Conceived as an enveloping membrane of atmosphere, a skin-like sensory interface, the nocturnal designates a surficial attention to the expanded field of the film's transnational intertexts. Despite its tender tenor and tranquil pace, *35 Shots* demands a digressive, almost spastic, perambulation between textual and intertextual registers of meaning. Such a restless approach befits the film's foregrounding of immediate kinship's scalar oscillations between notions of intimate proximity and the horizons of temporal and spatial distance invoked by the generational diaspora it thematizes.

Familial Rhythms

A keener attention to the ordinal functions of cruising in the film steers us towards the presentational function of rhythmic movement across the film, particularly in terms of how it unsettles the familialism it simultaneously articulates. Yvette Biro is one of several critics who has noted *35 Shots*' specific emphasis on the rhythms characterizing particular relationships and spaces; she writes that "instead of significant plot events, [*35 Shots*] relies on other forms of storytelling order: repetition and ellipsis ... there is a particular emphasis on the regular breathing rhythm of the physical environment."¹⁸⁹ By implying that a transfer of organic qualities occurs between human and spatial environments, Biro evokes how this impalpable, but nonetheless material, interaction is textually signified and somatically registered as a multirhythmic force. Characters in *35 Shots*' are introduced enigmatically, prior to the proper identification of their position within the film's established relational configurations. The belated identification of these characters' relations thus frames them as a supplemental and mutable feature of these bonds rather than their defining frame. In other words, the kind of rhythmic procession through which the

¹⁸⁹ Yvette Biro, "A Subtle Story: 35 Shots of Rum," in *Film Quarterly* 63, no. 2 (Winter 2009): 38. See also Dennis Lim, "Finding Rhythms Within Rhythms in Parisians' Lives," *The New York Times*, September 4, 2009 and Laura McMahon, "Rhythms of Relationality: Denis and Dance," in *Intimacy on the Border: The Films of Claire Denis*, ed., Marjorie Vecchio (London: IB Tauris, 2014), 175–187.

film presents its characters underwrites the notion that relations possess no substantial value prior to the interactions through which they are continuously realized. The nature of Lionel and Jo's dyad becomes explicit only after the film's opening sequence, as their mutually corresponding movements are conventionally more legible through the norms of married couples rather than father–daughter dyads. Close to all of the film's partnerships, in fact, are haunted by a similar slippage of positions and identifications. Even after specific kinship alignments are properly identified, the orientations they should properly establish are refracted by the relational alternatives they signify phantasmatically.

For instance, when we first encounter Gabrielle early in the film, we might presume she is Jo's mother, her absence from the opening sequence the result of a night shift driving her taxi. Only later, do we intuit she is their neighbor who covets the maternal position we thought she already occupied. This misperception, however, is routinely reanimated. In an unrelated scene, Joséphine rifles through her dad's possessions and discovers a handwritten letter alongside a photograph of her mother. We hear the letter's descriptions of care through a disembodied voiceover we align to Jo's mother. However, a tight close–up of its signature reveals its author is Gabrielle, who is thus reinscribed into a position from which she is continuously displaced and rebuffed. These oscillations – friends mistaken for mothers, daughters who could be wives – speculate on how the institutions and lifepaths modeled around the native family might generate different orientations if we reflect upon the complex and indeterminate ways that any kinship node might be realized. It also thematizes that the social determination of any kinship role is never fully realized or complete, and these “leakages” point precisely to productive opportunities for reimagining affective and institutional relations. I will return to this point later.

Denis underscores such an interest in the rhythmic, rather than coherent and stable, nature of any given lifepath by opening *35 Shots* with a long tracking shot filmed from the driver's compartment of an RER train. The somatic impression of riding inside the train's shaking carriage is heightened by the hand–held camera that Denis has likened to “a form of breathing,” thus

aligning the body's pulses and respirations with the train's mechanized motion and establishing what the director calls "a rhythm inside a rhythm with the movement of the camera and the movement of the carriage and the tracks."¹⁹⁰ Throughout the rest of the film, the "organic" camerawork of Denis' long-time collaborator and DP Agnès Godard creates correspondences between the ebb and flow of the social world and the body's internal rhythms.

In "The Economic Problem of Masochism," Freud contests the notion of a putative coherence to the subject, speculating that subjectivity is the effect of rhythms produced by the body's internal drives. Although he claims we cannot conclusively determine anything exhaustive about subjectivity's origins, he hesitantly proposes that subjectivity might arise from "the rhythm, the temporal sequence of changes, rises and falls in the quantity of stimulus."¹⁹¹ Denis' film seems to partake in a similar speculative inquiry, as her characters appear to manage modulations in affective and somatic intensity by finding a holding pattern, habit or meter in their relationships, or through the routine of their labor. In one of her repeated developments of Freud's idea, Lauren Berlant suggests that not only subjectivity, but our relation to our physical and social environment, is predicated on a "tracking [of] oneself in the echoes or lag time of the changes one is always making" so that "what's internal to you is also what's in relation to others and to the world."¹⁹² *35 Shots'* recurring motif of train movement seems to analogize such a ceaseless transaction between internal and external rhythms and forms. In particular, the atmospheric shots of trains moving in and out of dark tunnels appear to symbolize the exchange between the

¹⁹⁰ Claire Denis quoted in Dennis Lim, "Finding Rhythms."

¹⁹¹ Sigmund Freud, "The Economic Problem of Masochism" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1957).

¹⁹² Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 222.

external world of the social and the inside of the body where subjectivity is phantasmatically contained.¹⁹³

Apart from the steady movement of vehicles on an overhead bridge, the camera in this opening shot observes little more than the undulating lines formed by railway tracks as they cross paths and diverge. This visual horizon reads as a metalanguage of cinema as narrative machinery; it does not establish or delineate a specific itinerary but symbolizes, rather, the underlying ground for any given pathway's emergence. The shot thus reflects a tension between lifelines that appear "given" and thus natural, to invoke Ahmed's model, and pathways that fail to extend an inherited line, or which actively deviate from the terms of this inheritance. From the film's get go, we find ourselves on the train's predetermined path, yielding to its propulsive motion. However, allowing ourselves to follow the movement of a line provided for us in advance does not immediately imply a kind of unquestioning disregard for the conditions of its "givenness." The image of the tracks facing us makes us dimly aware of a gamut of alternative trajectories, a visual metaphor revealing the virtual dimension of any itinerary as always already haunted by the purely potential alignments one might have pursued in its place. This sense of actuality's coterminous presence with the virtual is further established by the tracks' figuration as a space not only of lived and metaphorical transit, but also of material labor. The tracks' status as a place of work reminds us that the very ground for any given line does not inhere in the social in any absolute and timeless way but exists, rather, as the normalized effect of maintenance, coordination, and reproduction.

The first few shots in this sequence are filmed in daylight, and introduce us to some of the film's central characters, Lionel, repeatedly appearing on his cigarette breaks, and Rene the train driver approaching retirement, conducting one of his final commutes. A jump-cut suddenly

¹⁹³ The sense of the body as both the "ground" but also the "vanishing point" of subjectivity's origins has been elaborated by Mignon Nixon, *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and a Story of Modern Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).

advances the setting from daytime to the night, initiating a series of dark and barely visible shots. This stark transition underscores not only the absence of a transparent visual field but provides the vague impression that this transparency has been strategically and specifically revoked. In these images, both human figures and the physical environment emerge faintly from an undifferentiated field of darkness, or as ghostly reflections imprinted on the trains' smudged windows. This visual deconstitution prevents a penetrable and orientating depth of field from emerging, and in doing so, it heightens our sensory memory of space from the previous, more luminous shots, while also intensifying our attunement to the tempo of commuting and the cadences of the trains' movement. In the absence of space's total visibility, we still recognize Lionel's presence abstracted into a dark silhouette precisely due to the established pattern of his periodic cigarette breaks. The alternation between the tracking shots and close-up of faces, creates a kind of contrapuntal rhythm, drawing the film's characters into sync with each other as well as with the different patterns of time in their environment – the velocity of the trains, the conclusion of the working day, the passage of day into night, and the shifting bodily movements of anonymous commuters returning home.

One of these commuters is Joséphine, whom we follow as she purchases a rice cooker, a seemingly banal gesture that will later prove to have an important operational, rather than explicitly symbolic, role in the film's approach to kinship's formalism. We hardly overhear any sustained dialogue between Jo and her father throughout the film but the affective timbre of their relationship is expressed, as I have intimated earlier, via the rhythm of the gestural patternings that circulate between them: the anchoring pace of their shared commutes; the correspondence of their movements in the apartment; the affective ripples of their touches and gazes. However self-enclosed Joséphine and her dad might seem, the film's figuration of this dyad through the rhythmic flow of its habitual enactment presents it as a constitutively permeable and precarious enclosure. For Henri Lefebvre, in fact, "rhythm" designates a networked movement of dynamic inter-relations between habituated actions and unforeseen occurrences that are bodily, mechanical, cyclical, capitalist, and so on. This continuous convergence and unfolding of multiple

and multiscalar vectors is either subsumed into existing routines or not but can also lead to structural collapse or renewal, since "there is always something new and unforeseen that introduces itself into the repetitiveness: difference."¹⁹⁴ Denis' attunement to the rhythmic cadences of domestic kinship, therefore, emphasizes its permeability to the contingent and unforeseen rhythms it is always incorporating into its existing structure.

Take the first scene in which we witness Joséphine and Lionel's evening interactions. After her purchase, Joséphine arrives home to an empty apartment whose roomy interiors and networks of doors and hallways recall the modular design of Ozu's architectural mise-en-scene, its multiple framing devices redoubling and refracting our act of looking. As soon as Lionel joins her, the father and daughter's paces move in mutually influencing, and prevailingly tacit, correspondence. This sense of a binding spatial envelope between them becomes palpable through the rhythmic economy of their habits, filmed through a slow sequence of wide, static framings that accrues these minor gestures' subtle sensory residues. While phenomenological descriptions of the night have tended to focus on the sensory intensities of urban spaces, comparatively little has been written on the bodily dispositions specific to domestic spaces at night. And yet here the sensations we associate with day's end – tiredness, hunger, slowness, "vegging" – play a critical role in materializing the otherwise invisible affect shaping the felt dimension of the father and daughter's quotidian life. As Elena Gorfinkel's account of bodily fatigue in film helps us see, the actors' decelerated movements, and their seemingly habituated and slightly dissociated gestures, express a sense of ebbing energy, slackening vigilance, and appetitive needs, that evokes the diffusion and attenuation of willful agency (just prior, moreover, to sleep).¹⁹⁵ Such a corporeal state, in which the body's limits are tenderly intimated rather than

¹⁹⁴ Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), 40.

¹⁹⁵ Elena Gorfinkel, "Weariness, Waiting: Endurance and Art Cinema's Tired Bodies," *Discourse*, 34 no. 2–3 (Spring/Fall 2012): 311–347. For more on the appetitive dimension of the scene, Aaditya Aggarwal, "Eating in Near Silence: The Trope of Food in Claire Denis' 35 Shots of Rum," *Third Space: Journal of Diaspora and Transnational Studies*, April 1, 2016, <https://dtsjournal.com/2016/04/01/1-1-inaugural-issue/Re/bound>.

painfully felt, tapers our sense of coherent selfhood and resensitizes us to the fact of our flesh rendering us more porous to the rhythmic valences of our surroundings and the flux of temporal duration.

In his perceptive essay accompanying the film's DVD release, Rob White delineates the precise sequence through which the father and daughter's choreography of minor gestures underwrite their intuitive calibration to each other. Before unlocking the door, Lionel rings the buzzer so that his daughter is not startled. Once their dinner is ready, he then steps out of the shower and starts the washing machine Jo had purposefully left on rest mode, anticipating that he would want to clean up before eating.¹⁹⁶ The silence accompanying how these movements are negotiated gives them the appearance of a habitual and automated routine. However, a minor incident seems to undermine the father and daughter's intuitive attunement to their self-regulating habits. As it turns out, Lionel also brings a new rice cooker home which his daughter clearly did not predict. She uses the red appliance her father selected rather than the pink one we saw her buy earlier, curiously never mentioning its existence. The way this blunder plays out appears odd, as any form of subterfuge seems disproportionate to such a small misstep. However, before Jo's peculiar evasion can fully register, it gets rapidly absorbed and dissipated by the otherwise predictable flow of the evening's interactions. It is only moments later, when we see her holding the unopened appliance in her room that her earlier silence fully strikes us as strange or meaningful. Her pensive expression, in fact, suggests that this minor error symbolically exceeds any immediate concern, while nonetheless unsettling how she understands the dynamic with her father as permanently stable through the implicit synchrony of their movements. Calling attention to this minor "misfire" would only intimate at the potential for misalignment and dissolution immanent in any rhythmic structure, including the quotidian patterns of being and relating through which Jo and her father constantly reconstitute their bond.

¹⁹⁶ Rob White, "Close to Ozu," unpaginated.

Queer Ozu and the Father as Vanishing Point

Both the network of rooms and hallways in Joséphine and Lionel's apartment and *35 Shots*' initial trope of train movement homage trademarks of Ozu's cinema, visually reinforcing how the film invites us to read Denis' alignment with the Japanese director as analogous to Joséphine 's devotion to her father. The film's metaphorical conceit of rhythmic, incestuous cruising, however, unsettles the dichotomous distinctions between fathers and daughters and rethinks the imagined vector of transmission suggested by this genealogical line. Through this trope, intertextual and intergenerational congress is revised from a limited and linear orientation proceeding towards a single destination to a reciprocal and reversible contact zone where the daughter's present but also the father's past become mutually breached and transformed. In this way, *35 Shots* enacts a critique of patrimonial inheritance as a hegemonic force without, however, antagonizing the real figures around whom this symbolic law is buttressed. Through its casual appraisal of different "parental" citations, it is as if paternity becomes an unremarkable and even incidental attribute of the film's intertextual fathers, so that they now offer new variables for imagining different relational arrangements and solidarities. Thus, by dislocating Ozu, the film's putative dad, from his symbolic stasis and singularity, the rhythmmed meter of the film's cruising resituates him among other figures who could also fall under the term "father." As a result, he now moves into a broader field of resonance where his "innumerable and imperfect reappearances," to again cite Bersani, become the precondition for an aleatory, associative movement towards unprogrammed attachments.¹⁹⁷

In other words, I want to suggest that through the trope of cruising, *35 Shots* does not just submit Denis' auteurial position to transformative scrutiny but it also interrogates and rethinks Ozu's limiting terms of inclusion within Eurocentric film discourses. We thus might read the alliance between Ozu and Denis as a critical reflection of what Masha Salazkina describes as the narrow and distorting criteria through which non-Western films are included in institutional and

¹⁹⁷ Bersani, "Sociability and Cruising," 170.

academic film canons. For Salazkina, the tokenist presence of non–Western national cinemas in academic film surveys often serves to confirm Eurocentric regimes of meaning, “[reproducing] the imperial hierarchy of the modern world system,” where “East Asian art cinema is linked to/traced back to France... without changing the original theoretical foundation of such analysis.”¹⁹⁸ Thus, we might interpret *35 Shots*’ familialist metaphor in terms of how Japanese art cinema has become institutionally legible through French film productions and their correlating theoretical rubrics. But the intimate domesticity through which this metaphor is pitched also suggests that the geopolitical and commercial relationalities underpinning world cinema are also shaped by vested interests in reproducing heterofamilial norms as the naturalized basis of public or institutional formations. In what follows, I trace how *Late Spring*, like *35 Shots*, explores the lived dimensions of strange or nonnormative love through both the subjectivity of the daughter as well as the father prevalently expressed in its nocturnal mise–en–scene. Through this lens, I contend that the admittance of a nonwhite and queer “forefather” like Ozu in the Eurocentric arena of Western film studies has often depended on the critical excision and distortion of his cinema’s representation of anomalous social attachments, emplacing him instead as an exemplary figure of formal and authorial expression. Films like *Late Spring*, for instance, trace the psychic impairment that can result from renouncing personal desires in order to appear adequate to constrictive institutions of normative personhood. This critical exclusion, in turn, has conflated mid–century Japanese art cinema (to which Ozu serves as a problematic metonymy in many syllabi of post–war film) with notions of stasis, tradition, and reactionary nostalgia.¹⁹⁹ In contrast to this approach, *35 Shots* makes Ozu’s more challenging ambivalence towards the perpetuation of cultural self–sameness newly visible.

¹⁹⁸ Masha Salazkina, "Introduction: Film Theory in the Age of Neoliberal Globalization," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 56, no. 2 (2015): 335.

¹⁹⁹ Bordwell’s paradigmatic study revises some of the Orientalist assumptions regarding Ozu’s style, and qualifies tenuous claims imputed to his rendering of the family but omits any discussion of homosexuality. David Bordwell, *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

The train travel that forms such a significant part of *35 Shots*' sense of movement reflects how trains in Ozu's films open up a significant field of resonance beyond atmospheric punctuation. Early in *Late Spring*, for instance, the montage through which we experience Professor Shukichi Somiya's (Chishu Ryu) and Noriko's (Setsuko Hara) train journey forecasts their hope of extending their relationship indefinitely into the future. Like Lionel, Shukichi is a widower, and Noriko is his only daughter. They live together blissfully in an arrangement that seems to approximate the rhythms of a married couple. This dynamic does not appear incestuous in any absolute sense of the term although, as in *35 Shots*, their intimacy is haunted by an incestuous reading as it blurs the differentiated tiers that organize sequential stages of recognized kinship. Nonetheless, the anomalous contours of their relationship prompt their friends and family to interfere with their lives, as they hope to redirect an "obstructed" Noriko into a proper patrilinear lifepath of marital exchange.

As Noriko's meddling aunt makes clear, however, should Shukichi and Noriko persist in their current arrangement it won't be long until her opportunities for finding a suitable husband will expire. She is approaching her late twenties and thus entering the "late spring" that the film's title forecasts. Noriko initially views this mandate not so much as an oppressive imperative but rather as an arbitrary, so all the more bewildering, way of doing things. Not only does she consider the possibility of living permanently with her father as a fully adequate, rather than deficient or approximative, form of social presence. But perhaps even more radically, marriage seems to possess no symbolic authority over her. She views it neither as a pathway to pursue or fear, or even as an institution against which to define an oppositional identity. Before it has been repeatedly forced upon her, she does not even "view" it at all. It is only the remarriage of older men which she sees as a kind of pointless repetition of what was already irrelevant to begin with, treating its redundancy with an unvarnished disgust. In other words, her indifference declines not only to confirm normative kinship's terms of social legibility but, rather, its terms as legibility. Without the state of exception the war offers, Shukichi realizes that the intimacy he shares with his daughter is untenable if he is to safeguard a secure social position for her future. And yet

Noriko repeatedly insists she would rather forsake such meaningless and unfulfilling legitimacy rather than abandon her father – an intransigence that prompts him to deceive her.

When we see father and daughter attend a Noh play together, a sequence famous for its running time of seven minutes, Shukichi feigns interest in an attractive widow by exchanging a smile with her across the theater. Here, the exuberant duration of the performance coincides through parallel editing with Noriko's visible dismay, thus spatializing her process of recognition into an eventful climax. Seeing proof of her father's interest in another woman, Noriko eventually consents to an arranged marriage and dolefully leaves her father's side. At the film's conclusion, however, we discover Shukichi feigned his intentions to marry the widow in order to encourage Noriko to acquiesce to a suitor, such as to properly enter what Ahmed describes as the regulatory alignment of "the right path...the path of duty but also of kinship, a path of being related as part."²⁰⁰

In this film, the overtly stylized appearance of nocturnes readjusts the diegetic sensorium, underscoring these scenes for their greater narrative or symbolic import. In *The Aesthetics of Shadow*, his critical study of the social and technological factors driving aesthetic shifts in Japanese cinematography, Daisuke Miyao observes the resonance of Weimar cinema's *chiaroscuro* lighting to numerous Japanese cinematographers including *Late Spring's* director of photography, Yūharu Atsuta, during the 1930s.²⁰¹ While filmed at a later moment in Occupation-era Japan, *Late Spring's* night scenes possess a densely atmospheric and stylized quality in which the interplay between artificial light and darkness invests the images with an expressive visuality that is put to captivating though often enigmatic use.

²⁰⁰ Sara Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 13.

²⁰¹ Daisuke Miyao, *The Aesthetics of Shadow: Lighting and Japanese Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 164–165. While acknowledging the influence of German cinematographers, particularly Karl Freund, to Japanese cinematographers, Miyao's interest lie in "[thinking] about the simultaneity ("coeval modernity") through which directors and cinematographers in Germany and Japan in the late 1920s to early 1930s became intrigued by the sense of tactility in the visual medium that it is to clarify who was influenced by whom."

Unlike the American *film noir*'s more or less fixed taxonomy of symbolic meaning related to perdition, disillusionment and alienation, the nocturnal shadows in Ozu's visual aesthetic stage dynamics of transparency and invisibility. I read this interplay as an interrogation of the boundary between normative practices and the unrealized or disavowed exclusions that haunt their constitution.²⁰² But this conflict between the real and the fantasmatic for Ozu is not only a spatial but also a temporal concern. As the film's title makes clear, he evokes cycles of seasonal transition to symbolize the lived and painful dimensions of time's inexorable unfolding. Whether the film treats the marital as an inevitable component of this cycle or derealizes it, rather, as an arbitrary milestone has long been debated.²⁰³ I enter these discussions by proposing a closer look at the film's staging of the night as another, alternative scheme for approaching the passage of time. The film's nocturnal aesthetics establish a means of disordering how time is rendered legible through a false alignment of an inexorable cycle (spring) to genealogical node (marriage) – and as the notion of a “late spring” or “Indian summer” suggests, Ozu is precisely attuned to moments of atmospheric disorder that are out-of-sync with a linear and normative conception of “natural time.” Throughout the film, in fact, Ozu stages scenes of intimate exchange during late-night moments that are typically associated with social withdrawal. While institutions of heterofamilial love are never quite defeated in these scenes, their constrictive promises and the toll they place on personal complexity are at least laid bare. In doing so, the night in this film produces the atmospheric conditions of what we might approach as a nascently or incidentally queer epistemology that questions the appearance of normative social conditions as natural givens.

In *Late Spring*, as well as in the other film texts I investigate in this study, night's association as a threshold into the next day thematizes and interrogates the generational forms

²⁰² Here, my reading of constitutional haunting draws from Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997) and Adam Phillips, “Keeping it Moving: Commentary on Judith Butler's ‘Melancholy Gender – Refused Identification,’” *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 5, no. 2:181–188, 195.

²⁰³ See Malini Guha, *From Empire to the World: Migrant London and Paris in the Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

through which our sense of the future's continuity with the past becomes tangible. At the same time, however, night also functions as a liminal zone in which the suspended continuity of everyday routines allows us to interrogate its routines, and wherein alternatives to ordinary practices are permitted to come into view, if only transiently. The night in *Late Spring* offers atmospheric form to this liminal condition, poised between acceptable and illegitimate kinship. In this capacity, the night also becomes a territory wherein the ultimately arbitrary and fantasmatic nature of patrilinear norms, for all their undeniable material consequences, lose their aura of presumptive timelessness and come to seem arbitrary, unfamiliar, and strange. The tension the night thematizes between confirming and denaturalizing familial conventions becomes evident if we align the film's nocturnal sequences.

For instance, the ambient intimacy of the night café's spooling light seems to embolden Noriko's unguarded exchange with her father's friend Onodera. She describes his decision to remarry in the most disfiguring of terms: an indecent, filthy and foul practice that is, in turn, reflected in how the high-contrast look of the scene's surrounding shadows risks disaggregating the visual field. In another nocturnal scene, private thoughts are similarly disclosed between Noriko and her divorced friend, Asa. They begin by gossiping about a pregnant but unmarried acquaintance before Asa lectures Noriko, somewhat seriously but also with a great deal of self-irony, for still being unmarried. Noriko playfully turns this judgmental attitude on her friend, asking on what grounds she can pressure her to marry when her own marriage has so recently failed. This conversation lists three styles of social failure that might "befall" women in postwar Japan and whose figural burden, they've been told to strenuously avoid. And yet the symbolic deficiency these modes of living supposedly imply seem at odds with the easygoing conviviality of the women, one of whom, as the film underscores through a preceding scene, might be a divorcee but is more importantly college-educated, financially independent, and charismatically self-possessed.

As the father/daughter axis structures *35 Shots*' textual and extratextual legibility, it asks us to read the film's relation to *Late Spring* as daughter is to father, as Denis is to Ozu, as Noriko is to Shukichi, as Jo is to Lionel. However, we might also ask how Ozu's own relationship to the regulation of kinship modulates the very terms of this filiation's reading. If a patrilinear alignment demands that we reproduce its line of descent, as Ahmed suggests, what do we make of a filiation to a figure whose own work and life defaulted from such "gestures of return"? Ozu's films, as I have been suggesting, as well as his "auteurial text," obstruct the terms of a normative genealogy's smooth reproduction. His sparse biographical details, moreover, suggests or at least codes him as queer: he was expelled from his boarding school when a love letter he wrote to another boy was discovered; he lived with his mother for most of his life, and he never married. I recite these biographical moments not only to evoke the route manner with which they are repeatedly mentioned in the critical reception of his work, but also to underscore how they confirm to the figuration of a public persona whose life – and life's work – have been read in terms of the closet.

Here, I offer biographical shards suggestive of queerness not to compound the closet's "hermeneutics of suspicion," against which Marcus proposes a counter-strategy of surficial reading that, as I have been suggesting, ends up reinforcing the binaristic thinking it purportedly seeks to displace. As Nicholas de Villiers has observed, a "hermeneutics of suspicious" is a style of reading that "distrusts appearances" and leads to an "impulse whereby sexuality is understood as concealed meaning that can nonetheless be made transparent to scrutiny."²⁰⁴ Nonetheless, in tracing the auteurial and intertextual transmission of Ozu into the domain of world cinema, it is important to underscore how questions of concealed queerness, and the attendant problematics of proper and improper legibility they provoke, continue to haunt Ozu's reception and have become indissoluble to his institutional presence. Under the alibi, presumably, of the closet's problematic politics, the academic discourse around Ozu has tended to ignore questions about

²⁰⁴ Nicholas de Villiers, *Opacity and the Closet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 2.

his sexuality while nonetheless registering a “will-to-ignorance and silence” that paradoxically marks its presence as something tangibly unsaid (in such a way, however, that supports the less conspicuous maneuver of relegating questions of sexuality as less material, real, or lived components of “historical context.”)²⁰⁵ Here, I hope to underscore that I am not interested in the epistemology of exposure as a technique through which to locate the “truth” about Ozu in his desire. Rather, I am interested in how Ozu’s auteurial text performs a certain process of oscillation, the incipient suggestion of queerness and its simultaneous occlusion, that invites us to think about “queerness” not as an attribute of true inner being – what Foucault called “sex as the universal secret” – but rather in terms of what de Villiers refers to a hermeneutic of opacity.

In contrast to the closet which is “unable to contain ... oppositions between [visibility and invisibility] but attempts metaphorically to maintain them,” the more ambiguous entanglement of these terms in a notion of opacity enables different political and discursive effects. Firstly, it redresses how the presumed fixity of homosexuality treats the putative queer subject or queer text “as an object of knowledge.” Instead, by presenting anomalous desire as something potentially present but also unlocatable and unsettled, its opaque rendering in *Late Spring* becomes “a positionality from which it is possible to know and to speak,” challenging the conventional terms through which sexuality is imputed with discursive legibility and meaning.²⁰⁶ In other words. Noriko’s aberrant desire may or may not serve as a figuration of Ozu’s homosexuality, but it is the “paranoid” potential of this reading that extends our vigilance outside of Noriko, or referentially Ozu, to the cultural or institutional contours through which this subject position accrues stigma in the first place. Thus, queerness’ indeterminate presence unsettles the taxonomizing knowledge encrypted in this mode of scrutiny, revising this knowledge into something vague, uncertain and “atmospheric,” in Anderson’s sense of the term, rather than as a

²⁰⁵ This has been redressed in two, and to my knowledge isolated, instances Robin Wood, *Sexual Politics and The Narrative Film: Hollywood and Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) and, to a more hesitant extent, Elyssa Faison, “Tokyo Twilight: Alienation, Belonging and the Fractured Family,” in *Ozu International Essays on the Global Influences of a Japanese Auteur*, eds., Wayne Stein and Marc DiPaolo (Bloomsbury Collections, 2015), 57–75.

²⁰⁶ de Villiers, *Opacity and the Closet*, 11.

coherent orientation towards specific persons or their symbolic delegates. In this way, the sense of anomaly queerness designates does not inhere exclusively in “aberrant subjects” but extends into a probing scrutiny of the institutional and ideological shape of their social and historical contexts that is reflected in the film’s formal design.

For example, the queer and critical affordances of opacity are registered through the high–contrast nocturnality of the film, in its juxtaposition of transparency and blindness, but also in its perturbation of ordinary, everyday appearances. For instance, in the film’s most famous scene, Noriko and her father prepare to go to sleep in a Kyoto inn after visiting Onodera and his new wife. After seeing how fulfilled Onodera seems with his spouse, Noriko reluctantly consents to marry her suitor in order to make room for her father to pursue the widow, a confession he only half–hears as he drifts into sleep. In this dramatic climax, we first see the father and daughter in a medium–shot, the dramatic fill–light hanging overhead bifurcating the image into distinct areas of luminous and dark planes. But as soon as Noriko turns off the lights, the darkness that prevails on the visual field seems to also register a perceptual shift towards the strange and arbitrary conventionality to which Noriko has just submitted herself. In contrast to the generally naturalistic air of the film, as soon as Noriko turns off the electric light, the interior of the room does not transform, as we might expect, into a space of almost total darkness. Instead, the sudden loss of the room’s main source of light, inexplicably – and thus all the more astonishingly – allows for the silhouette of branches behind a screen–door to appear across the horizontal expanse of the shot’s frame. No plausible spatial relationship, however, can account for the shadows suddenly coming into view. In order for the silhouettes to materialize, they must have been lit from behind, such that they would have already been partially visible even with the room’s electric lights still on.

The famous, and much debated, medium–shot cutaway of an isolated vase further accentuates the impression of a sudden anomalous rift in reality’s texture. Centered in its frame and surrounded by the night’s darkness, the vase appears backlit by a semi–transparent screen

similar to the one looming over Noriko's prostate body. This shot might appear like mere stylized transition, an enigmatic but place-establishing hinge Noël Burch describes as a "pillow shot" (in reference to a pillow word, a literary device describing a figure of speech that links one element with another, otherwise unrelated component of a poem).²⁰⁷ But rather than cut to another scene, the next shot guides us back to another close-up of Noriko, except here she appears upset and on the verge of tears. This affectively-laden image is then followed by an identical shot of the earlier vase held for ten seconds, a dilated duration that mirrors our confusion regarding its inexplicable and spooky reappearance. Through this repetition, the vase registers a temporal glitch that underscores the newly aberrant atmosphere of Noriko's physical and social environment, as the vase now appears unnaturally and hauntingly subjectivized.

In this scene, the night's blurring of boundaries metaphorically reflects and accentuates cinema's much discussed capacity to unsettle the ontological distinctions between subjects and objects. As Noa Steimatsky reminds us, in fact, "at certain historical moments in particular ... the cinema was understood to endow a face-like expressivity upon other objects small and big: hands, plants, houses, street corners, entire landscapes are sometimes described as having a face – which also translates as being, or having, character or soul. As figure, or indeed as instrument of expressivity, the face routinely strives beyond its morphological coordinates: the reaction shot and the shot–reverse–shot are only the most common ways in which the face can extend expression beyond its own perimeter, most obviously as its gaze is (actually or virtually)

²⁰⁷ Noël Burch, *To the Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in the Japanese Cinema* (University of California Press, 1979), 169. While Burch's research was critical for Ozu's reception in West European and North American contexts, alongside the work of Donald Richie and David Bordwell, his formalist treatise has been criticized by numerous scholars for reducing questions of aesthetics in Japanese cinema as an unchanging ideological system in opposition to "the West." For critiques of Burch's essentialism in the context of the academic reception of Japanese cinema see Scott Malcolmson, "The Pure Land Beyond the Seas: Barthes, Burch and the Uses of Japan," *Screen* 26, nos. 3–4 (1985): 31; Ben Singer, "Triangulating Japanese Film Style," in *The Oxford Handbook of Japanese Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): 33–60. In *The Aesthetics of Shadow*, Miyao instead argues that what Burch reads as the persistence of traditional aesthetics in the lighting of Japanese cinema should be contextualized as "the invention of tradition" through modern technologies, economic necessity and local needs.

oriented towards other objects.”²⁰⁸ The erratic oscillation between Noriko’s face and her physical environment, for which the vase serves as a metonymic surrogate, can thus be read as a projection of her subjectivity into the physical appearance of the world. But at the same time, it also supplants the aberrant character of her unconventional ambitions with the strange, agentive aura suddenly imputed to the vase’s presence. In doing so, a queer structure of anomalous feeling is no longer firmly linked to a specific referent, such as Noriko (or, if one elects to read referentially and symptomatically, Noriko as a surrogate for Ozu’s queerness). Instead, its extension into the atmospheric and physical expanse of the visual field incites attention to the “unnatural” character of the surrounding world, the cultural and material relations that designate legitimate forms of social presence from unviable forms of intimacy or desire.

Nightshifts

35 Shots most conspicuous correspondence with *Late Spring* is also its most deliberate deviation from its originating text. Unlike Noriko and Shukichi, the characters fail to make the concert (the scene of the *father’s* betrayal). In Denis’ movie, however, infidelity’s textual locus and author are reverted. It is extratextual rather than diegetic and enacted by Denis as auteurial daughter rather than by any paternal figure. Moreover, its consequences are not psychically ruinous but highly transformative, creating revisions and improvisations necessary for the film’s dramatic centerpiece.

The sequence is set into motion by Gabrielle, their next-door neighbor and Lionel’s old flame, who organizes a joint outing that includes another neighbor, Noe (Gregoire Colin), with whom Jo has been casually flirting for years. Throughout the film, Gabrielle’s appeals to maternal surrogacy are gently yet consistently rebuffed. But during this outing she hopes to rekindle her affair with Lionel and reestablish the doting care she used to provide for Jo (“it’s been so long since we’ve been out as a family,” she announces). In fact, given the film’s narrative fidelity to Ozu thus far, we might reasonably expect to see Gabrielle’s wish fulfilled through a reenactment

²⁰⁸ Noa Steimatsky, *The Face on Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 11.

of Shukichi's deception in *Late Spring*. Lionel would thus rekindle an interest in Gabrielle at the concert in order to encourage Joséphine to choose between her two suitors: Noe or a handsome classmate at the University who they planned to meet at the concert venue. However, on their way to the event, Gabrielle's taxi breaks down in the middle of an unexpected downpour, deviating their movement away from the concert and into a restaurant that was just about to close for the evening. Galt reads the pivotal importance of this scene as an evasion of capitalist time that expands into a temporal space of open-ended possibility, arguing that the "disruption of the regular operations of capitalist leisure opens up onto something unexpected: a recalibration of desire and affection. The stoppage of one regime of vision enables the efflorescence of another, outside capitalist time."²⁰⁹ This deflection from *Late Spring's* script underscores a sense of a diversion through which unexpected and aleatory events will take shape.

As the restaurant owner reopens her business for the stranded group, we see another couple walk in, adding an important inflection to how we read this scene. This anonymous couple's presence, in fact, expands the space into a symbol for a broader sociality consisting of the "core" ensemble of the film's protagonists, whom we are invited to read in terms of the "family," surrounded by a peripheral circle of strangers, including the couple, and the restaurant's owner and her surly nephew. A sudden jump-cut reveals Gabrielle and Lionel dancing to "Siboney" and the conspicuous shift to a handheld camera registers the sensual intimacy of their bodily rhythms merging. Gabrielle, clearly satisfied with how the night is unfolding, leaves Lionel mid-song to dance with his daughter. However, during their dance, the cut meter of "Siboney" recedes and is replaced by the sensual rhythm of the Commadore's *Nightshift*. In this context, the song's title seems to underscore the night's capacity to deviate and reimagine a given life path into new and unexpected registers, while also reflecting and redoubling the film's orientation towards artistic forefathers. Released in 1985, the song pays tribute to Jackie Wilson and Marvin Gaye (incidentally murdered by his father), both of whom died a year earlier, and the song's

²⁰⁹ Galt, "World Cinema of Refusal," 14.

melodic structure and lyrics show traces of these singer's influence while simultaneously expressing a melancholic acceptance of generational change and separation.

As the song begins, however, father and daughter struggle to find an appropriate bodily attunement to its sensual melody. Noe intervenes from the sidelines, relieving Lionel of his embarrassment by asking to have this dance with his daughter – a replacement that enacts an obvious symbolic exchange. Through this maneuver, in fact, it seems clear that Noe aims to position himself as a libidinal substitute for Joséphine's father. In a certain reading, this substitution seems to visualize the incest taboo at the core of Oedipal and anthropological accounts of kinship structures, presuming that Joséphine's capacity to desire others is instated by a displacement of an original investment in the father whose interdiction steers her towards other object choices. Such an overt process of substitution and displacement seems to signify what Claude Levi-Strauss has famously called "the exchange of women" in which daughters are given by their fathers to another generation of men to marry. Such an economy of exchange seems to secure the continuation of a patrilinear social line that naturalizes heterosexual reproduction, positioning it as the punctual origin for socially available forms of kinship. However, the outcome of this exchange in the film does not secure a successful transition, and in doing so, it denaturalizes this scheme as a natural and underlying system at the very moment that it foregrounds its formulaic logic.

Joséphine and Noe's intimacy, of course, is not a smooth continuation of her dance with her father as it alternately registers erotic complicity, ambivalence, and conflict. In fact, while their initial rhythmic attunement to each other's bodies seemed to spell out their mutual attraction, once Noe's desire becomes more assertive, Joséphine starts to withdraw from his grip. Clearly embarrassed, Noe begins to walk away from her. However, not without a little irritation – and admittedly, Noe's mopey neediness and rather desperate antics are eminently unattractive – Jo pulls him back in her direction, as if to signal that it is not so much Noe's advances she is rejecting but rather the symbolic terms through which he is expressing his desire and initiating

what he intends as a new relational alliance.

However, even as Joséphine and Noe stop dancing, the music – contra any kind of convention within mainstream narrative cinema – does not recede in volume or intensity. It persists even as the camera draws its attention away from the “uncoupling” pair to the peripheral events in the background that would otherwise go unrecognized. The camera turns its attention to the restaurant owner and her nephew as they bring plates of rice and fish from the kitchen, or the other couple, whom we now realize had been dancing all along, as they sit down to eat. Our sensory acuity to quotidian surroundings are thus revitalized, an impression reinforced by the curvature of the camera’s movement as it pans the room, a technique Agnes Godard uses exclusively for this scene, as if to accentuate our attunement to the phenomenal resonance of these “background” activities. Denis seems to choreograph these peripheral events as part of the “dance” initiated by the father’s forfeiture of his privileged position, thus drawing attention to what Noe’s attempt at libidinal substitution failed to recognize.

As Kaja Silverman has argued, in fact, the chain of displacements initiated by relinquishing a prohibited object of desire does not lead to a predetermined or natural destination. “Because of the unstable and heterogeneous nature of every love–object, desire can extend itself in entirely unpredictable directions,” she writes, “perhaps what permits an early love–object to replace the mother, for instance, is not the smell of breast milk, but the name Persephone, which seems to the infant subject akin to the mother’s name, “Penelope,” and which leads, through many detours and circumlocutions, to an adult passion for classical literature. And for another subject, the word ‘mother’ might signify a mole at the corner of a shapely mouth, which she many years later rediscovers in the face of an eighteen–year–old boy.”²¹⁰

Thus, while in *Late Spring*, the night underscores Noriko’s aberrant status within kinship laws as a refusal of movement through exogamic displacement, here the nightshift scene reverses the orientation of her resistance to paternal law. Rather than arresting movement, it

²¹⁰ Kaja Silverman, *World Spectators* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 42.

initiates a series of promiscuous displacements akin to its contingent mobility across intertextual fragments that I have likened to the digressive intimacy of cruising. Despite the dissolution of the heterofamilial exchange it initially seemed to pace, the song's persistence disperses the accumulated libidinal energy of this unrealized climax across a moving medley of sensate textures and fragmentary gestures. The sonic expanse of the song, and the camera's errant and kinetic movement encompasses the perceptual imprint of both objects and bodies indiscriminately. This free play of roaming but revitalized attentiveness also seems to comment upon Gabrielle's subjectivity in particular. While she initially hoped to secure her position as Lionel's partner, his attention veers towards the beautiful restaurant owner whom he invites to dance, and a close-up of Gabrielle's face amidst the sequence's relay of gazes makes her disappointment unequivocal. This look of disappointment registers how a fulfilling sense of social belonging is conventionally understood to be a question of possessing what Rebecca Solnit calls "a great many ducks lined up in a row — spouse, offspring, private property, erotic experiences."²¹¹ But the sequence's dispersive constellation of feelings, sensory acuties, and gestures simultaneously intimates at alternative coordinates for an enduring and sustaining attachment to our physical and social world. While the "night shift" does not offer any prescriptive or determinate alternatives to these forms, the dance of libidinal displacements it stages reminds us of the variable modes in which love might be actualized, setting the stage for relational systems that do not disqualify those who fail to be adequate to normative intimacy, or are simply disinterested in what it has to offer. Beautiful strangers or next door neighbors, but also a plate of food, a particular way of being touched, a song, or even the buzz of a Saturday night, may not seem like anything worth building a life around (but nor for the matter is a boy). But this scene proposes that they can modestly initiate "a rich and affectively charged associational network" through which less punitive lifeworlds might be imagined and sustained.²¹²

²¹¹ Rebecca Solnit, *The Mother of All Questions* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), unpaginated.

²¹² Kaja Silverman, *World Spectators*, 124.

From Lübeck to Dakar

The resonance of the film's paternal identification recedes as the film drifts from France into a new geographic and symbolic terrain, Lübeck, where Jo's late mother is buried. This geographical and linguistic displacement represents a double movement within the film's symbolic network: we move from the fatherland to the motherland, and away from Ozu and towards another "parental figure" in the form of Fassbinder. The significance of this shift, however, lies less in its specific and ultimately transient point of destination and inheres rather in the potential for promiscuous movement it unequivocally registers. It is surprising that the film's belated alignment with the German director is rarely remarked upon, as this allusion becomes so resonant through a set of inter-related signifiers – most emphatically, the presence of Ingrid Caven whose image is indivisible from Fassbinder's biography, owing to their brief marriage and her roles in many of his films (and, in a film that interrogates the imperative of the couple form, the nonstandard nature of their marriage extends the film's concern with alternative relational configurations). The domestic interior in which Caven meets Jo and Lionel, moreover, is organized around a triadic chromatic palette evoking the bold color scheme of Fassbinder's films. *35 Shots of Rum* also shares a motif of interracial love and migrant workers living in Germany with *Fear Eats the Soul* (1974), a film that informs the composition of Denis' earlier *I Can't Sleep* in its spatializing of hostile yet desiring gazes.

Joséphine's unexpected fluency in German appears striking as it manifests a latent element of her biography that was hitherto unknown. Read through the film's ceaseless movement between textual and intertextual domains, her shift into a different linguistic register puts the stability of Joséphine's role as Denis' surrogate under greater scrutiny. Critical responses towards the film have generally accepted Joséphine as Denis' transparent delegate who accrues symbolic significance through the dynamics of paternal filiation she makes visible. Whether or not critics see this alignment as dutiful or disobedient ultimately amounts to a trivial distinction as either position presumes and reinforces a singular and paternalist orientation as the

primary ordering principle of the film, at the expense of its subtle and promiscuous attunement to both alternative kinship modes and transnational genealogies in world cinema. By hailing Fassbinder, the film extends its cruising movement across a series of intertextual queer dads and texts, but it also incites attention towards less recognized axes of affiliation: dead mothers, a cousin, and even Caven's unnamed character who oscillates indeterminately between relational nodes. It remains unclear, in fact, if she is Joséphine's aunt, grandmother, or her mother's close family friend, nor do we ever really feel the need to conclusively determine the nature of her clearly affectionate relationship to Jo, as well as to her deceased mother.

Furthermore, Joséphine's symbolic relation to Denis is neither set nor static but alternates between different possibilities. At the time of filming, Diop was a fledgling director who had already shot a short film. She has since become a celebrated filmmaker in her own right, her subsequent short and medium-length films achieving acclaim across international film festivals. As a young director starring in an elder female cineaste's film as her surrogate, Diop's symbolic relation to Denis is thus simultaneously homologous and parental – an oscillation that for all its structural ambiguity seems to trace the hope for a more sustained institutional recognition of cross-generational and intergenerational solidarity and influence among women filmmakers. But Diop's presence also alludes to yet another intricate genealogical field that disorganizes unitary lines of filiation. Her name, in fact, identifies her as the daughter of the musician Wasis Diop and the niece of Djibril Diop Mambety, the director of the landmark Senegalese film *Touki Bouki* (1973). Moreover, Mati Diop's most well-known film to date, *Mille Soleils* (2013), focuses on *Touki Bouki's* lead actor Magaye Niang playing a fictionalized version of himself negotiating *Touki Bouki's* legacy on his life. Although *Mille Soleils* was produced five years after *35 Shots of Rum*, and thus exists outside its immediate field of enunciation, its overt thematization of familial dynamics and its oscillation between diegetic and extradiegetic poles seems to extend *35 Shots of Rum's* expansive familial nexus.

By intimating the totality of relations that underpin world cinema through the microcosm of

the family, *35 Shots* provokes attention to the gendered and heteronormative organization of global cinema's institutional and economic structures, wherein the visualization of gendered exclusions can serve as a mirror for neoimperialist biases and vice versa. Thus, through the film's expanded attention to non-paternal and extended kin in this sequence, the film also seeks to reconfigure or reframe what Salazkina calls the "imperial hierarchy of the modern world system" through a sustained intertextual invocation of the Senegalese auteur's hallmark film. Here, Denis' reflexive inscription of her auteorial subjectivity in *35 Shots* serves again as a locus through which to think about the field's gendered but also neo-imperialist biases. As we have seen, critics readily hail Denis as a post-colonial auteur who thematizes the aftermath and persistence of indirect modes of colonial dependency and exploitation in West and East Africa, where she grew up as a child of civil servants. As a French white woman, then, she is seen as engaging with the landscape and colonial legacies of various African countries, such as Djibouti in *Beau Travail*. But rarely has the question of African cinema's role in shaping her aesthetic influences impinged on any serious engagement with her work, despite the obsessive linkage of paternal influences critics have traced in her corpus. In this Lübeck sequence, the faintness of her homage to *Touki Bouki* redresses this oversight, while simultaneously thematizing the institutional blind spots within the putatively transnational discourse of world cinema that has foreclosed recognition of this "inheritance." I'll return to this point later.

The final scene in the Lübeck sequence evinces the indeterminate qualities of familial kinship by reinscribing its scalar composition. If the affective resonances between father and daughter were visually accentuated through their apartment's network of rooms, this scene condenses that graphic and symbolic system into the compact space of the camper in which they drive to Germany. We first see the vehicle parked on the beach in a wide shot with the sea and the grassy topography of the shoreline framing the father and daughter inside their car. The waves' continuous movement asserts the sea's vast extension beyond the shot's frame so that the camper appears even smaller in comparison to its natural setting. However, despite the vehicle's limited and narrow space, its open door reveals a surprisingly homelike interior. Inside

this space, we observe Lionel grabbing a beer from the fridge as Joséphine washes the dishes in an inbuilt sink. These gestures evoke their rhythmic routine in their ample apartment, inviting us to read the van as a cipher for the film's repeated restructuring of scale. Such fluctuations in scale visualizes an understanding that material and relational forms do not possess timeless attributes particular to themselves but are rather continuously reconfigured by shifting entanglements and relations. Through this trope of resizing residential environments, the film thus initiates a process of symbolic restructuring that further derealizes the diegetic domain, a space already delaminated by the film's continuous profusion of intertexts. In this specific scene, the visual field thus acts as an allegory for symbolic meaning's structural dynamism, in a way that suggests that its formal composition and the events it oversees are constantly renegotiating the terms of a symbolic order. The vehicle's position near the sea further accentuates this reattunement to liminal and unresolved meaning, as the port city's shoreline acts as an indeterminate boundary between inside and outside, land and water, continental and Northern Europe and, at the moment of the scene's unfolding, day and dusk. Such an arrangement of multiple borderlines once again relinquishes the notion that bounded and determinate structures are the underlying characteristic of representational space, emphasizing, rather, representation's capacity for mutable, and thus perennially indefinite topologies. For in lieu of static models that delimit and prescribe symbolic relations, the film repeatedly traces formations that vacillate and slide into patterns that surface only to break, akin to the unstoppable flux of intimacy I have read through the optic of cruising. In doing so, *35 Shots* allows for a richer attunement to the symbolic and material indeterminacy of relational arrangements as they are continuously rearticulated through a rhythmic congress with our immediate social environments and the less perceptible but often violent force of geopolitical capital's uneven flows and exploitative channels of circulation.

In light of Diop's presence in *35 Shots*, and the film's concern with questions of transmigration, this image of the sea also recalls the periodic visual motif of the shoreline in *Touki Bouki*. In this film, it is repeatedly shown as a captivating chromatic vista that symbolizes both the bounded periphery that prevents Mory (Magaye Niang) and Anta (Mareme Niang) from fleeing to

France, while also serving as the threshold they need to traverse to make it to their imagined promise land of Paris. This intertextual lineage connects with *35 Shots*' metaphors of cruising as a space wherein the promise of intimacy coincides with the threat of being mugged and robbed. In one of the couple's many harebrained schemes, they steal clothes and money from Charlie (Ousseynou Diop), a wealthy homosexual whose sexuality is symbolically and problematically linked to bourgeois and foreign decadence. It would be difficult to redeem this pejorative figuration of gay sexuality but it is nonetheless significant to underscore how the film's protagonists are not rewarded for this betrayal. And while the film plays on scenes of Charlie's courtship of Mory for laughs, like Fassbinder's *Querelle*, it also validates Charlie's desire for a handsome but treacherous trick through lingering and highly libidized attention to Mory's athletic physique. Moreover, unlike other West African films that cast homosexuality as a foreign and colonialist presence, *Touki Bouki* is also remarkable for its brief and nonjudgmental evocation a gay underground scene in Dakar²¹³. Not only does *35 Shots*' textual system of cruising sustain a counterpublic that *Touki Bouki* surveys only transiently. But in divesting fathers of their unique authority, this "paternal intertext" now circulates in a broader associational field that does not excuse or recuperate its homophobia, but which instead revises the force of its stigmatizing representation by resituating it as part a longer history of national and transnational films that have grappled, at times irresponsibly, with the sexual and gender politics that are often initiated by debates surrounding the national's resistance to globalizing influences.

Conclusion

As will soon become evident, this scene's investment in questions of scale and space are pressed into a reflection of how world cinema should be mapped, a conundrum whose geopolitics

²¹³ For discussions of homosexuality in African Art cinema, including *Touki Bouki* see Martin Botha, "Queering African Film Aesthetics: A Survey from the 1950s to 2003," in *International Films: Critical Approaches to African Cinema Discourse*, ed. Frank Nwachukwu Ukadike (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014), 63–86; Sada Niang, *Nationalist African Cinema: Legacy and Transformations* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014).

Denis again approaches through the surprising figure of heterofamilial kinship. The problematic of how to approach the parameters of world cinema are reestablished through the film's extension and revision of its originating text. As it is the last time we see the father and daughter together before she gets married, this sequence corresponds to *Late Spring's* scene at the Kyoto inn at night. The vast geographic and temporal distance separating *35 Shots* from *Late Spring* is again abridged not only through the proximity enforced by intertextual allusion but also via the intimate familial idiom – the textual and intertextual redoubling of father–daughter dynamics – through which this very allusion is pitched. By evoking the breadth of the global through the surprising yet recurring trope of immediate kinship, *35 Shots* approaches world cinema as a discursive field defined by an ambiguity between oscillating scalar terms such that distance becomes proximity, vastness is evinced through closeness, the far–flung constitutes the intimate, and citational recall of earlier texts turns into the foreknowledge of *35 Shots's* narrative outcome.

While *35 Shots's* transnational intertexts erode the imaginary unity of the film's narrative domain, they do not void the question of territorial place of its political or discursive consequence. On the contrary, the spectrum of these allusions' felt presence, from the fully contoured to the only faintly registered, reinvests the film's textual field with an intensified awareness of the inconsistent spatial measurements separating each citational line from the film's narrative center, which is to say, the institutional conditions that render Fassbinder more legible than Diop, for example. In doing so, *35 Shots* acknowledges the partiality of its worldly perspective while also reflecting upon the subjective and structural conditions that determine what is included within this partial and particularized vantage point. Such a self–reflexive approach resonates with the “orientational map” for which Dudley Andrew advocates in “An Atlas of World Cinema.” Rather than delineate territorial borders, an orientation map, he specifies, is less an exhaustive survey of

global cinema but rather a reckoning with how the “thwarted totalization” of an inconceivably vast global scale “[encouraging] a dialectical understanding of culture and of one’s place in it.”²¹⁴

As if in response to Andrew, the final scene of the Lubeck sequence, with its emphasis on notions of borders and scales, demands that we interpret it explicitly as discursive cartography that expresses Denis’ situated position within a sense of world cinema. But if maps mandate a specific mode of reading the world, and conscript attention towards particular terms (borders, elevation, climate, demographics), this scene’s steady progress towards nocturnal darkness calls attention not just to what is legible in the world but also to the psychic and social conditions of this legibility, and what it forecloses and excludes. Through the night’s protraction of perceptual recognition, the scene’s darkness temporalizes vision and thus invests it with its own dimensionality. In doing so, the act of looking becomes as much a symbolic component of this map as any element of the scene’s mise-en-scene. Implicating our sense memory of looking in the dark, nocturnal atmosphere advocates for a hermeneutics of closeness in *35 Shots*’ mapping of world cinema as an idea, as human vision at night impels us to move nearer to what we wish to see. But at the same time, this opacity also prompts us to animate sensory modalities less associated with distanced mastery than unimpeded vision, such as scent and tactility, forms of perception that blur and extend the imagined boundaries of the self into a permeable contact with our surroundings. In a related vein, film theorists working on the sensory and aesthetic dimensions of transnational cinema – such as Laura Marks and Hamid Naficy – have identified how formal attributes associated with the partial or incomplete image, such as the image’s surface texture or its tight framing, engender an irresolution between distance and closeness that signifies the complex affective, material, and mnemonic connections between homeland and the transnational for diasporic subjects.²¹⁵ In other words, sensory acquisition in unilluminated

²¹⁴ Dudley Andrew, “An Atlas of World Cinema,” *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 45, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 15.

²¹⁵ Laura M. Marks, *The Skin of Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

darkness, as it is mediated in Denis' film, fosters an intimate attentiveness to the proximate, while still responding to that which appears incomplete and occluded in the distance. Analogizing the partial nature of all knowledge, the night's presence in this map of world cinema, I want to suggest, symbolizes the new but as yet unrealized configurations that its institutional and discursive shape might assume.

APICHATPONG WEERASETHAKUL'S NOCTURNAL AUTEURSHIP

Apichatpong Weerasethakul's fifth feature length film *Cemetery of Splendor*, the night has a double resonance as the primary setting for the film's exploration of sleep as well as a conceit reflecting dynamics of technological transition. Shot in his hometown of Khon Kaen, located in Isan, a region of North Eastern Thailand, *Cemetery of Splendor* takes place around a disused school converted into a make-shift clinic. This sleep ward hosts a group of slumbering soldiers who have been rendered unresponsive by a mysterious narcoleptic illness. The film traces the effects of this enigmatic disorder on the everyday life of the town, focusing in particular on the friendship between a volunteer caretaker, Jenjira (Jenira Pongpas), and Itt (Banlop Lomnoi), one of the narcoleptic soldiers. However, we soon learn that the soldiers condition cannot be reversed. A royal palace and cemetery were built on the very premises of where the clinic stands, allowing for the soldiers' energy to be siphoned by the spirits of ancient kings to fight a never-ending battle in a parallel realm. This trope of slumber thematizes contemporary sociopolitical conditions under a resurgent authoritarianism in Thailand, while also connecting this political treatise with a materialist reflection on cinema's transition from celluloid to digital.

The film, in fact, marks the Thai director's transition from 16mm celluloid to the digital Alexa camera, as well as a change of DP, from Sayombhu Mukdeeprom to Diego Garcia. In this way, the film extends his short-works' construction of political metaphors in relation to the current, and potentially brief, coexistence of digital and analog formats, mining this dynamic's allegorical relation to the night as a transitory space where a sense of the collective present is either reiterated or reworked. Speaking about an earlier short, *Ashes* (2012) whose first half was filmed on 35mm but shifts to digital at its conclusion, Apichatpong explains that this conjuncture of media was motivated by a curiosity to see whether "[film and digital] could go together. And I think it does, the digital and the analog co-existing. In a movie that talks about the transformation...the passing of something, in a situation that's quite hopeless. The memory of something that's gone.

The last scene with the fireworks is a funeral. I think this says something about the medium itself, it is transforming or dying.”²¹⁶

Many of Apichatpong’s earlier feature lengths, such as *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* or *Syndromes and a Century* challenge the binary opposition between life and death through their emphasis on illness and haunting’s material and affective entanglement with normative conceptions of aliveness. In a related vein, *Cemetery of Splendor* reminds us that sleep is an existential baseline, such that the imagined self-containment of being alive comes undone through sleep’s suspension of wakeful consciousness. Like the cinematic night with which it is closely associated, representations of sleep invoke and engage our physiological limits as integral to the sensory experience of the film’s audiovisual address. At the same time, harkening also to earlier works of avant-garde film, such as Andy Warhol’s *Sleep* (1963), dormancy here is linked to cinematic slowness’ attunement to inaction, the boring, and the inconsequential, in such a way that desyncs cinematic time from eventfulness and narrative action and allows it to unfold as an undifferentiated duration. Thus, as a limit to knowledge and self-possession, and also potentially, cinema’s conventional formal components, the metaphor of sleep in *Cemetery of Splendor* gestures to the discursive legacies of slow film, and both conscious and unconscious fantasy. Through the trope of slumber, the film questions what kind of phenomenological or social presence (if any) sleep constitutes, and explores how it might develop formations of cinematic time that are not linked to the logic of narrative causality or the compulsory reproduction of dominant social orders.

As I have surveyed in the previous chapters, sleep, and its corollary of dreaming, has become centrally important to critics of new media in ways that might appear contradictory. For Jonathan Crary, for instance, sleep as a necessary interval of cognitive withdrawal, prevents the total assimilation of human life into digitally-mediated attempts to coordinate social rhythms with

²¹⁶ Apichatpong Weerasethakul quoted in Daniel Kasman, “Keep It Mysterious: A Conversation with Apichatpong Weerasethakul,” *MUBI*, June 5, 2012, <https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/keep-it-mysterious-a-conversation-with-apichatpong-weerasethakul>.

temporal processes of nonstop connection and production.²¹⁷ But inversely, as a trope for contemporary media convergence, sleep's remove from sensory contact with the external world might also symbolize the dematerialization of older apparatuses into effects simulated by computational systems, in a manner akin to how waking-life is abstracted in slumber into the psychic material through which dreams are formed. Thus, for a series of scholars, sleep as a cognitive remission from world-bound sentience mirrors how certain cybernetic discourses aspire towards modes of connectivity and representation that are unfettered by material boundaries. For instance, in *Virtual Memory: Time-Based Art and the Dream of Digitality*, Homa King cites N. Katherine Hayles notion that "the great dream and promise of information is that it can be free from the material constraints that govern the mortal world' and 'achieve effective immortality.'"²¹⁸

But as King and Hayles' work makes clear, dreaming does not solely imply earthly transcendence; in its unpredictability and elusiveness to consciousness, it can also induce modes of reverie or recollection that allow us to imagine reality's potential for transformation outside of dominant arrangements of power. Accordingly, *Cemetery of Splendor* develops its metaphors of slumber through its capacity to oscillate between opposing registers of compliance and resistance, while also interrogating, rather than eliding, distinctions between the carnal thingliness of the somnolent body and the aleatory promiscuity of the dreaming mind. Through this dialectical interplay, the film interrogates media technologies' participation in sustaining but also potentially transforming the discursive construction of the nation's imagined essence. In this way, the film propels and explores a phenomenology of sleep to reveal the ruse of an absolute and self-possessed subject, multiplying the figure of the somnolent body to destabilize an image of the national body-politic as self-sovereign, coherent, and self-sufficient.

Originally titled "Cemetery of Kings," the narrative's three-pronged allusion to monarchy, national mythology, and military force invokes, as Kong Rithdee has argued, "the propaganda of

²¹⁷ Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (New York: Verso Books, 2013).
²¹⁸ N. Katherine Hayles quoted in Homa King, *Virtual Memory: Time Based Art and the Dream of Digitality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 10.

nation-building,” which has been used to license intensified cultural and political surveillance in Thailand, particularly in the wake of the 2014 military coup d’etat.²¹⁹ In a certain reading, therefore, sleep, merely symbolizes political passivity, acceptance, or indifference towards the militarized government’s judicial and social over-reach. The country’s military junta, in fact, has routinely justified its unchecked control over free-speech and democracy as a means to protect the nation’s social order, legitimating its authoritarianism as an extension and expression of the people’s interest, if not their collective will.²²⁰

The film’s last scene might thus appear to corroborate an interpretation of sleep as the inverse of wakefulness, a binary opposition that in turn mirrors an understanding of dormancy and consciousness as polarized metaphors for political awareness (or a lack thereof, one need only think of critiques of cinema as a dream-like trance that induces identification with dominant ideology).²²¹ In this scene, we see Jen staring intently in the distance, a symbol for the film’s vigilant attunement towards an impending but unspecified menace in the process of emerging. In this shot, Jen seems to be looking both directly at a group of kids playing football over mounds of dirt and giant craters created by bulldozers. But her unblinking stare and the long duration of the shot also conveys the sense that she is looking beyond what is directly in front of her, possibly at the horizon of future displacement and dispossession that this destruction portends. Early in the film, we learn that the bulldozers are digging up the earth to make room for fiber optic cables. The landfill is thus the culmination of a repeated motif that appears at different moments throughout the narrative, often at the periphery of the shot’s primary field of action.

Through this reference to the digital’s material underpinnings, the film reflects on its own system of digital production, exploring its camera’s capacities and tonal differences from film, as

²¹⁹ Kong Rithdee, “Cemetery of Splendor,” *Cinemascope* (2015), <http://cinemascope.com/spotlight/cemetery-of-splendour-apichatpong-weerasethakul-ukfrancegermanymalaysiathailand/>.

²²⁰ See Michael Connors, “Cultural Policy as General Will and Social Order Protectionism: Thailand’s Conservative Double Movement,” *International Journal of Cultural Policy* (2016): 1–16.

²²¹ See Jean-Louis Baudry’s concept of the “dream screen.” Jean-Louis Baudry, “The Apparatus,” *Camera Obscura* 1, no. 1 (1976): 104–126.

well shall see, but also by gesturing to the broader material infrastructures that enable the circulation of digital media (like the cables systems, the dream world the soldiers inhabit is repeatedly referred to as being underground).²²² The vision of the indistinct, de-individuated construction site is strikingly at odds with the variegated details of Isan—life lovingly registered throughout the film, textures and ornaments that bespeak “a modern vernacular” of the local culture’s ties with transnational globalization, such as micro—economies like markets surrounded by glossy corporate advertisement, but which alternately also register the stubborn persistence of Loatian and Khmer influences, such as statues of Cambodian goddesses in local shrines that bely attempts by Bangkok—governance to absorb Isan in fabricated histories of “homogeneous Thainess.” The ravaging effects of the bulldozer’s excavation on the local ecosystem thus allegorizes the obliteration of local, regionalist culture and memory to make room for global systems of rapid communication and exchange. For the characters in the film, this disruption does not simply signify an abstract metaphorical transition between analog media in favor of the unfettered flow of digitized images. It also implicates the material reality of the local community. As Itt predicts, the soldiers and the townfolks will soon have to move away from the hospital’s vicinity, so that telecommunication companies and governmental bodies can expand the infrastructure that connects the nation to a global system of digital commerce.

The last shot of Jen’s mawkishly widened eyes thus registers the sudden and full force of this realization, and offers an image that seems strikingly different to the soldiers’ deep slumber. However, given how the motif of the craters is elaborated as an accretion of sounds and images throughout the film’s duration, we might ask whether Jen’s sudden awareness of this material and symbolic threat stands in opposition to slumber; or whether it is not, in fact, her care for the sleeping soldiers and her intimate exposure to their dream—world, that allows her to see what the equally wakeful children cannot yet perceive. Reflecting how dream—work can unearth repressed

²²² For a useful primer see Nicole Starosielski, “Pipeline Ecologies: Rural Entanglements of Fiber—Optic Cables,” in *Sustainable Media: Critical Approaches to Media and Environment*, eds. Nicole Starosielski and Janet Walkers, eds. (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), 38–55.

aspects of our psychic lives, Jenjira's intimate involvement with the sleeping soldiers reattunes her perceptual acuity to her surrounding conditions, such that submerged or disassociated forces in her social world suddenly emerge into a sharpened focus.

Initially, the soldiers' inexplicable predicament is treated as a crisis by the city. Eventually, however, their sleep is neither normalized nor forgotten but rather its arbitrary comings and goings are integrated into the social rhythms of everyday life. In this way, conventions upholding rigid demarcations between waking– and sleeping come undone, as do diurnal and nocturnal modes of attunement and sensory calibration. When Itt, for instance, falls asleep in a cinematic multiplex, we see two men carry his supine body down the escalator. The crowd of spectators leaving the theater, however, seem uninterested in what has become a frequent and unremarkable occurrence in their daily lives. In another scene in a canteen, one of the soldiers initiates small talk with his wife and fellow soldiers, only for his face to fall flat on the plate of food he just claimed was delicious. This sudden collapse into sleep prompts the gentle concern of his spouse and the benign amusement of his friends, but it does not inflate into viral panic. In fact, in the next shot, the sight of the soldier's body carried back to his bed by a sentient appears dwarfed and peripheral compared to the looming presence of the bulldozers that dominates the shot's composition. In both of these scenes, the soldiers' vertiginous descent into unconsciousness creates a fluster in their surroundings that rises briefly only to dissipate. Without devolving into disaster, this fleeting agitation leaves a vague but lingering impression of something anomalous in the air, unsettling the cohesion of the surrounding social atmosphere.

The splat of the dormant soldier's face in his food, in fact, can be read as an encoded expression of disobedient revulsion towards the portraits of Field Marshall Sarit Thanarak that appear in the shot's background, the Isan-born dictator who assumed power in 1957 by staging a military coup – one of many in Thailand's subsequent history. Throughout his tenure as prime minister, Sarit restructured the nation's symbolic and cultural discourses in order to excuse and support his hegemonic policies, such as his abrogation of the constitution or the forced

dissolution of opposition parties. To this end, he revived the image of the monarchy to cast his authority as the manifest fulfilment of Thailand's true, timeless identity. However, through a cunning affiliation of his anti-democratic coup with the benign presence of the smiling king, Sarit reframed anxieties and dissent towards his program of "social purification" as attacks on the central, core forms of Thainess itself. During his tenure as prime minister, for instance, he jailed writers and intellectuals, and instituted censorship and restrictions on music, dancing, and fashion, notoriously arresting "people with long hair, tight pants, and flashy clothes" as putative threats to common Thai people and the traditional family.²²³ Thus, in order to further consolidate and justify his power, Sarit restored awe and prostration towards the king not only as an icon for Thailand's history but also as a paternal figure, the unifying father of the nation who erased differences of class, language, and regional identity by imagining the nation as an expanded nexus of intimate, familial bonds. In this way, by linking his government to the revival of a "timeless" paternalism, Sarit's destructive policies were symbolically framed as "tough love", and strict but ultimately benevolent oversight over the nation's "errant children". As Michael Kelly Connors has argued, "although Thailand had changed to a democratic system, the people still feel they 'are in the status of a child while the governors are fathers who must give warmth.' Such a legacy is dangerous to democracy because under its influence the people lack responsibility and lack the political consciousness to govern themselves (*pokkhrang tuo eng*)."²²⁴ Thus, in *Cemetery of Splendor*, the deep somnolence of the soldiers acts as a metaphor for a tendency towards political indifference, trust, and obedience among Thai citizens; a lack of critical consciousness that is strategically cultivated by the symbolic paternalism of the nation's monarchical institution, as it is continuously instrumentalized by its military regime.

²²³ For an analysis of the symbiotic relationship between authoritarianism and the monarchy under Sarit Thanarat's rule see Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotism Paternalism* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publication, 2007).

²²⁴ Michael Connors, *Democracy and National Identity in Thailand* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 79.

Moments before Itt's recumbent body is carried out of the cinema, in fact, we witness him, alongside the scarce audience members in the darkened theater, stand for the "king's national anthem" – a montage of clips and images from Rama IX's life – that is projected before every film in Thailand, and to which all audience members are expected to rise (failing to do so could lead, in fact, to a *lese majeste* infraction, which has been used to jail public intellectuals). We are thus invited to read Itt's collapse, a few scenes later, as a symbolic refusal of this coercive injunction, a practice that exemplifies cultural policies synchronizing the body politic to the permanent exceptionalism of the monarchy and its affiliated institutions. Thus, while indexing a notion of political indifference, at the same time, the soldiers' sudden black-outs also undermine the political sensorium of monarchical and military unity, while also unsettling, as we shall see, the cultural potency of familialism that grants military despotism its symbolic authority. Writing presciently in 2007, the historian Thak Chaloehtiarana observed how Sarit's rule established a prototype for future military take-overs, as his power was legitimated through his appeals to his father image that was reflected and amplified via his association with the king: "Thai politics even today is just one step removed from despotic paternalism," and the possibility of a political relapse demands that we seriously contemplate its past meaning and form, especially the likelihood and implications of a future, adaptive resurrection of a paternal rule, *mutatis mutandis*.²²⁵

In fact, while we hear the first notes of the anthem, and witness the audience rising, we are not shown the montage honoring the king. Instead, *Cemetery of Splendor* replaces it with a sequence of tenuously connected nighttime scenes of people sleeping, reemphasizing the night's historic role as an alternative public sphere to dominant historical culture. As a surrogate to this monarchical montage, however, we are nonetheless asked to read it through the lens of spectators in a state of cinematic absorption at the cinema. In lieu of vignettes featuring the king's ecstatically adoring subjects, and the citizens benefitting from his magnanimity, this nocturnal montage reveals the bodies of citizens who have been rendered redundant by neoliberal

²²⁵ Chaloehtiarana, *Despotic Paternalism*, 235.

expansion and left out of the state's promise of familial unity. Reversing the conventional relationship between sleep and dreaming, then, in which the former serves as the conduit to the latter, this 'alternative montage' to the monarchical trailer induces a cinematic mode of reverie in which scenes of slumber enable the repressed of the social to surface. From the darkened theater in which Itt and Jen rise to greet the anthem, the action shifts to an image of the clinic's ceiling fan, a shot whose vacillating color scheme signals the presence of the LED-lights which the doctors recommend to cure the soldiers. The film then scans different soldiers in the hospital, before moving outdoors to show a group of homeless people gathered around a lamp-post, its luminous nimbus reflecting the wall behind them, a mural commemorating Sarit Thanarat, and then later, another homeless person asleep at a bus station. This dormant body's exposure to the elements, and to the potential for physical violence, is strikingly dissonant with the light-box advertisement for "EU wedding studio" behind him. Featuring the smiling faces of white men with Thai brides, this ad is most likely a match-making service for Isan-women looking for foreign husbands, a dream of either financial advancement or exoticized retirement that serves as a counter-point to the social precarity of the homeless person sleeping.

Moving across these images, the montage thus revises a resignification of sleep's metaphoric relation to cinematic spectatorship. For while identification with the king's "national anthem" can be viewed in terms of the hallucinatory passivity that cinema can induce in spectators, here it becomes an index of physical and social vulnerability, of experiences that lie in excess or default of the dominant order's social promise of unity under the government's ruse of paternal care. However, layered on this social critique, is also a meditative excursus on the digital camera that acknowledges misgivings towards its dematerializing protocols, while also offering a ruminative, speculative treatise on digital cinema's capacity to foster critical investments in physical reality that are nonetheless grounded in its sensual and phenomenological elements.

Vivian Sobchack views the digital's technological and phenomenological structure with critical and ethnical skepticism, but in the process, she offers an exacting ekphrastic account of

its sensual attributes that are highly pertinent to this scene. “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, discontiguous, and absolute,” she writes, “And this electronic world incorporates the spectator/user uniquely in a spatially decentered, weakly temporalized and quasi–disembodied (or diffusely embodied) state.”²²⁶ For Sobchack, these attributes attenuate the fleshy, corporeal groundings that induce us to invest and care in the profilmic world. But it is precisely this sense of the filmic object’s sensual diffusion through the digital camera, the persistence of the physical object despite its dissipated, material indexicality, that lends itself to the metaphors and physiology of sleep. In this dormant state, our flesh and the surrounding world endure albeit in a form that eludes our self–possession or conscious self–presence. Thus, in the same way that the digital is better equipped to register the sensate reality of the nocturnal world than film, the sequence seems to ask whether the Alexa is more existentially aligned with the carnal and social experience of sleep that occupies, in the most optimistic conditions, at least a third of our lives. As the sequence reminds us, for numerous people at the brink of social destitution, sleep cannot be conflated with a retreat from the world, or viewed as an internal limit and resistance to social mandates. For the slumbering subjects in this montage, sleep is in fact a threshold where they are most precariously embodied, exposed, and permeable to the contingencies of their physical and social environments. At the same time, the sequence, filmed at night using available lighting, exploits the low–light abilities of the digital camera to foster our vigilant attunement to the world in which the public sleepers entrust their bodies. Here, the textured details of physical reality that pierce its fog of darkness are presented with an uncanny sharpness that reflectively thematizes our revitalized attention to social realities often excised from mainstream technologies of visibility and representation. Through this “alternative anthem,” the sequence exposes the hypocrisy and delusion of trust and identification in the monarchy’s paternal authority, setting the stage for

²²⁶ Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 153.

affective orientations to other figurations of the social discursively constructed around the transient temporality and visual opacity of the night.

The Aunty as Nocturnal Counterpublic

By tracing the slow enmeshment of dream–life into waking life, the self–assured and integrated sensorium of Thailand’s current established order fragments into new potential meanings. In the same way to how dreams provide phantasmagoric form to unconscious or even unthought dynamics, the disruptive bodies of narcoleptic soldiers reconfigure the rhythms and textures of Khon Khaen’s social life, allowing for peripheral or errant experiences to shift towards the center of the narrative’s emotive concerns. In the process, the city’s sleep crisis produces a constellation of relational trajectories that stray from prestigious affects, like amative desire or paternal recognition, or relational pairings, such as the couple or the parent–child dyad, whose cultural stakes are readily intelligible and widely–ratified. At one point in the film, Jenjira calls Itt “her new son” to her American husband. However, at the same time, their dynamic is rippled with erotic undertones that confuse and entwine vertical and lateral relations. Jen looks on with curiosity, for instance, as another volunteer bounces Itt’s erect penis while he is asleep, and in the film’s conclusion, they share something that is akin to, but not strictly legible as, sex; complicating, or perhaps reconceiving, their bond’s equivalence with mother–son relations. Jen also develops another casual, cross–generational friendship with Keng, a medium who acts as a conduit between the sleeping and the sentient. In exchange for lending her money, Jen asks Keng to cure her disfigured leg that was damaged in an accident, leading to a painful and physically strenuous disability, although we never see whether either transaction is honored. When Keng becomes a sales lady for beauty products, Jen teasingly probes her on whether she is in on a sham; telling her that her facial cream smells like cum while simultaneously accepting it as a gift.

In this way, Jen acts as the fulcrum for each of these affectionate but symbolically unspecified bonds. Thus, through the film’s focus on her corporeal presence and subjectivity, I

want to suggest that *Cemetery of Splendor* displaces a paternal and implicitly atavistic idiom for national culture, with an affective orientation toward aunts, or what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls “the avunculate,” the “process of making visible aunts and uncles.”²²⁷ As *Cemetery of Splendor* focuses on aunts, rather than uncles, Sedgwick’s concept is more accurately rendered here as materteral, a word whose esotericism suggests that’s aunting overlooked and underdescribed cultural status must necessarily be enfolded into any attempt to think it. In Thai, there are two terms for aunt: *paa*, used for women who are the same age or older than one’s own parents, or *naa*, for women who are younger. These terms are liberally and almost always used to refer to any older woman, even beyond one’s own immediate family. The aunt–label thus serves as a sign of respect or deference but it also bespeaks a conception of the broader national sphere as a community of intimate bonds united by a shared investment in the nation, a practice that is widespread throughout South Asia and Southeast Asia. As I will argue, the figure of the aunt, in both literal and extended notions of the family, supercedes the parent–child dyad as the embodiment of the films’ unremitting attention to the night.

While culturally ubiquitous, the aunt is culturally positioned at the emotive and valuative peripheries of Thai kinship systems. In this way, Jen’s embodiment of this position in *Cemetery of Splendor* is metaphorically aligned with the night as a transitional time space that reflectively thematizes, in order to potentially disorganize, the genealogical lines and identities that reproduce and potentially reconceive existing social arrangements. In Sedgwick’s view, “having aunts and uncles, even the most conventional of aunts and uncles, means perceiving your parents as somebody’s sibs – not, that is, as alternately abject and omnipotent links in a chain of compulsion and replication that leads inevitably to you; but rather as elements in a varied, contingent, recalcitrant but re–forming seriality, as people who demonstrably could have turned out very

²²⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Tales of the Avunculate” in *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 61.

differently – indeed as people who, in the differing, refractive relations among their own generation, can be seen already to have done so.”²²⁸

There is thus a double–valence to the aunt’s symbolic alliance with the night, particularly but not exclusively, aunts who never got married, or whose marriages appear affectively marginal to their lives, at least in terms of their social intelligibility, as do Jenjira’s, in both *Cemetery of Splendor*. Jen’s alliance with the nocturnal is on one hand emblematic, as nocturnal dynamics of lateness and opacity metaphorically reflect her advancing age, her economic and social marginality, and the slower pace of her balance and gait resulting from her damaged leg. But by virtue of her social positioning as an “aunt,” this alliance with nighttime is also structural, evincing a transitional node between different temporal zones, such as yesterday and tomorrow, and one generation to the next. Like the night’s attendance to the liminal and overlooked, Jen allows us to imagine different modes of futurity that still insist on crossgenerational kinship through channels that are not, however, exclusively predicated on the logic of biological reproduction or patrilinear inheritance. In reflecting on her own relation to her aunt, Sarah Ahmed described such a reconceived notion of generational continuity as a horizon in which “family stories might be told differently, through the very affective labor of the women who don’t reproduce the family line; who in a conventional tree would just be an “end point.”²²⁹ At the same time, however, an attunement to the materteral takes on the symbolic authority of paternalism obliquely, and in this way more productively than an antagonistic challenge to its force.

Jacqueline Rose, echoing Sedgwick, regards symbolic rivalry with the father as a tactic of limited efficacy for contesting its structuring function within a dominant symbolic order, observing that symbolic patricide merely reinscribes the father into a cultural over–presence, and colludes, moreover, with the very aspiration for triumphal mastery which it purports to displace.²³⁰

Conversely, attuning ourselves to aunts and uncles resituates the law–of–the–father into a

²²⁸ Ibid., 63.

²²⁹ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 199.

²³⁰ Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Virago, 1996), 224.

broadened relational web. The materteral revises the paternal signifier as an emblem of what Thak calls “despotic paternalism,” playing on the etymological origin of the word in the law—of the—father, “which assumes that the Thai sociopolitical structure should be fundamentally atavistic, static, and neatly compartmentalized.”²³¹ That is, centering aunts in kinship and social systems resituates the father, instead, within an expanded cosmology of relations. In this broadened system, the paternal signifier reoccurs unremarkably as a secondary component of sibling seriality’s flexible economy, rather than confirming it as the authorizing origin of an immobilized symbolic order. Thus, through this logic, the paternal signifier is not eradicated but rather desituated as the origin of an “innate unity” intrinsic to people across the national territory. It is instead turned into a sign of mutable dimensions and functions within the unstable symbolic machinery of the national commons, which can thus be realized or initiated in multiple ways, belying its inflation into an immutable law.

As Sedgwick notes, there is a distinct whiff of queerness to aunts and uncles. “Because aunts and uncles (in either narrow or extended meanings) are adults whose intimate access to children needn’t depend on their own pairing or procreation. It’s very common, of course, for some of them to have the office of representing nonconforming or nonreproductive sexualities.”²³² And particularly in Thailand, the moniker *can and* has been used as “a discursive position” denoting queer mentors for younger gay people.²³³ As Sedgwick points out, however, the symbolic queerness of aunts and uncles exceeds their actuality, bypassing their individual relationship to sexual nonconformity by virtue of how they temper conscious and unconscious investments in paternal, and even maternal, supremacy. Jen herself actualizes this term in ways that are highly particularized, as she reads as both normative but also queer, which here I take to mean, following the term’s re—articulation and expansion in recent queer theory, as any subject

²³¹ Chaloeontiarana, *Despotic Paternalism*, 235.

²³² Sedgwick, “Tales of the Avunculate,” 63.

²³³ See, in particular, Peter Jackson’s study on gay Asian culture through the specific example of “Uncle Go’s” advice column for gays, lesbians, and kathoey. Peter A. Jackson, *First Queer Voices from Thailand: Uncle Go’s Advice Columns for Gays, Lesbians and Kathoey* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2016).

position that appears negatively marked or illegible within dominant systems of value or recognition.²³⁴ Jen, in fact, is a woman whose past and present marriage bonds define her social presence less than her elective connections with younger friends. Moreover, throughout the film, she oscillates between a radically unguarded acceptance of the unfamiliar while still being staunchly committed to nationalist imperatives and religious rituals. On one hand, she met her American husband, Richard, through online dating, a relation she seems to have pursued out of practical economic motives. She thus partakes in the transnational commodification of Thai brides for foreign men, a practice particularly associated with the North East, but she displays considerable agency in how this union organizes her time and daily inclinations. But less conventionally, she is also an older, disabled woman who shares her sexual wants in an offhand manner, casually affronting cultural biases that can only imagine the young, reproductive, or able-bodied as legitimate desiring subjects. There is a parallel, therefore, between how the soldiers' sleep and the materteral rearrange the symbolic and affective commons of the nation. The narcoleptic soldiers trouble the public sphere's sustained atmosphere of benign ordinariness from within its very structures of governmentality, much like dreams fracture the imagined unity of the subject. In a similar way, Jenjira, as aunty to the nation, lays bare the psychic and affective burden of social anomaly, while nonetheless identifying and being sutured within its traditional forms and institutions. For Ahmed and Sedgwick alike, the aunt's imbrication within a field of existing and often ordinary contexts – its deferred position from “the rhetorical sublimity and ‘dizzying’ unthinkability of any alternative topos” – enables rather than forecloses its critical affordances.²³⁵ Ahmed, in fact, argues against a version of queer critique that shames or leaves behind subjects who are materially and economically bound to standard or normative cultural systems. “Queer genealogy would not be about making another family tree, which would turn queer connections into new lines, nor would it be about creating a line that connects two sides,”

²³⁴ See, in particular, Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

²³⁵ Sedgwick, “Tales of the Avunculate,” 58.

she argues, “queer genealogy would take the very ‘affects’ of mixing, or coming into contact with things that reside on different lines, as opening up new kinds of connection.”²³⁶

Reflecting the night’s suspension or loosening of conventional codes of conduct, as well as its opacity, Jenjira’s embodiment of auntness evinces how the relational ties that underwrite the social are electively lived, even within existing cultural scripts. As there are few, socially–enforced and deeply–felt norms imposing what an aunt’s relationship to her nieces and nephews should look like, as a node within kinship structures, the aunt is not discursively locked, unlike the symbolic plenitude normally attributed, in rivalrous and idolatrous relations alike, to the place of the father. Like the prototypical aunty, in both the explicitly familial and expanded sense of the term, Jenjira dispenses advice to Itt and Keng. She is solicited for financial and emotional support, offers gossip and jokes, and tempers their plans for the future that she finds misguided, without, however obstructing or obsessing over the eventual choices they make.

Throughout the film, these materteral connections are likened to relations that are conventionally more central to kinship structures: Jen is “like an older sister” to Keng, or Itt is “like a son.” Aunt relations, in fact, are thinkable only through analogy, lacking the symbolic imperatives of authority and obligation that are culturally attached to parents. Like the visual image of the night, the social worlds to which aunting gives rise do away with the notion of an absolute or substantial foundation. They achieve their legibility instead through “similarities between ... another female relationship—my aunt is ‘like a mother,’ ‘like a grandmother,’ or ‘like a girlfriend,’” kinship terms with which they also retain an irreducible incommensurability.²³⁷ Thus in supplanting the father as a metaphor for the social, the aunty as a figuration for the nation recasts understandings of the public sphere as dynamically indeterminate rather than eternal and singularly sovereign. Through her embodiment, the national commons cannot be viewed as a

²³⁶ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 154.

²³⁷ Patricia J. Sotirin and Laura L. Ellingston “The ‘Other’ Women in Family Life: Aunt/Niece/Nephew Communication,” in *Widening the Family Circle: New Research on Family Connection*, eds. Kory Floyd and Mark T. Morman (London: SAGE publications, 2006), 90.

timeless ground linked to an unconditional, symbolic source, but it is conceived rather as an open field of variable relations. As Patricia Sotirin and Laura Ellingson argue, in fact, “aunts enjoy the options of extended kin: unlike nuclear family relationships, there is more cultural tolerance for neglect, disregard, and distance, as well as for care, connection, and contact.”²³⁸ Reflected in Jen’s developing relationships with Itt and Keng, aunting, extended as a trope for nonfamilial social relations, reflects modes of crossgenerational congress outside the cultural gaze that steers nuclear relations into normative mandates. Thus, the materteral’s temporal, economic, and affective loops come down to matters of considerable choice that move us beyond social connections narrowly conceived in the image of nuclear families – reflecting, in other words, a vision of the public underwritten by expansive notions of contingency, instability, and openness. In this way, my reading locates aunting as a queer analytic symbolically linked to the enigmatic indeterminacy of the night, following Sotirin and Ellingson’s contention that “by naming the aunt as nonnuclear and using the aunt as a reference point for recognizing and reclaiming other nonnuclear relationships as valid forms, conceptions of family” – and, I would add, citizenship – “may be expanded.”²³⁹

Night Market Intimacies

In her reading of *Tropical Malady*, Arnika Fuhrmann has argued that the film “situates its model of same–sex relating within a broader queer social vision in which male and female homosocialities intersect in pleasurable ways,” specifically addressing the bond between the gay couple at the center of the film and two older women, Pa Samreung and Pa Noi.²⁴⁰ We have also witnessed a similar dynamic between Jen and Tong unfold in the background of *Uncle Boonmee*. But out of all of Apichatpong’s films, *Cemetery of Splendor* makes social ties between younger men and aunt–like figures the central emotive focus of the film. While Itt is not explicitly presented

²³⁸ Ibid., 97.

²³⁹ Ibid., 99.

²⁴⁰ Arnika Fuhrmann, *Ghostly Desires: Queer Sexuality and Vernacular Buddhism in Contemporary Thai Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 141.

as queer, the casting of Banlop Lomnoi as a soldier recalls his role as one half of the gay couple in *Tropical Malady*, in a fashion similar to how Jenjira's portrayal of characters with her same name renders distinctions between the discrete works in Apichatpong's corpus ambiguous. This reading seems compounded by a detail initiating the film's night market scene in which Itt and Jen share a meal of fried mussel pancakes, custard, and ice coffee. At the beginning of this sequence, the camera lingers over a young street vendor talking to her boyfriend on the phone while she prepares food for her customers. She is flanked by a male friend, whose name we learn is Poy. Poy holds his friend's cellphone to her ear, so she can work with both of her hands while speaking. After reassuring her boyfriend that her male companion is "just a friend," Poy confirms that he is indeed no potential love rival, interrupting to ask if the boy on the other end has any cute friends and, if so, whether they can join them. This fleeting detail ratifies the auto-citational allusions Jen and Itt carry from earlier films, so that their appearance in the next shot seems like a variation of the playful interaction between a straight woman and her gay male friend, thus framing how we view the night market as a space of social congregation that can casually accommodate social gatherings outside of normative familial intimacy.

Once the film cuts to Jen and Itt seated at their table, the next shot is sustained in a continuous, static long-take that situates the unfolding of their intimacy amidst the ebb and flow of the city's urban nightlife. While Itt and Jen are situated in the image's foreground, and serve as its clear fulcrum, they also appear slightly off-center, as if to underscore that their relational bond, while far from clandestine or forbidden, stands at a remove from fully recognized forms of intimate alliance. The shot's oblique angle accentuates the image's depth of field which extends past Itt vertiginously, capturing row after row of fellow diners behind him; while to the right of Jen, a pathway between the food stalls and tables penetrates the visual field at a slanted axis, allowing a steady procession of amblers to gradually recede or grow in scale as they advance towards the stationary camera or move away from it. As the camera's immobility registers the contingent flux of variegated bodies, this image underscores a sense of the apparatus' fundamental rapport with, and astonished submission to, a principle of emergent reality.

As such, the shot's dynamic composition subtly intimates at how an attunement to aunt-pairings might begin to rearrange the potential character and atmosphere of social space, and with it, existing conceptions of intimacy and community. It also forecasts the nocturnal sensorium through which the indeterminacy of aunting is visually and metaphorically elaborated not as threatening, dispossessive, or solemn but rather as a realm in which the dissemination of the self's sense of containment is experienced as expansive and light-hearted, self-quivering rather than self-shattering. In keeping with the different instances of sociability between gay men and older women Fuhrmann identifies, this scene of companionship between Jen and Itt revolves around the sensory pleasure of food, and the social buzz of the open-air night market. As a space that sells meals and goods inexpensively, night-markets in Thailand act a quotidian setting for forms of social gathering and pleasure outside the tedium of home life or the gendered labor of domestic cooking. Its cheapness provides patrons from different economic classes with easy access to the free-moving play of sociability, such that the rhythms and registers of this local economy play a significant role in modulating an ambient sense of national belonging as it is mundanely felt in everyday contexts.

Thus, while there is a casual spontaneity in the thoughts shared between Itt and Jen, the film's evocation of their bond through the sensory pleasures of the night market redresses the social spectrality of pairings that deviate from parental, amative, or intergenerational friendship structures. The scene's sensory surround frames the emergent and atypical intimacy between Itt and Jen as enjoyable, fulfilling, but also as a distinctly public mode of association. As the night-market bespeaks distinctly Thai conceptions of collective belonging and social presence, the affective structure of the public sphere it symbolizes is simultaneously reframed by the materteral relations it frames in this sequence. In other words, the overlooked and "contingent determination" of aunting opens a slanted path for thinking about the varied modes of social presence this friendship represents, inciting alternate possibilities of national belonging outside the symbolic authority of nuclear kinship formations.

This sense of potential social repatterning is compounded by the film's appeal to the sense. Having just awakened from his slumber, Itt finds his senses radically heightened. He tells Jen that he can feel all the temperatures of the urban lights, smell all the food around them, even the flowers in his dreams. In observing Itt and Jen in the night market, we are thus invited to expand our perception into a space of sensual sociality analogous to Itt's own heightened sensibility, but also akin to the lifeworld encoded in the modest pleasure of sharing a meal with an aunt-like figure, what José Muñoz describes as "an encrypted sociality" that might inhere in "a quotidian act... that signifies a vast lifeworld of queer relationality."²⁴¹

This sense of a restructured social world is expressed not only through the ambient mood of nighttime congress, but also in the sensate affordances of the digital camera through which we become vicariously attuned to Itt's hyperperception. As with the low-light sequence of homeless people sleeping, this scene of public intimacy evinces attributes linked to the Alexa's sensor and to the digital difference more broadly: a retention of visual detail in the image's highlights and a crisp rendering of space that appears uncannily vivid and sharp, particularly when compared to photochemical film which, even when it renders details in low-light, nonetheless evokes a high-contrast quality. In comparison, the brightly illuminated night image in *Cemetery of Splendor* lacks the enveloping atmosphere of grain (even though, under particular operating conditions, the video noise the Alexa's sensor registers can be read as a native grain, a motility that is remarkably close to that of photochemical film, and which has thus made the camera particularly popular for filmmakers attached to photochemical formats but who are unable to afford shooting analog). As a result, objects and textures appear starkly delineated and particularized, from the plastic bottles on the table to the individual strands of hair of the girl seated next to Itt, a hyperphotographic quality that mimics Itt's epistemophilic astonishment towards his surroundings.

²⁴¹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 6.

Through this sensory threshold, *Cemetery of Splendor's* digitally-mediated aesthetics turns into a reflective structure that allows us to partly inhabit Itt's perceptual extension towards his environment. In the process, Itt's corporeality comes to analogize the digital camera, while also serving as a locus through which the dialectic tension between digital cinema's aesthetic affordances and its entrenchment within networks of digitized control come into view. As we learned earlier in the film, Itt's sensory acuity derives from his prolonged immersion in the abstract, dematerialized dream-realm of the primeval kingdom. But at the same time, since this metaphor is actualized through his carnal embodiment, the film also reminds us that even though digital cameras transcribe and dematerialize reality into abstract binary code, their computational logistics still inhere in physical hardware that is materially of this world, just like the soldier's heavy bodies; and that filmmakers who turn to the digital still have a stake in how its distinct capacities can reattune us to established but also new thresholds of registering phenomenal reality. Given the film's misgivings towards fiber optic cables, and its repudiation of the country's military regime, the elaboration of this metaphor through the figure of a soldier also acknowledges how digital media has been used to extend cultural surveillance and expand capitalist business into provincial towns and villages (as we notice, furthermore, in the giant billboards that border the market's local economy). Against his own volition, in fact, Itt has become an operative cog whose energies are siphoned by the kings of yesteryear, whose mythic paternal reign over the national imaginary is repeatedly invoked by Thailand's succession of authoritarian regimes to symbolically justify their power.

Thus, as Itt's date with Jen occurs in the vibrant but ultimately liminal threshold of the night – whose transience is further compounded by Itt's likely relapse into extended slumber – I want to suggest that their relational bond also signifies the current reciprocal dialogue between newer and older media, in a moment in which photochemical film is still available, but becoming increasingly peripheral (as *Cemetery of Splendor* itself indexes, marking Apichatpong's shift from a celluloid to digital feature-length). In this context, therefore, Jenjira serves as a metonym for cinema's discursive construction around the photographic properties of celluloid that acts as a

counterpoint to the digital systems analogized by Itt's body. In the expanded nexus of Apichatpong's interrelated writings and films, he has repeatedly elaborated Jenjira's metaphorical relation to cinema, although the intersubjective exchange implicit in her friendships does not lock this symbolic allusion to a singular medium. In the catalogue for *For Tomorrow, For Tonight*, for instance, Apichatpong writes: "At night, when [Jen] was not online, she wrote. She had begun her memoir – she had reached her high-school entries. Having known her for more than years, I could imagine a telephone-book-sized diary. She was a camera with an unlimited supply of film. I asked her to remember my visit today and to write it down. We can then exchange our hard disks in the future."²⁴² In this passage's metaphoric construction of media in terms of Jenjira's body and psyche, Apichatpong does not limit her allegorical function to analog media, as he also foresees her memory's reembodiment in computational form, specifically through the idiom of her cross-generational friendship with Apichatpong. In this way, Jen's corporeality and her cultural determination as "Auntie Jen" serves as an analogy for cinema's ongoing reconceptualization across different technologies and cultural functions, a dynamic akin to how Jen's attention moves, in this passage, between the physical qualities of pen and paper, and the digitized flaneurie of her internet browsing.

This corporealized metaphor for cinema is also indissolubly linked to Jen's damaged leg. While her disability is clearly not reducible to her social status as an "auntie," both positions inform how her embodiment reflects cinema's discursive and historical construction. These bodily and cultural coordinates, moreover, are reflectively thematized by the film's nocturnal milieu. Its darkness alludes to the specular dimensions that render these social positions overlooked and peripheral, but it also offers a perceptual threshold that mirrors how marginalized experiences may serve as hermeneutics for a restructuring of the social. In Thai cinema and soap operas, visibly disabled characters (*ngoï*) have historically been viewed as recipients of bad karma, not just physically debilitated but also ontologically deficient. When treated compassionately, they are

²⁴² Apichatpong Weerasethakul in *For Tomorrow, For Tonight: Apichatpong Weerasethakul* (Dublin: Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2011), unpaginated.

nonetheless viewed as irrevocably abject, vehicles through which noble, able-bodied protagonists can signal their virtue.²⁴³ In contrast, Apichatpong's films redress the marginalized representation of disabled characters in mainstream cinema by placing Jen as the focal presence of his oeuvre, an embodiment around which his films' recurring themes are crystalized as elements of a multitudinous but ultimately unified corpus. As one of her legs is shorter than the other, Jen's gait reflects the dilated pace of Apichatpong's films, almost as if his work's slowness is synched to her deliberative movements. In other words, the reduced, or more laborious, motility of her body serves as a central rather than marginal element of his films' sensory schema – provoking a critical reflection on cinema's ability to revitalize our experience of physical reality through the phenomenological moorings of our flesh, not only in its pleasures and affordances, but also in its limits and fragilities. In this way, therefore, Jen's haltering pace aligns her again with the night, not just metaphorically, but also phenomenologically, as both serve as sensory conduits that pressurize our sense of optical and physiological mastery over the diegetic world we virtually strive to inhabit. In the same way that the film's nightscapes stymie our vision, *Cemetery of Splendor's* casual attunement to Jen's physical comportment – its discerning attention, for instance, to the slower cadence of her walk – denaturalizes how “normative practices in our culture,” to again cite Sobchack “estrangle us *phenomenologically* from our own bodies and the bodies of others.”²⁴⁴ In other words, by foregrounding Jen's reduced mobility – or, by propelling it, in fact, as the corporeal “anchor” through which we experience the film's diegetic world – the film redresses how “the *neurologically* ‘normal’ rest of us are generally at home in our bodies, living them as a capacious and mobile sites transparently grounding and enabling our intentional activity in a world that is reciprocally expansive.”²⁴⁵ Thus, in the process of unsettling the assumptive invulnerability of our bodies, our corporeal identification with Jen, as the film's

²⁴³ For a synthetic view of disability representation in Thai cinema see Russell Meeuf, “Chocolate's Ass-Kicking Autistic Savant: Disability, Globalization and the Action Cinema,” in *Different Bodies: Essays on Disability in Film and Television*, ed. Marja Evelyn Mogk (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland, 2013), 101–108.

²⁴⁴ Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 204.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 203.

narrative motor and protagonist, also incites a heightened scrutiny of our social world's sensorium, whose exclusionary norms snap into view at the moment in which their structuring obstructions viscerally mark our own bodies as shameful, problematic, or aberrant.

In this way, disability connects the film's sensate structure to its investment in questions of technological remediation. In a certain reading, the "permeability" that disabled bodies signify, to cite Judith Butler, might analogize analog media's susceptibility to the effects of time, and to the environmental conditions of its storage and the profilmic world it registers.²⁴⁶ While the computational encryption behind digital images lacks a fixed material grounding, celluloid film is porous to mistakes that are irrevocably registered in its images, particularly prior to the advent of digital post-production. Film's tendency towards flaws, and the revelation of its chemical deterioration in the surface of its images, renders film's proximity to our bodily existence more intimate and closer to the vulnerable experience of physical injury and debility. Thus, the persistence of Jen's presence in the digitally-filmed *Cemetery of Splendor* can be seen as a means to redress and contest what King identifies as digital media's "divorce from the tangible and the time-bound," a strategy she links to Agnes Varda's *The Gleaners and I* which curtails its digital apparatus' "desubstantialized" protocols through its careful attendance to tactility, society's discarded detritus, and Varda's centering of her own aging corporeality.²⁴⁷

However, through the idiom of aunting relations, the interarticulation between digital and celluloid media appears more reciprocally inflected. For if Jen signifies a lineage of cinematic history, this metaphor must also take into account how she is affectively breached by her intimate bond with Itt, as well as Keng. Through these aunting relations, in fact, Jen seems to absorb Itt's mnemonic and sensory attributes. And it is again through her transformative friendship with the soldier – and perhaps her intimate contact with the medium – that she becomes alert to the environmental damage of the bulldozers, and the futural displacement and calamities its

²⁴⁶ Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 54.

²⁴⁷ King, *Virtual Memory*, 73.

landscape of craters might portend. Thus, Jen's metaphorization of cinema should be viewed as an emergent and discursive process that acknowledges cinema's historic grounding in photochemical film, and its correlating and fundamental rapport with reality. At the same time, however, this metaphor's inflection through her aunt-identity, renders cinema open to transformation by newer media that can probe phenomenal reality's ongoing rearrangement through sensual and phenomenological affordances, including the very digital cameras that bring this world to our attention and recognition.

Thus, if the film's pervasive nocturnal milieu asks us to consider the terms through which cinema and the social are reproduced, through Jen's corporeality, *Cemetery of Splendor* proposes the aunt as a critical lens into the dominant role paternal identification plays in preserving the cult of a coherent and timeless Thai identity. The aunt, as an emblem of cinema, in fact, is positioned within patriarchal kingship structures, but also aslant to its core axes, in such a way that can alternately collude with its worldview, but at times also subverts and questions its symbolic authority. She can police our standing within normative imperatives, but so often offers us lifelines, to again cite Ahmed, through which we can orient ourselves towards different social imaginaries that are not "offered at home."²⁴⁸ For younger generations, aunts, like film, potentially act as cultural repositories to the past – not least of all, the past of our parents that they would rather not divulge – oscillating between accuracy and unreliable embellishment. Like the cinematic public sphere, the aunt is so ubiquitous as to be overlooked, and her cultural capital is often deemed peripheral, outmoded, or a disreputable or frivolous indulgence. Across these different cultural scripts, however, *Cemetery of Splendor* argues that revitalized attendance to the "communicative practices" associated with this ignored or dismissed kinship relation might envision the social's future beyond dominant structures of familialism. At the same time, by centering the aunt as hermeneutic into kinship systems, the film nonetheless acknowledges that there is no viable position that escapes the familial's complete purview, given how deeply it

²⁴⁸ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 199.

organizes our social paradigms and cultural imaginaries. As a relational mode between older and newer generations, aunting, much like our relationship to cinema, remains “loosely prescribed,” and that indeterminate space for Apichatpong can encompass a virtual lifeworld of possibilities. In order to actualize and explore some of these possibilities, therefore, the film offers affective density to a role that unsettles and reconstitutes the cultural schema through which aunts are normally viewed, showing us Jenjira in states of quotidian enjoyment, melancholic discomposure, and ecstatic pleasure, and even more provocatively, in equivocal situations that breach distinctions between these various emotive states.

Parks and Ecumenical Recreation

I want to conclude this discussion on nighttime and aunting in Apichatpong's practice by considering a scene in *Cemetery of Splendor* in which this dynamic of affective indeterminacy attunes us to the nation's discursive construction and potential reconstruction. While this sequence takes place during the day, it makes a series of references to sensory memories of nocturnal perception, underscoring how nocturnal hermeneutics can exceed their temporal frame and lead to a rearrangement of the social's central forms and practices. During one of his prolonged, narcoleptic episodes, Itt falls asleep in an outdoor verandah overlooking the Mekong river while he is in the company of Jen and Keng. When Keng presses her hand against his arm, she opens a channel to his thoughts, inviting him to transfer his consciousness into her body, a transmigration reflecting the landscape's proximity with Laos. In this way, Itt can perceive both planes of existence simultaneously, and proceeds to give Jen a tour of the royal palace he inhabits in his dreams. This otherworldly sphere subtends the very space Jen and Keng inhabit, albeit in a parallel dimension. We never witness this realm directly, and neither does Jen. But rather, we learn of its lavish rooms and the earthly paradise of its fields and gardens as Itt/Keng points to where these myriad luxuries stand in relation to our physical environment – the strange and scraggy environs of Sala Keoku Temple, an ecumenical sculpture park designed by Bunleua Sulitat. Apichatpong has expressed his sense of kinship with Bunleua, a self-taught and possibly

gay artist, who designed the park and its sculptures in the late seventies. Despite its popularity with visitors, Sala Keoku has never been recognized as a historic site by the Thai government, as it synthesizes Buddhism, Hinduism, and non-doctrinal mysticism, thus breaking with Theravadin-Buddhism as the de-facto religion of the nation-state. In the late seventies, in fact, the garden pavilion was raided by the army who believed it was a hideout for Communists. Their destruction of statues can still be detected today, as *Cemetery of Splendor* illustrates in medium-shots of fractured sculptural figures, their beatific smiles appearing hauntingly and defiantly demented in their dismembered state. The incommensurability between what Itt/Keng describes and what we actually discern underscores this excursion as a political allegory, as the scene lays bare how the imagined splendor of sovereign origins is projected into the arid landscape and weathered architecture of the unkempt park and its extraordinary sculptures: people hiding in a cave, a couple locked in a romantic embrace whom we first see en fleshed and then as skeletons locked in the same amative pose.

On one hand, the disjunction between these parallel states, one mediated through our sensory acquisition of ambient sound and image, the other through the purely notational codes of speech, can be read as a symbolic treatise on digital protocols. In other words, the opposition of virtual narrative to physical actuality would reflect how digital apparatuses communicate computational, immaterial images that do not tangibly inhere in a physical medium. In such a reading, the sequence would thus promote a skeptical distance towards digitally-mediated sense perception, and connect our hesitant faith in the image to the real and symbolic violence occluded beneath the nation-state's veneer of serenity. But critically, the symbolic valences of the scene's mise-en-scene are too equivocal to be reduced to a binaristic opposition between veracity and fantasy; a dichotomy wherein the digital would signify notions of decorporealized transcendence and analog media, by implication, would stand in for ideals of earth-bound materiality.

The disjunction between the palace and the park derealizes the hallucinatory ideal of a unified Thainess, an ideology grounded, as Itt's descriptions make explicit, in the idealization of

the monarchy's immemorial endurance. But I want to suggest that the scene achieves this derealization not only through an insistent attendance to the sculptures' material objecthood, or through a censorious attitude towards reverie. By establishing the crown's coercive appeal as an immaterial dream, the profilmic space this sequence registers supplants the "tour's" patrifocal orientation to kingly authority with an attunement to the enigmatic character of the sculptures themselves. Cumulatively, they disclose a hybrid and heterogeneous system of belief that continuously defracts any formalized framework for cultural commonality. In other words, the park's setting does not displace hallucinogenic dreams with critical wakefulness but it supplants it, rather, with an appeal to a more capacious relation to fantasy, one that is not escapist or dissociative but rather responsive to the historical verities of Isan, akin to what Muñoz describes as "concrete utopias [that] are relational to historically situated struggles ... [they] can also be daydream-like, but they are the hopes of a collective, an emergent group, or even the solitary oddball who is the one who dreams for many."²⁴⁹ For Apichatpong, in fact, "the temple echoes the history of Isan itself. It is a manifestation of revolt," as he interprets the sculptures as allegories for "Homosexuality and poverty [that are] perceived as negative traits, like being born in the Northeast."²⁵⁰ In this way, these sculptures' aesthetically thematize positionalities that are linked with social negativity and which are therefore in conflict with resurgent appeals to an essential Thainess, undermining their symbolic reliance on, and reproduction of, traditional kinship, social hierarchies, and religious and cultural homogeneity. Through this framework, the symbolic permissiveness of the park's references would appear decidedly at odds with a deterministic idealization of one cinematic medium over another, extending and encouraging Apichatpong's cautiously affirmative conjunction of digital filmmaking with analog principles.

At the end of their tour and visits to the temple, Jen and Itt, who is still in possession of Keng's body, find a bench in a secluded area of the park. This scene layers a distinctly nocturnal sensorium on the setting's daytime milieu. The characters repeat their conversation in the city's

²⁴⁹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 3.

²⁵⁰ Apichatpong Weerasethakul, "Fireworks (Archives of *Kick the Machine*)," <http://www.kickthemachine.com/page80/page22/page33/index.html>, undated.

night market to each other: “I can sense every smell here,” “I can feel the temperature of the lights,” “you must be superman,” “I even smell the flowers in my dream.” Through this reprisal, a specifically nocturnal mode of perception is invoked that encompasses the expansion of non-ocular capacities, like smell, taste, and touch, that are not as firmly linked to mastery or knowledge. This allusion to a sensorium metaphorically and sensually connected to the night is conjured in the same spectral and virtual register as the king’s palace, informing the scene’s subsequent staging of an illegible spectacle of enigmatic intimacy. Seated in the garden, Jen lifts up her pant leg to reveal surgical scars on her injured thigh. This glimpse of her leg arouses Itt’s curiosity, and he grazes its unusual shape with Keng’s fingers, underscoring the double valence of Keng as medium – a conduit between parallel realms, but also a corporeal metaphor for the camera’s capacity to induce a sense of reciprocal, somatic contact with the world on screen.

Jen offers Itt a liquid mixture of medicinal herbs her husband drinks for his Alzheimer’s and arthritis, in the hopes that its curative effects might extend to Itt’s narcolepsy. But instead of drinking the tonic, to Jen’s surprise, Itt/Keng kneels in front of her and begins to lick the liquid that he gradually pours over her leg. Jen strokes Itt/Keng’s back as she feels their tongue on her flesh. She begins to sob, although the affective valence of her tears in response to Itt/Keng’s gesture remains ambiguous. What Itt/Keng’s licking communicates is indeterminate, and it remains similarly uncertain whether Jen’s tears index feelings of social dispossession or express, rather, an overwhelmed sense of relief for the recognition and repair attributed to, or potentially misrecognized, in sex or sex-adjacent acts.

Through the nexus of auto-citations Apichatpong routinely implements across his films, the sight of licking invokes a central scene in *Tropical Malady* that again asks us to layer a nocturnal atmospheric through the process of intertextual recall. In a pivotal moment in this earlier film, we witness two men – one played by Banlop Lomnoi, the other by *Uncle Boonmee*’s Sakda Kaewbuadee – licking each others’ hands at night in front of two flags. In her analysis of the film, Furhmann calls this a “quasi sex scene” and invokes Apichatpong’s own reading: “I wanted them

to kiss for the nation.”²⁵¹ Here, the rezoning of kissing from mouth-to-mouth to lips-to-skin resonates with what Fuhrmann will later describe as Apichatpong’s “[reframing of] queer personhood as ordinary, though not obedient, and as socially central, though not assimilated.”²⁵² In my interpretation of *Cemetery of Splendor*’s reprisal of licking, I want to pursue two critical orientations, and their complex enfoldment. The first relates to the “quasi” of Fuhrmann’s reading, probing how these acts’ slanted orientation to sex’s expressive norms might serve to actualize the materteral’s potential to steer us towards different imaginings of national publicness. A second distinct but nonetheless related aim of my analysis seeks to contextualize this atypical portrayal of intimacy in relation to the shifting and indeterminate configurations of sensory perception metaphorically, and here virtually, linked to nighttime.

In a certain reading, the sense of wondrous amazement solicited by this unusual act can be viewed as an attempt to displace Jen from existing cultural schematics that bar, in Sobchack’s analysis, women, the elderly, or the disabled from appearing as desiring or desirable subjects.²⁵³ But in another light, the affective intensity and communicative ambiguity of this intimate act – the way it errs from but nonetheless orbits on the periphery of sex’s core forms and practices – manifests what is already immanent in a hermeneutics of aunting. As we have seen, aunts exist but are also structurally subordinate within social imaginaries of national unity whose very legitimacy relies on their resemblance to familial structures, and their correlating arrangement of visceral attachments and identifications. I want to propose, therefore, that licking here serves as a metaphorical conceit that diagrams how aunting relations, in their lack of prescriptive determination, offer “plots of intimacy” and modes of connection, that might resignify societal terms for national belonging, particularly by anomalizing the familial matrix in which aunts are simultaneously enframed.

The scene is filmed in a static medium shot that last over five minutes. As a result, it

²⁵¹ Fuhrmann, *Ghostly Desires*, 123.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 157.

²⁵³ Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 37.

accumulates sensory details from its profilmic environment, linking the unfolding of our rapt bewilderment to the scene's evocation of place. As Itt/Keng squats prostrate before Jen while licking her leg, it is almost as if the pair have acquired the exuberant, enigmatic, and spectacular quality of the pavilion's sculptures, as their figural arrangement incites the kind of absorptive astonishment which, for Muñoz, "helps one surpass the limitations of an alienating *presentness* and allows one to see a different time and place."²⁵⁴ If *Tropical Malady's* gay couple "kissed before the nation" by licking each other in front of two flags, what does it mean, then, to lick an injured leg in a space where distinctions between religion and recreation are casually blurred?

In his study of ecumenical parks and cosmological gardens, the Buddhist scholar and monk Justin McDaniel draws a distinction between prescriptive notions of obedient, rule-bound Buddhism and what he calls "socially disengaged" Buddhism. This latter category implies the synthesis of quotidian leisure with religiously-inflected practices and visual culture, and serves, in this way, as a meta-discourse on the meaning of public culture.²⁵⁵ In McDaniel's view, garden temples like Sala Keoku constitute sites of religious culture that are "non-teleological and nonformal," and which "promote ecumenism without a specific telos in mind."²⁵⁶ As a result, these sites can help rethink public space and culture through their dynamic structure, what he describes as "complex adaptive systems" that "sees agents as part of heterogeneous, dynamic, flexible, process oriented, and ever-changing synchronic and diachronic network."²⁵⁷ In their synthesis of religiosity with the open-ended sociability of leisure, these public sites err from their designated mission in multitudinous ways, becoming spaces for exercise, lovers, relaxation, or micro-economies like food stalls or fruit vendors. Even the material decay of their structure changes the site's physical design over time, setting the stage for unprogrammed uses and reappropriations.

²⁵⁴ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 5.

²⁵⁵ Justin McDaniel, *Architects of Buddhist Leisure: Socially Disengaged Buddhism in Asia's Museums, Monuments, and Amusements Parks* (Honolulu: Hawaii University Press, 2017), 10–12.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

In other words, while grounded in historical–consciousness and cultural tradition, cosmological gardens propose a mode of social assembly in which the idea of the public is positioned as a perpetual becoming, catalyzed not by metaphysical concepts of fluidity or untrammelled volition, but rather by the contingent force of material entropy and the unpredictability of historic developments. This vision of public space as malleable but historically grounded informs the film’s take on cinema’s technological remediation, and correspondingly, its reconfiguration of cinema as a public sphere.

The park’s open and contingent meaning analogizes an ethos of virtuality that does not bespeak the digital’s capacity for simulation but rather reflects its categorical impurity, cinema’s mixed formal and technological components that are shaped and changed by historically–contingent contexts. As King argues, in a passage that could easily describe the adaptive systematicity of cosmological gardens, “the virtual is perpetually open. What it includes cannot be counted or listed, and it can never be grasped synchronically.”²⁵⁸ In fact, as Martine Beugnet has pointed out, for many film theorists of both classical cinema and digital media, cinema’s technological variegations render it “a medium of the indefinite.”²⁵⁹ Drawing on Jean Epstein’s notion of *photogenie* – the indeterminate affective surplus that film invests in its objects – Beugnet argues that the instability intrinsic to cinema’s material and ontological reconstitution is what “[inclines it] towards the indeterminate and permanently changing.”²⁶⁰

Thus, it is perhaps this commitment to phenomenal reality’s presentational indeterminacy that Apichatpong asks us to read the scene of queer intimacy through palimpsestic allusions to the night and its staging of indefinite vision. While the scene in *Tropical Malady*, and of course, the earlier scene in the night market, would be widely well–known to even the most casual enthusiast of world cinema, there is also a third work that seems pertinent here; a reward, as it

²⁵⁸ King, *Virtual Memory*, 61.

²⁵⁹ Martine Beugnet, “Introduction,” in *Indefinite Visions: Cinema and the Attractions of Uncertainty*, eds. Marine Beugnet et al., (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 10.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

were, for the ideal, well-versed viewer that auteur cinema hails through its persistent recourse to auto-referential strategies. This film is a short video work, *Fireworks (Archives)* (2014) which captures Jenjira Pongpas and Bonlop Lomnoi wondering Sala Keoku at night, their bodies, and the fantastical presence of sculptural animals, flickering in and out of view through the reflected flair of the fireworks and the errant movement of a torch. The strobe-like lighting produces a visual field that oscillates between the exuberant over-presence of the strange sculptures and fleeting moments of total darkness. This rhythm creates a stuttering perceptual cadence, such that the spatial relations between Jenjira, Itt, and even the sculptures, are continuously dislocated, forecasting a vision of public space and culture that is groundless, dynamic, and erotically charged, recalling the textual organization of *35 Shots* through the contingent nexus of cruising; or a cosmological, and highly libidinal take, on hide-and-go-seek.

In *Cemetery of Splendor*, the erotics of nighttime's disaggregating vision is thus reflected by licking's oblique expression of sexual intimacy, which threatens intimacy itself with illegibility, rendering it dangerously proximate to animality, and the random, indiscriminate motility of bodily drives. Thus, in this way, the scene does not just situate us as passive onlookers to Jenjira's leg being licked. In the process of beholding this enigmatic, and irreducibly ungraspable, expression of desire, our perceptual relation to the scene is projected into Keng's roaming tongue. Licking mirrors and calibrates our sensory contact with the screen, as our apprehension remains on the image's surface in the same way that the tongue skims Jen's scarred skin. Its flickering movement also suspends the tongue's normative functions. In other words, the perceptual mode encrypted in licking does not connote what Diana Fuss calls "the ingestion model of identification, which stresses the subject's annihilation of the Other through oral incorporation."²⁶¹ Nor does it allow the tongue to stick out in a gesture of derision, or form speech to signify deliberative reason

²⁶¹ Diana Fuss, *Identification Papers: Readings on Psychoanalysis, Sexuality and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 41.

and debate. For Mel Chen, in fact, licking has “its origin in a forbidden sexuality,”²⁶² as it registers a simultaneous “fantasy that not-licking is a viable way to contain the interconstitution of people and other people, or people and other objects.”²⁶³

Thus, as an analog to our sensory congress with the screen, licking’s intense but unfixed movement communicates the intimacy and fluidity between spectator and image, while also keeping their ontological distinction, and irreducible alterity to one another, in place. Licking affirms the complexity, vagueness, and opacity of the object of its wet regard through a gesture suspended between distance and assimilation, sensory absorption and relaxed awareness. Moving through these registers, licking ratifies the substantiality of Jen’s carnal presence, and the verities of her injury, while also dismissing the need to situate these bodily coordinates, and the marked subjectivities they signify, into a fixed system of representation. Hence, this scene does not propose any specific alternatives for social legitimacy or intelligibility. Instead, it connects the fundamental indeterminacy of several juxtaposed terms, from aunting relations to the communicative uncertainty of lapping, to the overriding question of a counterpublic culture invoked by its emplacement within the ecumenical park, in its persistence outside of national authority. Thus, in this context, I want to suggest that the park’s resistance to sanctioned discourses of nationhood allegorizes the aunt as an alternate geo-body for the nation-state, supplanting the emblematic figure of the paternal king and its image of the social as closed, transcendent, and atavistic.

Licking’s indeterminate relation to intimacy vitalizes our attention to Jenjira’s flesh, in both its concrete and allegorical dimensions, while at the same time, keeping her interiority and bodily affect irreducibly indeterminate and unknowable, and in this way renewing Jen’s metaphorical allegiance to the night. The scene thus insists that Jen’s allegorical reflection of public culture

²⁶² Mel Chen, “Toxic Animacies, Inanimate Affections,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 17, no. 2 (2011): 271.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 275.

does not reside immanently in the substantiality of her bearing, or the particularity of her character, but it is encoded, rather, in the variability, open-endedness and constitutive contingency of aunting relations as such. Staged and allegorized through nocturnal atmospherics throughout Apichatpong's films, these relations are conceived and approached as intergenerational modes of connection steered by choice and inclination, more so than obligation. In this way, aunts can intervene in a rethinking of public life, and its rapport with symbolic systems like familialism, that have subsidized a politically paralyzing rhetoric of sovereign exceptionalism. Like Jen, they do so by rerouting the uniqueness of symbolic parents to the variability of siblings, while also presenting the underlying identity of the public sphere as something, like the night, that is dimly conceived, an enigma whose captivating splendor is that of an underlying uncertainty.

***Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, The Slowness and Chromatic Sheen of The Night**

As I draw this chapter to a close and towards the dissertation's conclusion, I want to link my discussion on nighttime and aunts in *Cemetery of Splendor* to nighttime and uncles with reference to Apichatpong's *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010). This feature-length precedes *Cemetery* in Apichatpong's filmography, and its narrative and visual design obsessively thematizes its celluloid materiality through nocturnal atmospherics and dynamics of carnal embodiment, even blurring, as we shall see, distinctions between these two domains. As the film's title indicates, *Uncle Boonmee* makes the slanted position of uncles within kinship structures central. While the night in *Cemetery of Splendor* sets the stage for dreams and a surrender into slumber, here a synchronic and homogeneous sense of time is disrupted through the mnemonic recall of his former incarnations. The stagings of Boonmee's former selves are visually organized around the darkness of the night, as if to underscore the transient and potentially phantasmatic nature of their revival. But whereas the materteral relations in the digitally-filmed *Cemetery* are linked to the night as a transitional domain – thus signifying the alliance between digital and film, as well as newer and older generations – the avuncular frame of

Uncle Boonmee invokes the night as a metaphor for lateness, reviving our attention to cinematic technologies and genres that are dying but not dead, out-of-favor but not inoperative, but whose extension into the future appears far from assured.

This sense of lateness attached to the night also signifies Boonmee's last days, and by analogy, photochemical cinema's cultural depreciation and ebbing lifespan. The film's narrative centers on its titular protagonist, a farm owner in the North East, before he dies of kidney failure. In this context, his debility functions as a corporeal metaphor for the material entropy of photochemical film, while the trope of reincarnation signifies, in turn, cinema's technological remediations across different media. In one of his widely circulated aphorisms, the film theorist and conservationist Paolo Cherchi Usai describes celluloid cinema's ontology as an intrinsic movement towards self-extinction – "the art of destroying moving images."²⁶⁴ In bringing film philosophy together with discussions of film preservation, Cherchi Usai argues that cinema's preordained death inheres in the chemical properties of its material substrate, likening the work of a preservationist to that of "a physician who has accepted the inevitability of death even while he continues to fight for the patient's life."²⁶⁵ Every time film passes through a projector, in fact, its material substrate deteriorates. Film cannot evade death; even under optimal storage conditions or with sparing use, its silver nitrates undergo an organic and irreversible process of disintegration. Film's matter turns on itself: from the very moment of its production, it begins to emit nitrogen dioxide that interacts with its surficial gelatin and the surrounding airspace to generate acids that corrode its physical substance.

In contrast to the virtually limitless amount of footage digital information can record and store – analogized by the fathomless depth of dreams in *Cemetery* – film's intimate implication with questions of finitude also relate to the limited duration of an individual reel. In *Boonmee*, each of the six, twenty-minute reels corresponds to a discrete cinematic "past life," such that an

²⁶⁴ Paolo Cherchi Usai, *The Death of Cinema: History, Cultural Memory, and the Digital Dark* (London: BFI, 2001), 6.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 105.

individual “life’s” ending signals a changeover of reels coordinated by the projectionist. Elena Gorfinkel argues that the frequent metaphorization of cinema as a body should not imply a coherent visual imago but rather a series of organs that roughly correspond to “screen, projector, celluloid.”²⁶⁶ Thus, if Boonmee’s body analogizes the cinematic apparatus in these physiognomic terms, Boonmee’s failing kidney reflects the “leaky materialism” of photochemical cinema. As a symbol for the slow, imperceptible incontinence of celluloid matter, Boonmee’s organ preserves gaseous and material waste inside his own body, giving rise to the toxins that progressively lead to his death. In light of Boonmee’s ailment, we repeatedly see his caretaker, Jaai, and later the ghost of Boonmee’s deceased wife dilate his kidney. These scenes are filmed in lingering, static shots that expand the film’s realist ethos to include the routines of work and management emerging not from any absolute distinction between death or life. Instead, they evince the indeterminate threshold of dying and debility that is mirrored by the liminal chronospace of the night, where most of the film is set.

Through the film’s attendance to the physical work and periodic vigilance required by care-taking, its links its excursus on cinema’s material obsolescence to the scrupulous labor of preserving and safe-guarding celluloid film: the attention to detail, the stretches of boredom and waiting, and the gentleness used to handle a weakened body. These gestures and experiences correspond to a series of technical skills required to screen film: the projectionist’s rapid but exacting changing of film reels to prevent its catching fire, as well as the conservationist’s attempts to restore and minimize damage to film’s material substance, even against the odds of its inevitable decay. By foregrounding the uneventful rhythms of end-life care, the film enriches the affective tenor surrounding current debates on material obsolescence and cinematic ontology. While the excesses of corporeal stress in *Holy Motors* frame film’s cultural depreciation as a heroic mode of endurance, in *Uncle Boonmee*, this transition is both obsessively foregrounded while also dedramatized. Death and transition are recognized in the film, and its arrival is more-

²⁶⁶ Elena Gorfinkel, “At the End of Cinema, This Thing Called Film,” *LOLA* 1, no.1 (August 2011), http://www.lolajournal.com/1/end_of_cinema.html.

or-less delayed by Boonmee and his caretakers. However, it is not treated as exceptional or aberrant. But rather, through the care takers' management of Boonmee's physical discomfort and physical deterioration, dying becomes entangled with the timetables and workflows of the everyday, the uneventful time of anticipating, waiting and cleaning which mirror the human labor required for photochemical cinema to function and survive.

Each of the film's six reels corresponds to a different genre of Thai cinema, such that Boonmee's death, and his soul's movement through cycles of reincarnation, give rise to various allusions to cinema's historical and technological permutations. The film's procession of past lives map an unruly gamut of allusions, reminiscent of Oscar's succession of appointments in *Holy Motors*: ghosts from schlocky B-movies, red-eyed monkeys from cheap television shows, soap operas featuring historical princesses etc. However, in my discussion, I want to hone in on the film's specific allusion to day-for-night, a pre-digital mode of simulation that distinguishes one of the most widely discussed and enigmatic sequences in the film: the roamings of a water buffalo whom we are invited to read as one of Boonmee's many former incarnations. As I have surveyed in this study's introduction, day-for-night, since its material inception in early Hollywood, had to be characterized as improper to the filmic image by cinematographers as they were in the process of defining cinematography as a "mastery of light." This position was largely strategic in order to guarantee their guild rights and professional autonomy. In order to propel their profession from one of cinema's many technical components to the very foundation of its status as art, in fact, cinematographers routinely championed the control and manipulation of natural or artificial light as the medium's specific grounding, akin to the canvas for a painter, thus treating hybrid or non-naturalistic modes of filmmaking as "impure."

Apichatpong heightens rather than diminishes day-for-night's reputation as aesthetically disreputable. Here, day-for-night's indecently non-natural color signifies the latent potential of a counter publicsphere that is virtually immanent in current social arrangements, and whose troublesome chroma produces a kind of sensual distancing effect from national fantasies

grounded in Thailand's exceptional past. In both sequences, day-for-night incites a collision between two temporal forms, the nocturnal and the slow, whose phenomenological effects are intimately aligned. Through this juxtaposition, I argue that *Uncle Boonmee* reflects upon the intellectual value of the "slow aesthetic," in which Apichatpong's cinema is repeatedly classified, while simultaneously expressing an ambivalence towards this movement's discursive construction around an often monadic conception of realism. In doing so, this scene's oscillation between day-for-night's overt artifice and the languorous pace of an expansive temporal duration incites reflection towards the seductive rhetoric of unities and origins symbolically subsidizing an ambience of despotic paternalism enforced by authoritarian "fathers."

An Aesthetic of Slowness

The fragmenting effects of narrative and metaphorical past lives surfacing in Apichatpong's film might appear at odds with slow cinema, the cinematic aesthetic with which he is most consistently aligned. This "aesthetic of slow," to use Matthew Flanagan's widely-circulated term, privileges protracted rhythms and languorous durations, and has generated one of the most coherent critical paradigms through which various transnational auteurs can be tangibly constellated. Alongside Apichatpong, a compendium of slow cinema's adherents might include Chantal Akerman, Lisandro Alonso, Pedro Costa, Lav Diaz, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Tsai Ming-liang, Kelly Reichardt, Béla Tarr, and Andy Warhol.²⁶⁷ It is not difficult to see why the night in Apichatpong's films, and in the work of many of the directors I have just cited, share a natural affinity with slow cinema, a stylistic and discursive model premised on a distension of cinematic time so pronounced it supplants narrative efficiency and linear causality with a sense of undifferentiated temporal duration.

In the absence of light, the night stalls our perception of the visible environment. Hence, as our sensory bearings unfold at a decelerated pace, it is as if the passage of time becomes

²⁶⁷ Matthew Flanagan, "Towards an Aesthetic of Slow in Contemporary Cinema" 16:9 6, no. 29, http://www.16-9.dk/2008-11/side11_inenglish.htm.

spatialized into its own territorial dimension, such that the attenuation of optical perception induces a psychic and physical reconciliation with lived duration. We have, in fact, repeatedly seen how the prolonged rhythms of Apichatpong's cinema collude with the visual strain of nighttime darkness in *Cemetery of Splendor*, particularly in the montage of urban space at night whose attunement to Khon Khaen's homeless challenges the notion of a harmonious and unified public sphere. In this vein, the night features prominently in many works by slow cinema auteurs beyond Apichatpong, such as Chantal Akerman (*News From Home*), Bela Tarr (*The Man From London*), and Tsai Ming-Liang (*Rebels of a Neon God*, *Stray Dogs*). Through its corresponding association with immobility, emptiness, and inaction, as Ira Jaffe has argued, slow cinema might thus seem diametrically removed from the immoderate multiplication of origins performed by the trope of the night throughout Apichatpong's corpus.²⁶⁸ However, I argue that it is precisely the commonsense affinity between inaction and listlessness, protraction and containment that *Uncle Boonmee* reconceives. By rendering vision self-doubting and simultaneously more attentive, nocturnal slowness in this film probes the ontological foundation of reality while simultaneously resensitizing us to its phenomenal presence.

Even prior to being introduced to Boonmee, the film's first sequence shows one of his past lives as a water buffalo roaming the jungle at night. There are several registers of meaning encoded in this scene. On a diegetic level, the buffalo is one of Boonmee's former embodiments, but this animal is also long-standing fixture of Thailand's national iconography bespeaking notions of cultural identity, particularly as a long-standing cliché of national cinema. As the cultural anthropologist and media scholar Annette Hamilton has observed, "for the elite, the actual life conditions of people in rural and provincial areas are generally still comprehended through images of the old farmer toiling away with his buffalo in the rice field."²⁶⁹ Such pastoral shots are

²⁶⁸ Ira Jaffe, *Slow Movies: Countering the Cinema of Action* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

²⁶⁹ Annette Hamilton, "Cinema and Nation: Dilemmas of Representation in Thailand," in *Colonialism and Nationalism in Asian Cinema*, ed. Wimal Dissanayake (Bloomington: Indiana, 1994), 145.

de rigueur even in contemporary Thai cinema. For instance, in the reactionary blockbuster *Nang Nak* (1999, Nonzee Nimibutr) it provides routine, atmospheric punctuation that suggests an overarching sense of uncontaminated Thai pastness. In *Bang Rajan* (Thanit Jitnukul, 2004), a historical epic on Thai–Burmese conflicts in the 18th–century, its featured buffalo, Boonlert, became an icon so celebrated that his co–star in the film, Bin Banloerit, held a three–day funeral for him following his death (not coincidentally, *Blissfully Yours*, Apichatpong’s film about the love affair between an illegal Burmese immigrant and a young Thai woman was specifically conceived to counteract the calumination of Myanmar in films like, *Bang Rajan*, that offer one–sided accounts of their territorial disputes).²⁷⁰

The buffalo’s encrypted fetish of pastness is in turn connected to the ideologically–freighted symbol of a farmer’s nuclear family from whom the buffalo briefly escapes. This family is arranged in a static, harmonious composition, as if to signify the lost state of original plenitude invoked by a contemporary rhetoric of despotic paternalism through which the government justifies its “strict authority” towards “the nation’s children.” In a certain reading, the protracted rhythms of this scene integrate these symbolic conceits as the social’s natural attributes, binding them to the spatiotemporal integrity of continuous duration, such that the past is immobilized into a repository for essential and timeless values. But here the chromatic hue veiling the image unsettles the symbolic codes these signifiers would normally coordinate. For David Batchelor, the abjection of color in the visual arts as superficial, immoderate, decadent, and unserious masks an anxiety towards sensory pleasures that do not inhere, or which exceed, objectal presence, and which therefore threaten the imagined coherence of identity. “Color is made out to be the property of some ‘foreign’ body – usually the feminine, the oriental, the primitive, the infantile, the vulgar, the queer or the pathological... color is regarded as alien and therefore dangerous ... it is perceived merely as a secondary quality of experience, and thus unworthy of serious

²⁷⁰ “Thais Mourn Film Star Buffalo,” *BBC News*, January 8, 2001 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/1106445.stm>.

consideration. Color is dangerous or it is trivial or it is both.”²⁷¹ In its double register as both secondary and alien, extraneous and thus irreducibly other, the chromatic sheen of nighttime is symbolically tied to the animality of the water buffalo, and works to desync it from human-centered symbolic constructs. While there are countless films featuring water buffalos in old and recent cinema, from comedies to social realist films, in *Uncle Boonmee*, this allusion seems to also reference the thingliness of cinema itself, given the film’s interest in cinema’s heterogeneous media origins, and the animal’s metaphoric conflation with the artisanal simulation of the scene’s artificial night.

The Night as Flesh

In Thai, the word for film, “nang,” also means skin, gesturing to a genealogical heritage of cinema aligned with shadow puppets (*nang yai*) that are constructed out of the hides of buffalos. The impression that this scene is alluding to the material and cultural origins of cinema in terms of *both* materiality and visual iconography is further reinforced by the buffalo’s appearance at the very beginning of the film. Situated as the film’s overture, the scene can thus be read as a metaphoric allusion to contexts of pre- or- proto cinema, setting the stage for *Uncle Boonmee*’s meditation on the technological transformations underpinning the history of pre-digital filmmaking – and uniting, in fact, the animal’s corporeal presence with an aesthetics of shadow and darkness.

Not surprisingly, cinema’s association with skin extends beyond media archeology specific to the Thai context. As a hermeneutical device, skin animates theories of corporeal dynamics in different national and transnational cinemas. In these discourses, skin provides a metaphorical frame for cinema as a virtual interface to sensations in excess of the optical, such as haptic and atmospheric perceptions. By frustrating optical mastery, such haptic images animate an embodied recall of alternate perceptual capacities, such as physical touch, or the

²⁷¹ David Batchelor, *Chromophobia* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 60.

memory of atmospheric pressure on the surface of our flesh.²⁷² As we have seen in the previous chapters, the cinematic night is a paradigmatic example of a haptic image, invoking a multisensory spectrum of corporeal affect. By rendering distinctions between figure and ground obscure, the darkened night image disables a distanced and objectifying gaze; inducing a more self-attentive awareness of our vision at the moment in which it is most precarious, and pointing us towards sensory faculties that are more frequently ignored during daytime, such as hearing and smell. Framed by the dilated pace of *Uncle Boonmee's* long shots, the night renders time itself haptic, sharpening our perceptual acuity to its lived duration, and rendering it somatically, even laboriously, felt.

At the same time, the notion of the cinematic image as a membrane that is containing yet permeable, form-giving but elastic, is particularly resonant with representations of the night. As Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener observe, the trope of skin “negotiates and re-distributes the relation between inside and outside; it designates a transitional and uncertain liminality with respect to where the self becomes the world and vice versa.”²⁷³ Like the night, skin interrogates the distinction between self and other, and troubles the boundary between seemingly discrete entities, such as the threshold between body and spectator. As Elena del Rio argues, when the cinematic 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.”²⁷⁴ This sense of mutual enfoldment is heightened by the engulfing

²⁷² There is an extensive research on skin, touch and haptics in this area of film theory, notable examples include: Jennifer M. Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); Rizvana Bradley, “Introduction: Other Sensualities,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Film Theory*, 24, no. 2–3 (2014): 129–133; Elena del Rio, “The Body as Foundation of the Screen: Allegories of Technology in Atom Egoyan’s *Speaking Parts*,” *Camera Obscura* 37–38 (1996): 92–115; Laura M. Marks, *The Skin of Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Alessandra Raengo, *On the Sleeve of the Visual: Race as Face Value* (Hanover, NN: Dartmouth College Press, 2013).

²⁷³ Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses* (New York and London: Routledge, 2015), 137.

²⁷⁴ Elena Del Rio, “‘The Body as Foundation of the Screen,’: Allegories of Technology in Atom Egoyan’s *Speaking Parts*.” *Camera Obscura* 38 (1996): 101.

“membrane” of the night image – its alterity emphasized by the double valence of the buffalo’s animality and its allusion to cinema’s origins in shadow puppetry. This nocturnal membrane thus designates both a tactile surface but also an expansive and disaggregating surround that problematizes distinctions between inside and outside, which here includes “inner” human self-knowledge and the irreducible alterity of the external world to which we are nonetheless permeable.

Once the buffalo breaks away after from his tethers and wanders into the jungle, his indolent roaming paces the scene’s expansive duration through formal tactics characteristic of the slow aesthetic. The camera’s framing generally remains wide and static, and cuts are sparingly used. The extreme length of each individual shot lingers deliberately over the scenery so that the buffalo’s movements appear charged with a heightened auratic dimension. In this way, eventfulness is not so much abrogated but expanded to include the amplified presence of these minor phenomena. Thus, by maximizing the seemingly minor incident of his lostness, the film’s slow aesthetic counteracts classical conventions where moments that stall or deviate from end-oriented goals are excised, investing time’s passage with a material density that renders it newly open and available to reordering outside of normative temporal schema.

Moreover, as Tiago de Luca has noted, the convergence of slowness with the dynamic screen presence of an animal underscores aspects of contingency in the image’s registration of the profilmic real.²⁷⁵ As the full scope of animals’ mental capacities remain irreducibly elusive to human understanding, the buffalo’s movements evince the impression of dynamic contingency, contra what a certain ethos of realism considers the deliberative and thus contrived force of professional acting. As a result, the kineticism of animal corporeality raises the possibility of imagining time outside of episodic memory as it structures human-centered notions of a “worthy” lifespan. For Nietzsche, among other philosophers, the self-reflexive understanding of past

²⁷⁵ Tiago de Luca, “Natural Views: Animals, Contingency and Death in Carlos Reygadas’s *Japon* and Lisandro Alonsos *Los Muertos*,” in *Slow Cinema*, eds. Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barrada Jorge (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 219–230.

events unfolding in a more–or–less intelligible sequence organizes our sense of anterior or futural time, and distinguishes human from animal consciousness.²⁷⁶ Across debates in both philosophy and cognitive science, critics have tried to determine whether animals perceive time at an accelerated or decelerated pace from human metrics, or whether they apprehend it, rather, as a perpetually iterating present.²⁷⁷ While the full scope of mental life for different animals might very well remain inaccessible to human knowledge, for many of these philosophers and neuroscientists, the alterity of animals from humans resides primarily in their experience of temporality outside of anthropocentric constructs, such that they do not conceive of existence as a progressive temporal arc or systematic life narrative.²⁷⁸ By foregrounding the unpredictable agency of animals, therefore, Apichatpong links the scene’s torpid distention to forms of temporal perception outside of human memory or subjectivity. In this way, this scene’s denaturalization of human temporality attunes us to a field of phenomenal actuality that encompasses the variegated and more–than–human phenomena and rhythms of the natural world.

Slow Cinema as Worldly Discourse

At this juncture, I want to expand my discussion of this scene’s nocturnality beyond the film itself, situating it within the larger debates on media ontology, realism, and temporality that have crystallized around the question of slowness, not only in cinema but also in purportedly anti–capitalist practices and discourses. Here, my analysis, like the mode of reading incited by the night, oscillates between close–looking and a kind of distant mapping of current discussions in film theory that motivate the scene’s aesthetic choices. Moving between the parallel tracks of the scene’s formal composition and these transnational debates, I endeavor to show how Apichatpong’s attunement to the specificities of regional place and localized media histories are

²⁷⁶ See Vanessa Lemm, *Nietzsche’s Animal Philosophy: Culture, Politics, and the Animality of the Human Being* (New York: Fordham, 2009).

²⁷⁷ For a synthesis of these debates see Laurel Braitman, *Animal Madness: Inside their Minds* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015).

²⁷⁸ Thomas Nagel, “What is it Like to be a Bat?” *The Philosophical Review* 83, no. 4 (Oct 1974): 435–450.

nonetheless entwined with geopolitical systems of form and meaning developed through the discourse of world cinema.

The scene's fascination with the contingency evinced by animal presence and expansive temporal duration hails the discursive construction of slow cinema, historically linked to the realist ethos articulated, most influentially, by André Bazin. In a series of recent interventions, film scholars have sought to diversify slow cinema's genealogy beyond a Eurocentric focus on French film realism, or to question and reconceptualize the various localized manifestations of realism as they are implemented across different national traditions. Cecilia Mello, for instance, links the contemplative pace and processual unfolding of Jia Zhang-ke's cinema to the syntax of Chinese painting; while similarly, for Lucia Nagib, cinematic slowness inheres in a movement towards intermediality in which slowness becomes a pressurized negation of cinema's intrinsic attribute of movement, as in the case of Ozu and Mizoguchi's films, where the static and distended pace of key scenes aligns cinema with kabuki theater.²⁷⁹ While these interventions reveal internal differentiations within slow cinema's totality of international productions, the realist framework tied most closely to Bazin remains the overriding paradigm through which contemporary filmmakers and critics alike position themselves within this aesthetic discourse.

In this way, vernacular instantiations of slowness enter into an aesthetic and critical dialectic with the discourse of realism championed by Bazin's emphasis on the spatiotemporal integrity of the profilmic event. In his well-known treatise on "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," Bazin famously argues for the "ontological relation" between cinema and reality, owing to the medium's basis in the indexical materiality of photographic film. His theory of cinema thus advocates for the preservation of reality's spatial and temporal continuum through long-takes, deep-focus shots, and a repudiation of artifice achieved via non-professional actors and on-location shooting. Contemporary filmmakers and theorists have thus adapted his conviction in the

²⁷⁹ Cecilia Mello "Space and Intermediality in Jia Zhangke's *Still Life*," *Aniki: Portuguese Journal of the Cinematic Image* 1, no. 2: 274–291; Lucia Nagib, "The Politics of Slowness and the Traps of Modernity," in *Slow Cinema*, eds. Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barrada Jorge (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 25–46.

primary importance of reality in film to address some of the most pressing political concerns of the contemporary period. In recent cinema, for instance, slowness' capacity to expand our sense of time's relationship to the real has served to reattune us to the ravages of ecological collapse (say, in the work of Michelangelo Frammartino) or the horizon of permanent precarity wrought by late capitalism's unsustainable demands on our physiological limits (as with the films of Kelly Reichardt or the Dardennes brothers).

Both of these political valences are invoked in *Uncle Boonmee's* overture. Overcast by the hokey blue of day-for-night, the scene's evocation of nature is thus ascribed with the blue filter's association with an outworn and anachronistic mode of representation, as if to link obsolescent media to natural and cultural worlds in the process of vanishing or spoliation. In the academic reception of slow films, critics have invoked Bazin's advocacy of long duration as a means to induce the spectator into a phenomenological submission to the world's irreducible alterity and its autonomy outside of human presence. In this way, slowness, like the night, reverts traditional ocularcentric biases in which the beholder of the look is positioned as the world's fixed locus of meaning. By overwhelming sensory perception with the felt density of temporal duration, slow cinema articulates an aesthetic that challenges human or individualist aspirations for sovereignty over the environment that we share with each other, as well as with nonhuman life forms. Through the film's distended and contemplative pace, therefore, cinema's conventional emphasis on narrative causality is supplanted by an attunement to the sonic environment and errant details of the cinematic image.

As the buffalo roams the jungle, the film's dense acoustic design layers circadian noises alongside the audible textures of the animal's movements and breaths, such that the image's focus on the buffalo's vagrant meanderings unfolds alongside a broader awareness of an encompassing, natural environment we cannot firmly locate in any fixed or absolute coordinate. Materialized through sonic synesthesia and obfuscated imagery, this multisensory mapping of the jungle cannot be optically mastered as an enclosed and distanced image organized around the

viewer's perspectival vision, or through a distanced remove from and mastery of the visual field. In this way, the interaction between the acoustic and visual components of the film invokes the natural world not as a contained, static, or pre-established domain. But rather, nature is visually and sonically materialized as the intertwined assemblage of animal life, atmospheric textures, and natural topographies whose magnitude, like the rising ambient noise of the jungle, swells and recedes arrhythmically in excess of human presence.

The density of sensate textures generated by slow cinema is frequently tied in film theory to the aesthetic's purported resistance to postindustrial acceleration. As the putative inverse of speed, deceleration is thus mobilized in multiple aesthetic practices and discourses as a respite or withdrawal from capitalism's temporal operations, namely its deturpation of social and somatic rhythms into the unceasing and undifferentiated temporality of current speed cultures. In Flanagan's landmark essay on the movement, he argues that "an aesthetic of slow uncompresses time, distends it, renewing the ability of the shot to represent a sense of the phenomenological real. Herein lies the marked tension between fast and slow: whereas speed perpetually risks gratuitous haste, fragmentation and distraction, reduction intensifies the spectator's gaze, awareness and response."²⁸⁰ In this way, the nocturnal chronospace signifies slowness not only as a temporal mechanism but also as a spatial category: a protective vestibule resistant to a sped-up world, a bounded territory that offers a cognitive recalibration to a more "organic" experience of time. Given slow cinema's orientation towards reality's felt emergence, its revitalization of the sensory might also extend, in this contemporary moment, to the opacity of digital technology, since new media's organizing powers increasingly travel through channels of unprecedented velocity that elude human perception. Song Hwee Lim, in fact, situates the spatial and temporal entwinement of slow cinema's politics in terms of the local's relationship to the global, observing how the early rise of slow cinema coincided with a turn to slowness in other

²⁸⁰ Flanagan, "Aesthetic of Slow," unpaginated.

cultural domains, where practices of deceleration were similarly developed to resist globalization, in particular the slow–food movement.²⁸¹

However, the cultural critic Sarah Sharma cautions against a default valorization of slowness, particularly as an effective mode of resistance against globalized capitalism. In her ethnographic work, she argues that the widespread acclamation of slowness is symptomatic of a simplistic overemphasis on acceleration to address contemporary capitalist regimes. This narrow focus limits out attention to the variegated temporalities through which neoliberalism diffuses its hegemonic control – including temporal regimes predicated on halting, languorous paces. We have already registered some of these modes of physical and affective labor throughout this study: Céline’s endless, off–screen waiting in the car in *Holy Motors*, Daiga waiting for a job that never materializes, as well as Jen and Jaai’s caretaking of the soldiers and Boonmee respectively.

As a result, while her pointed treatise does not address discourses of slow cinema directly, Sharma reframes some of the pervasive structuring assumptions that situate deceleration as a privileged signifier in the arena of politically–engaged aesthetics. Addressing the turn to slowness in lifestyle movements, she argues that “certain temporal modes are valorized as appropriate to political space. For example, the slow intersubjective time of a contemplative and deliberative public sphere is the assumed form of a properly civic and politicized public. The uneven temporalities that are the condition of the possibility for political space are completely unacknowledged.”²⁸² Thus for Sharma, the rash equation of slowness with progressive politics too often relies on the fantasy of an uncontaminated order of time that attributes a substantial basis, or an underlying positivity, to national public culture.

As a result, slow–centered lifestyles propose that this lost plenitude can be repaired

²⁸¹ Song Hwee Lim, “Temporal Aesthetics of Drifting: Tsai Ming–liang and a Cinema of Slowness” in *Slow Cinema*, Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barrada Jorge, eds. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 90.

²⁸² Sarah Sharma, *In the Meantime: Temporality and Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 12.

simply by opting out of speed. “The type of time that is valued by the slow food movement is ‘natural time,’ whether it is the time of the earth, the seasons, or the biological clock,” Sharma contends, “it is imagined to be precapitalist and preindustrial. Individuals are expected to reclaim an ‘essential’ experience of time, and such a reclamation is assumed to be possible.”²⁸³ In opposition to an approach towards slowness that conceives it as an autonomous or metaphysical regime of time, Sharma textures the ways in which its resurgence in lifestyle and aesthetic discourses complies to problematic conceptions of agency defined and constrained by the consumer practices it purports to resist. Across different cultural domains, from slow food to slow vacationing, the slow movement’s invocation of a natural, homogeneous time, she observes, occludes how temporality is “differentially experienced at the intersection of inequity,” thus ignoring how slowness under capitalism is itself a material resource that is unevenly distributed and available.²⁸⁴

Drawing on Sharma’s measured misgivings, it is not so much slowness that comes under critical censure in this coda, but rather the ways in which its proponents offer it as a utopian imaginary of natural time against which to frame liberalism’s disruptive reach. This structuring dichotomy risks constraining slowness as a reactive paradigm that naturalizes and legitimates a set of exclusionary cultural norms in the process of resisting others. In recent cultural and aesthetic theory, the desire to deinstall capitalist time’s mass-coordination of somatic rhythms to the incessant demands of the market requires a diagnostic counterfoil in slowness, idealized as the timeless truth of preindustrial being. In this view, capitalist speed is to slowness what the simulacrum is to actuality. As a result, this slackened temporal mode is then tasked with the role of fostering practices that can (re)synchronize us to a natural but lost sense of time that transcends not only capitalist hegemony but also historical particularity as such. Thus, in the process of forfeiting neoliberal demands for an incessant adaptability to speed, slow-life movements simply seek to displace a false temporal paradigm with the recuperation of a

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

fantasmatic temporal wholeness. Through its association with a realist ethos, therefore, slowness in recent cinematic discourses is often naturalized as an immanent property of phenomenal reality, without, however, questioning the discursive construction of how that reality is recognized.

At the same time, the possibility of a reactionary undercurrent in the turn towards slowness is not lost to many of its proponents. For instance, in Tiago de Luca and Nuno Baradas Jorge's exacting introduction to *Slow Cinema*, they observe that "two ... often interrelated, assumptions uphold the suspicion appended to the slow film, namely: that it is excessively aesthetic and that it is also retrograde in its nostalgic longing for pre-industrial temporalities and corresponding facing away from the complex multiplicity of time."²⁸⁵ While I do not disagree with their assessment of slow cinema's critical affordances, de Luca and Jorge's qualification raises the question of where, precisely, such criticisms of slowness' politically retrograde learnings are coming from. In their references, de Luca and Jorge only cite two pieces of journalism that express critical misgivings regarding slow cinema's "excessive aesthetics": Nick James' widely-debated editorial in *Sight and Sound*, and Nick Kois' "Eating Your Cultural Vegetables" in the *New York Times*.²⁸⁶ Neither of these articles, however, advance the argument that slow cinema's politics are regressive or nostalgic. In his piece, James laments how slow films are "passive-aggressive in that they demand great swathes of our precious time to achieve quite fleeting and slender aesthetic and political effects: sometimes it's worth it, sometimes not."²⁸⁷

While his piece advances a narrow perspective on what constitutes proper politics – conflating effectiveness with direct action and with immediate, measurable impact – he does not, however, attribute a conservative, backward-looking glance to slowness' languorous pacing. Instead he expresses frustrations at how slow films, in his view, have turned into a mannered

²⁸⁵ Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barrada Jorge, "The Politics of Slowness and the Traps of Modernity," in *Slow Cinema*, eds., Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barrada Jorge (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

²⁸⁶ Nick James, "Passive Aggressive," *Sight and Sound* 20, no. 4 (April 2010), 5; Dan Kois, "Eating Your Culture Vegetables," *New York Times Magazine*, April 29, 2011, www.nytimes.com/2011/05/01/magazine.

²⁸⁷ James, "Passive Aggressive," 5.

aesthetic orthodoxy that forecloses other kinds of formal experimentation. Similarly, Kois' essay does not demean the political aspirations of "slow-moving, meditative" cinema, but it is rather a gleeful performance of false contrition regarding his intellectual limits for enduring "deliberately paced" films in favor of his real enthusiasm for mass-produced junk.

In other words, the corpus of criticism skeptical of slow cinema's politics, and against which its proponents specifically articulate their defenses, is not only insubstantial but largely phantasmatic. While James' and Kois' pieces have generated vigorous debate on film blogs, and while their positions hinge on structuring biases that warrant close scrutiny, they have also been imputed with opinions – specifically, regarding the retrograde dimension of slow cinema – that they never in fact express. Kois' article, in particular, has been characterized as hostile philistinism, and several notable responses to his piece cite Apichatpong's *Uncle Boonmee* explicitly, often with a forceful defensiveness disproportionate to the piece's actual outlook that never challenges the political or aesthetic legitimacy of ruminative, slow-paced contemplation.²⁸⁸ A tweet from NPR's culture blog succinctly summarizes the back-and-forth of these debates: "Isn't the boring-cinema thing a war over a thesis ("boring movies are not worth watching") that was never offered?"²⁸⁹

By offering a synthetic overview of these debates, and their repeated invocation of film theory's political misgivings against slowness that do not appear to exist, I seek to ponder the origins and purpose of this persistently invoked but ultimately spectral counter-discourse. In doing so, I hope to reframe the specific political valence of slowness in Apichatpong's films, particularly as it relates to his appeals to a pervasive nocturnal milieu. As paranoid recourse to an antislowl contingent in film theory is as pervasive as it is fantasmatic, particularly for advocates of slowness, I suggest that this projection is a displaced recognition of a certain structural and

²⁸⁸ Manohla Dargis and A.O. Scott, "In Defense of Slow and Boring," *New York Times*, June 3, 2011 <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/05/movies/films-in-defense-of-slow-and-boring.html>.

²⁸⁹ Linda Holmes. Twitter Post. June 8, 2011, 1:16 pm, <https://twitter.com/nprmonkeysee/status/78556047039676417>.

discursive sympathy for the retrograde intrinsic to the slow, a disavowed acknowledgment that slowness puts a certain homogenizing desire for essential origins in circulation *along with* its more critical scrutiny of this very desire. But this internal tension to slowness is treated as incompatible with any attempt to align it with progressive politics – as if, in a meta-reflection of its own critique, a theory that argues against time as a closed and stable entity must refuse the internal contradictions that prevent its object from reaching ideological closure. In other words, efforts to think about an aesthetic of slow, or of spatiotemporal integrity, as heterogeneous, political, and conflictual in its evocation of time, immediately run up against slowness' susceptibility for restoration, singularity, and longings not only for lost origins, but also for an end to dislocation and partiality as such.

The imaginary nature of this debate – at least in the terms laid out by its proponents – serves as a smokescreen for an ambivalence intrinsic to theorizing the political potential of the slow, as if ambivalence, much more so than boredom, displeasure, or inaction, is precisely what “effective politics” cannot stomach. Yet, as Apichatpong's nocturnal overture endeavors to show, it is precisely the manner in which theories of slowness cannot fully elude aspirations towards wholeness, timelessness, and enclosure that induces Apichatpong towards this temporal idiom. Thus, rather than partake in a certain hermeneutical conviction in slow cinema's capacity to supplant a sense of monadic time with unforeseen and overlooked temporalities, Apichatpong is instead interested in the critical space slowness opens by virtue of its conflicting metaphorical associations with *both* heterogeneity and timelessness, the countervailing movement that consolidates *and* delaminates a sense of time as an essential continuum. It is perhaps due to the spatiotemporal integrity associated with dilated duration – its inability, that is, to totally escape an allegorical reading of closure and totality – that slowness can lay bare the deception of salvific origins, exposing the multiple processes of discursive construction behind the very identification with wholeness that, however partially, it simultaneously conjures. In this way, Apichatpong's engagement of an aesthetic of slow reflexively gestures and broadens the interpretative discourse framing his films, particularly the tendency to impute a transparent national

representativeness to his aesthetic choices. Here, the opacity linked to the night signals an awareness and repudiation of the very notion of exhaustive representativeness. Within the geopolitics of world cinema, in fact, a turn towards a halting, meditative pace has often been equated in the work of Asian directors with a longing for a simpler, national homogeneity anterior to globalization (even though preindustrial dynamics of direct and indirect colonialism, migration, or trade have long exposed this notion as a compensatory ruse). Even for Lim, whose work has been critical in moving Asian cinema beyond “Anglo–American–centric, identity–politics–based framework,” reiterates a similar reading: “On the other hand, a turn to slowness in rapidly developing regions, such as East Asia, may arise from an anxiety towards wholesale modernization and industrialization, and thus a desire to hold on to a less hectic pace associated with an agricultural past.”²⁹⁰ In Apichatpong’s films, and in the context of Thai independent film more broadly, this timeless past is laid bare as a discursive construction appealing to a militaristic and neo–conservative agenda in which the state is conceived as an impermeable entity whose ideological and religious coherence protects the nation from forms of destructive rule, both external and internal.

On one hand, the night’s perturbation of vision in this sequence incites a heightened absorption in physical reality’s sensate textures. Laura Marks attributes an amplified sense of tactility to indeterminate images that “give the impression of seeing for the first time, gradually discovering what is in the image rather than coming to the image already knowing what it is.”²⁹¹ Accordingly, the shot’s temporal distension analogizes and animates our sensory memory of looking into the dark. By simulating this process of cognitive adjustment, it is as if the scene is virtually animating how vision unsettled by darkness steers us closer to the world we wish to apprehend in order to discern its enigma. In the process, day–for–night rescales the cognitive imprint of minor occurrences to an even greater degree than what dilated durations already incite. Thus, the movement of the jungle’s foliage turns eventful, the flight of a butterfly traces an

²⁹⁰ Marks, *Skin of Film*, 178.

²⁹¹ Lim, “Temporal Aesthetics of Slowness,” 89.

aleatory and stylized gesture, and the way the curvature of the buffalo's back rises and falls becomes a focal point for the scene's proprioceptive energy and tension. But while affirming and rediscovering the phenomenal reality disclosed by the shot's prolonged rhythms, the night's opacity simultaneously prevents the consolidation of its symbolic meaning, expressing instead the precarity latent in any semblance of completeness. Thus, the troublesome chromatic skin of day-for-night revises our discernment of the buffalo, the family, and even the natural landscape as symbolic components of Thailand's substantial essence and grounding. However, through its intimate attunement to the indeterminate image, the night does not abjure their presence so much as it resituates them from representations locked within an immobilized rhetoric into highly-cathected, presentational intensities. In this way, they become no more and no less than highly particularized elements within the ceaseless unfolding of one uncle's soul, the vicissitudes of cinema across technologies, and the uncertain becoming of the nation.

MOONLIGHT, IN CONCLUSION

Throughout this study, I have been arguing that the night serves as a privileged discursive site in recent world cinema. As both an allegorical motif of numerous films and a sensory threshold of their visual structure, the cinematic night has been repeatedly called upon to explore and problematize questions regarding the physical world's continuity with – as well as its irreducible distance from – the cinematic image. Ontological interrogations regarding the physical world recorded and relayed in cinema have intensified in a moment in which our material, ontological, and social understandings of what constitutes “cinematic images” continues to be redefined by digital technologies. As we have seen, the nocturnal environment routinely displays how digital technologies open new channels of world visibility, specifically in low-light conditions. Through the specific visual context of the night, the films I have surveyed significantly expand the phenomenological horizon for cinema to discover and interrogate its surrounding environment. At the same time, the digital arouses concerns about the existential and temporal continuity between world and cinematic image becoming irrevocably attenuated. This anxiety arises from putatively disembodied and dematerialized nature of its material constitution, as well as its circulation within – and, as some have argued, ontological indistinguishability from – computational information that eludes ordinary human awareness or perceptibility.

Across these different chapters, I have explored how the nocturnal vistas of several films hold the countervailing principles of world-discovery and material disembodiment in dialogic tension. In doing so, I argue that ontological treatises on digital cinema should not be considered separately from the kinds of phenomenological access they extend to the world we inhabit, as they enable us, in turn, to question emerging affective and economic configurations redefining our worldly experience. While the artificial light of urban spaces and the technological affordances of recent digital cameras allow for a heightened access to the nocturnal realm, they never fully eradicate zones of darkness or even avisuality, even as they redraw where the fault line separating blindness from visibility might be located. Through the nocturnal's enduring association with visual opacity, albeit an opacity that contemporary cinema rezones and

recalibrates, the cinematic night provides an aesthetic domain wherein the putative stability and transparency of the world appears suspended. By now, it seems beyond dispute that digital cinema still functions, for the most part, as a photographic medium, despite competing forms of audiovisual entertainment that make no reference to profilmic actuality. Thus, as a result of digital cinema's enduring photographic logic, I argue that contemporary art cinema has repeatedly turned to spectacular nightscapes in order to showcase how low-light tactics of digital cameras can extend a materialist commitment to recording, revealing, and exploring the world anew.

At the same time, the night's enduring association with dynamics like lateness and darkness also express aspects of felt, subjective experience that unsettle notions of self-possession and sovereign agency. These nocturnal affects range from fatigue, sensory deprivation, or the dissociative state of slumber, and provide powerful expression to lived dynamics of indeterminacy and dispossession that have developed in response to new technological and economic systems of governmentality. As an aesthetic and exegetical image, the cinematic night thus troubles different ontologies of the visual, social, and material as they converge in the pervasive, yet perennially elusive, notion of the "world" – jointly conceived, in this study, in terms of a localized environmental place and as an inconceivably vast and complex breadth of transnational relations. As we have seen, the materialist aesthetics revived by a strain of medium ontology at the turn of the century possesses a definition of materiality that is too limited and constrained, repeatedly positing an understanding of the "world" that presumes intrinsic universality and stably transparent or neutrally immanent attributes.

As we have seen, the conviction that the world on film possesses an irreducible, extradiscursive concreteness has often found traction in the cinematic notion of the index, as a trace connecting the image to the profilmic environment via the natural property of light. The night in this study is not at odds with the index, but it does put pressure on the cultural logics encrypted in its indisputably central role within discussions of medium ontology. Ontological discussions of the medium, in fact, repeatedly identify the index as cinema's primary and fundamental attribute,

regardless of whether its specific interlocutors view digital cinema as essentially at odds with physical causality or as a remediated preservation of its cultural effects. Across their differing approaches to the digital, ontological debates have nonetheless tended to agree that indexicality is a neutral feature of the camera, a technical automatism that exists prior to social discourses that are to be located, instead, in questions of representation or aesthetic design. Rather than treat technology and cultural discourses as distinct domains, I argue that the allegorical trope of the night invites us to read technical protocols and the natural world in a continuum with social and psychic processes of cultural meaning–formation. In doing so, night cinema interrogates the psychic investments and social relations underwriting the very desire for an image of the world that is wholly self–evident and absolutely manifest. In this way, subjective desire and specific cultural processes are acknowledged as fundamental vectors to how the physical world emerges through cinema, in opposition to methodologies that posit them as secondary phenomena that are thematized on to the image from a belated vantage point.

Affective investments in the index animates much ontologically–oriented film studies which view the photochemical material trace as a neutral affirmation of the natural world’s empirical presence – the index as writing with light, the pencil of nature. As I have argued throughout this study, night cinema incites attention to several limits within this model. Firstly, faith in the extradiscursivity of the index appears to naturalize visual representation as contiguous with physical reality, underplaying the environmental and technological contexts that “interlock” to produce the image. Such a view assumes that the physical world, conceived not merely as concrete reality but, more specifically, as reality that naturally and automatically yields to the physical causality of the index, is always and already illuminated. In fact, as we have seen, darkness in pre–digital cinema does not comply to indexicality, it is virtual and notational, a site of black oxidation that has failed to register the imprint of light but which we read contextually as “shadow.” In other words, its properties are purely notational. Characterizations of the index as socially indifferent due to its extension from the natural force of light also presumes that the world achieves self–presence more “fully” during the day rather than at night, and that concrete reality

attains a certain ontological completeness by being ratified by a human gaze or, for that matter, a human presence over and against other worldly lifeforms that are more active at nighttime. Given how night and day also organize the differential temporalities specific to particular social arrangements and forms of labor, such a view implicitly reinforces the notion that nocturnal lifeworlds, in their remove from a) immediate sources of illumination or b) social practices synched to the reproduction and iteration of normative life, are ontologically and materially deficient, virtual rather than concretely actual. In contrast to this view, I argue that the cinematic night invites us to apprehend and interrogate physical reality outside of an uncompromised or self-determined sense of human subjectivity in such a way that contests any reading of our screened environment as an ontologically self-evident fact. Across this study, I contend that nocturnal cinema in the digital era calls for a more self-interrogating approach to what we mean when we talk about the very “world” the digital supposedly dematerializes. What subjective experiences and cultural epistemologies bring it into visibility? And what entities – both human and nonhuman, material and intangible, visible and apercptual – do we expect the physical world that cinema records and reveals to include?

World cinema’s nocturnal environments make psychic room not only for human experiences of vulnerability but also for nonhuman lifeforms that populate and rely on nocturnal ecologies, thus displacing the human as the fulcrum of the world’s scope and intelligibility. Thus, in contrast to classic genres such as *film noir*, contemporary world cinema has turned to the night not as a terrain of exalted otherness, a domain exempt from the economic structures and moral regimes of daytime culture. But rather it reconfigures our understanding of the night as a more complex zone of lived indeterminacy in which practices constitutive of normative subjectivity, as well as governmental and capitalist interests, exceed their conventional temporal boundaries through underdescribed mechanisms and infrastructures. These afterhour configurations often interconnect with modes of precarious life that imply subjects with a deteriorating relation to financial stability but, at the same time, they also induce alternative capacities for connection, kinship and flourishing enabled by their exclusion from dominant regimes of temporal

organization and sanctioned activity. Lastly, I have argued that an excessive privileging of cinema as a medium of light also fails to consider how indexicality is not an unbiased property of technology. Such a perspective, in fact, overlooks the specific political and social processes through which indexicality has been calibrated and engineered. I will return to this point later.

In this study's different chapters, I have suggested that by thematizing digital technology's technical protocols through the aesthetics of the image in conjunction with narratives that explore the alternative public spheres linked to nocturnal social worlds, conceptions of materiality and embodiment underpinning our fundamental sense and definition of the world are nuanced and expanded. Through the new perceptual configurations night images expose and lay bare, the nocturnal domain in cinema comes to encompass social worlds and relationalities deemed improper to normative social arrangements as well as coherent or rational forms of subjectivity. But it also symbolically expresses imperceptible forces that affect human destiny on scales that are both intimate and global: networks of surveillance, the occluded nighttime labor that maintains the infrastructure of the everyday, the clandestine engineering of affective sensoriums, or the violent consequences of climate change. Nocturnal cinema gives metaphorical valence to how these variegated, indeterminate and at times supra-sensorial forces act upon concrete actuality in ways that cannot be simply dismissed as "theoretical" or subsidiary dynamics" given their profound consequences to material life. Moreover, as an interval between the past and tomorrow, nighttime in these films asks us how deeply entrenched problems and emergent threats to the social polis – a sphere conceived, until very recently, as a "space of appearances" – might be acknowledged, precisely through a more concerted attentiveness to intangible, occluded, or indeterminate phenomena.²⁹² More specifically, in drawing attention to the atmospheric limits of cinema to mediate the world at night, nocturnal films also steer attention towards cinema and media's role – materially, aesthetically, and socially – in threatening but also

²⁹² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1958).

potentially expanding our modes of intervention and engagement into democratic civic life and politics.

As I draw this study to its conclusion, I end with a discussion of two recent films that condense but also expand the scope of the core chapters. Here, I consider how the night thematizes cinema's fraught history of rendering black bodies and life worlds on film, and how digital cameras and protocols are linked to an expanded aesthetic tool kit for expressing and (revitalizing) discourses on racial blackness on screen. I thus return to the question of nighttime and blackness I began to explore in *35 Shots of Rum* in the context of French and Senegalese cinema and photochemical film, but do so through independent American black films and the discourse of the digital.

My primary focus is Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight* (2016), an independent American film. The film is organized around three episodes that focus on Little/Chiron/Black, as he first grows up and then returns to Miami, at different stages of his life. In the first episode, we see him as a young boy (Alex Hibbert) who finds an inadvertent father figure in Juan (Mahershala Ali); in the second, he is a teenager (Ashton Sanders) who has his first gay sexual experience with a friend, Kevin, (Jharrel Jerome) while negotiating the dehumanizing effects of anti-gay bullying in his high school as well as his mother's (Noamie Harris) deteriorating drug addiction; in the third, Chiron now goes by the name Black (Trevante Rhodes), and returns to Miami after living as a drug dealer in Atlanta. In this episode, he will visit his mother who is now in recovery, and reunite with Kevin (Andre Holland) in the restaurant in which Kevin, eventually leading to their reconciliation.

As the film's title makes evident, *Moonlight* has an aesthetic and conceptual affinity with nighttime. Firstly, the night enables the evocation of Miami as a specific place. The city's febrile, moist atmosphere is expressed through captivating urban lights as well as the sheen of sweat on the characters' perspiring skin that conjures a sense of the city's humidity. Chiron's name also come from a hypothetical moon of Saturn, as well as one of its orbiting, minor planets, thus intimating at a cosmological horizon that is not only linked to the night sky but which also evinces

an ecological recognition of non-sovereignty or non-mastery against the inconceivable magnitude of the universe. Lastly, as a liminal temporal threshold, the night thematizes the film's concern with psychic and familial lineages – Chiron's mimetic introjection of Juan as a paternal ego-ideal, his fraught bond with his mother, but also the correspondences and discontinuities between the different iterations of his self at different life stages. For the spectator, night in the film frequently denotes moments that solicit our vision in recognition of their particularly intense sensual address. In contrast, within the diegesis of the film, the night is a space in which characters often avoid being seen, in a broader sense, by the presumptive vigilance of a societal gaze. This opacity allows for fugitive withdrawals from the performance of mandated identities into transformative thresholds of indeterminacy and risk. As allegorical motif and visual image, the night stages the tension between specular relations that fluctuate between hypervisibility and obscurity. I argue that it is in the tension between these two, seemingly antipodal properties that the film demands to be read, and through which it stages a self-reflexive engagement with not only the discourse around black cinema but also with how black cinema is understood and interpellated through a negotiation of existing aesthetic but also technological discourses.

When I first drew my attention to *Moonlight*, its circulation had been limited to art house cinemas as a small-budgeted production that had been enthusiastically received at the Telluride Film Festival, The Toronto International Film Festival, and The New York Film Festival. For the purposes of this study, I was drawn to the film's sensual, stylistic hailings of auteurist world cinema. Its network of intertextual allusions appear to thematize and redress how black cinema in the United States has often been narrowly viewed as anti-aesthetic, owing to a prescriptive circumscription of black cinema as always and already a variation of social realism. This category in turn has been positioned in contrast to attributes associated with the aesthetic virtuosity *Moonlight* evinces, and which derive from a distinctly global lineage of art cinema, notably immersive cinematography, densely composed mise-en-scenes, chromatic expressivity, and poetically enigmatic shots. At the same time, the intertextual structure of the film also reflects, in a certain reading, how the distribution and exhibition of black American art cinema has often

replicated the “niche” institutional rhythms of “world cinema” complicating past categorizations of the national and the global in the American film industry.

However, since writing this dissertation, the financial fortunes and peripheral institutional standing of *Moonlight* have obviously shifted dramatically. The film was awarded the 2017 Academy Award for Best Picture – one of the few black-focused films, and certainly the first queer-themed one, to receive a prestigious but notoriously conservative accolade. I rehearse the commercial and institutional rise of the film not to endorse a trite but all too common dismissal of the Oscars as a phenomenon scholars should disregard as unserious. Attending to the Oscars matters in so far as it forecasts shifting but also intractable institutional and professional tendencies of the American film industry, while also offering a significant but far from totally representative forum for how this industry views cinema’s role in the national public sphere. Nonetheless, much of the post-Oscars discourse surrounding *Moonlight* has often judged and evaluated the film in terms of its emblematic representativeness of black cinema as such, a reading which the film actively eschews through what I view as the historical and conceptual reflexivity encoded into its precise aesthetic grammar.

I thus align my reading of *Moonlight* with Michael Gillespie’s recent observations in *Film Blackness* where he argues that a range of independent American films from the mid-seventies onwards, including Jenkins’ first feature-length *Medicine for Melancholy*, “[operate] as a visual negotiation, if not tension, between film as art and race as a constitutive, cultural fiction.”²⁹³ Contesting a critical tendency to view films made by, or about, black people as stable signifiers for a coherent racial ontology, Gillespie instead “disputes the fidelity considerations of black film: the presumption that the primary function of this brand of American cinema entails an extradiegetic responsibility or capacity to embody the black lifeworld or provide answers in the sense of social problem solving. Furthermore the idea of black film cannot be tantamount to ethics

²⁹³ Michael Gillespie, *Film Blackness; American Cinema and the Idea of Black Film* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 2.

of positive and negative representation that insists on black film in the terms of cultural policy, immanent category, genre, or mimetic corroborations of the black experience.”²⁹⁴

As Gillespie argues, the critical and institutional reception of black cinema has often reduced it to pure referentiality, a stable signifier equating black lifeworlds to zones of resistance against immutable social ruin or exploitation. By foreclosing black cinema from other lexicons of aesthetic legibility, these prevailing modes of contextualizing and receiving black film can subsidize, for all their liberal intentions, a view of black life that locks it into a presumed correspondence with notions of intractable social subjugation and death. Gillespie’s use of words here is also highly suggestive – embody, mimetic corroboration – fleshy signifiers that evince how the desire for black cultural production as a coherent representational system is often anchored in the image of the racialized body as a “paradigmatic visual sign,” as Alessandra Raengo has argued.²⁹⁵

Drawing on Frantz Fanon’s famous notion of epidermalization, Raengo describes how Fanon’s interpellation by a child as a “Negro” exemplifies how the specular field of dominant culture identifies the black body as a “fully contained, fully intelligible visual object, a perfect sign that benefits from the synergy of iconic and indexical functions.”²⁹⁶ She argues that the idealization of the index as an objective trace has a material and conceptual affinity with the image of the black body envisioned as an absolute guarantee of racial knowledge. “The process of racialization is analogous to the photographic process of photochemical fixation,” she observes, “whereby the body is fixated in the field of vision, like a photochemical imprint is fixated by a dye.”²⁹⁷ In other words, film theory’s affective investment in the index as pure physical causality has the ability to “reinforce the idea of the transparency of race; that is, the coincidence

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 2.

²⁹⁵ Alessandra Raengo, *On the Sleeve of the Visual: Race as Face Value* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth University Press), 12.

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 12.

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 16.

between the photographic and the racial index.”²⁹⁸ This conflation endorses a cultural misrecognition of race as an immanent and absolute property of the black body that indexical fixation reifies on to the subject’s epidermal schema. However, even if the cultural histories of racialization and photography are mutually reinforcing, as Raengo suggests, this affinity is also, and at the same time, grounded in these visual technologies’ hostility to black flesh – a hostility we might characterize as the index’s paradoxical resistance to the very blackness it reifies.

As Richard Dyer has famously argued, the prevailing conceptualization of cinema as light works to universalize whiteness as an unseen cultural norm, aligning it not just with luminous metaphors for the good and knowledge, but also with transcendent notions of the unmarked and absent, a natural force devoid of particularities. Surveying a vast array of films in relation to the preferred lighting systems of American and European cinema, Dyer observes how the technical grammar of film has routinely privileged the fulsome visibility of white bodies at the expense of black actors. He notes that “the white–centricity of the aesthetic technology of the photographic media is rarely recognized, except when the topic of photographing non–white faces is addressed. This is habitually conceptualized in terms of non–white subjects entailing a departure from usual practice or constituting a problem.”²⁹⁹ The white–centricity of the representational norms Dyer describes appear so ubiquitous as to seem like the default setting of visual technologies. For instance, he observes how silent–era white actresses were backlit in such a way that their “porcelain” flesh appears cosubstantial with light itself. But even as late as the 1980s and 90s, films still retained a strong bias towards rendering white flesh as the optical standard, as dominant lighting designs often diminished or distorted the facial features of black actors, particularly in scenes in which they share the frame with white actors. Turning his attention to technical manuals, Dyer notes how solutions such as moisturizing the skin of dark–skinned actors, or avoiding green or yellow lighting schemes, were implicitly and repeatedly

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 76.

²⁹⁹ Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (London, New York: Routledge, 1997), 35.

described in terms of deviations from what had been accepted as the unmarked naturalism of “standard” lighting systems that just so happened to exalt white skin.

Dyer links these racial dynamics to a broader “culture of light” that impinges directly on this dissertation’s concerns with nocturnality. The contemporary presumption that any part of the physical world can be illuminated by modern lighting technologies “produced new expectations of everyday life – that it could be assumed to be visible at all times as required – and of dramatic art – that it took place in a separate space flooded with meaning creating light. Both are part of an epistemology of light, at once analytic and metaphorical.”³⁰⁰ For Dyer, a culture of geographically and temporally–ubiquitous lighting reinforces an uncritical assumption that physical reality is innately transparent. In fact, while few scholars would discount how psychic and sociocultural factors steer us towards particular value judgments, indexical discourses nonetheless betray a fundamental belief that the material world recorded and revealed through film corresponds to a realm of manifest appearances for which the index serves as an objective guarantee of truth. Cultural and societal discourses are thus seen as discursive projections on to the space of appearances film reveals, without taking into account, however, how racial dynamics might organize the technical conditions and premises for appearance itself to materialize.

For Dyer, this prevailing conviction in the world’s intrinsic, pre–discursive transparency “poses a problem ... in relation to that which cannot be seen,” an epistemological sovereignty he links to the privileged status of light in Western culture.³⁰¹ The idealization of light as natural and constitutive to culture itself engenders a view of the world’s opacity as a temporary, and ultimately deceptive interlude that can ultimately be demystified through technological and metaphoric practices of light, and the knowledge and possession they imply. But this romantic overvaluation of luminescence poses a second problem specific to visual representation, as it accepts that the light through which the photographic world is materialized is a neutral value rather than a

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 34.

³⁰¹ Ibid.

conditional technology engineered to confer and construct regimes of social dominance as natural orders.

While Dyer is primarily concerned with lighting, recent scholarship has extended his line of inquiry to the racial bias embedded in the technical base of visual technologies even prior to their contact with light. In a widely discussed article from 2009, media scholar Lorna Roth has surveyed how an implicit racial bias was encrypted in photochemical film as well as digital cameras. Roth's research focuses in particular on Shirley Cards, images of white women used by film stock companies to calibrate color balance from the mid-1950s. These images were selected by lab technicians as the ideal around which photochemical film's visual standards were designed, even if they made other races look washed out or illegible, in the case of dark-skinned bodies, or sallow, as with Asian complexions. In other words, gendered fantasies of white women by white male technicians and company executives literally structured the dynamic range through which film's revelatory powers are enabled, even though they caused the features of dark-skinned subjects to disappear. In this way, film and photographic technologies tacitly reduced dark-skinned subjects as epidermal signifiers for blackness, as film often inadequately rendered their facial, which is to say individuating, features un-visible. These limitations were not prompted by primitive chemistry or happenstance. But rather "the reason for these deficiencies is that film chemistry, photo lab procedures, video screen colour balancing practices, and digital cameras in general were originally developed with a global assumption of 'whiteness' embedded within their architectures and expected ensemble of practices."³⁰² Thus, the history of film has only partially relayed an image of the world that conforms to principles of isomorphic resemblance, as its encrypted bias posits white bodies as the rightful inhabitants to the space of appearance (and with it, recognition and the potential for validation) while positing black people as deficient or improper to visual and thus psychic recognition.

³⁰² Lorna Roth, "Looking at Shirley, the Ultimate Norm: Colour Balance, Image Technologies, and Cognitive Equity," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 34, no. 1 (2009): 120.

Given how the work flows and technical protocols underwriting visual technologies were mostly unknown to the general public (and often ignored by film and media scholars), the technological bias of imaging apparatuses went largely unremarked, as “it was assumed by the public that such things were based on science and could not be changed.”³⁰³ (120) However, the textural values of photochemical indexicality were far from an absolute or default property of the emulsification process. Instead, as Roth endeavors to show, photochemical film underwent significant processes of retooling in order to rectify the medium’s limitations with color balancing and high contrast, eventually leading to a racially diverse array of multiple Shirleys. As Roth asserts, it was only when furniture and chocolate manufacturers began to complain about the lack of dynamic range for rendering wood or dark candy on film that the chemistry of film stocks was reworked in the United States. This recalibration had the added but ultimately inadvertent effect of improving how the features of black subjects appeared on film. Likewise, the Japanese film market began to change the dynamic range of visual technologies to suit (light-skinned) Asian complexions in order to satisfy booming consumer demand for home photography in Asian markets. In recent cinema, several technological and institutional reorderings have dramatically redressed how film reinforces whiteness as a prototypical global standard for photographic images. In addition to addressing the racial biases of visual media’s hardware and chemical capacities, additional changes include the broadened expertise of lighting technicians, and a greater racial diversity among filmmakers and film crews.

But as we shall see through *Moonlight*’s example, the properly aestheticized appearance of black flesh on screen in recent cinema and television has been greatly assisted by the digital turn, owing to their ability to render color tones at opposite ends of the spectrum. This range in some ways compensates for the in-built bias towards white flesh-tones that persists in the design of digital cameras (as well as light meters used to locate sources of available light). Thus, the productive expansion of black representational practices by digital devices (such as the RED

³⁰³ Ibid.

or the Arri Alexa) puts pressure on film theory's repeated characterization of digital recording technologies as disincarnate or materially disconnected, revealing how this position is structured by an implicit compliance to standards of white privilege that reflects and simultaneously naturalizes white cultural norms in their definition of what constitutes physical reality, embodiment, and materiality. There is of course a long-standing association between black people and atmospheric darkness, ranging from racist tropes of the "dark continent" to critical metaphors for the unrepresentable magnitude of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. In many ways, it is tempting to align the representability of black bodies in relation to the night in opposition to how Dyer describes "white people [as] central to [a general culture of light] to the extent that they come to seem to have a special relationship to light."³⁰⁴

But even beyond such a binaristic model, historical practices on how to render black people on screen are technologically and conceptually linked to advances made in filming low-light conditions, a dialogic relation which *Moonlight* thematizes but also re-elaborates. Here, I am referring to several histories that warrant further scrutiny in future studies. In a tantalizingly brief reference in her article, Roth, for instance, cites Brian Harris, a lighting technician for Black Entertainment Television, who asserts that "had NASA, the U.S. intelligence service, or meteorological scientists already completed their research on photography of low-light areas at the time of the popular development of still photography, the evolution of film chemistry might have unfolded quite differently."³⁰⁵ Furthermore, the title of Jenkins' film is an abbreviated version of its originating source, the unproduced stage play *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue* by Tarrell Alvin McCraney. In the context of the play's adaptation into cinema, its truncated title cannot but suggest how black facial features have historically been sculpted by reflected blue light. The film's nocturnality, however, offers not just a lens into historic practices of rendering dark skin, it also points to contemporary discourses on the political stakes of dislodging black bodies from epistemic systems that delimit their appearance into corporeal signifiers for racial knowledge.

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 113.

³⁰⁵ Ibid.

In her study on the racialized discourses that structure surveillance cultures, Simone Browne has coined the category of dark matter. As a heuristic device, this concept aligns black bodies to atmospheric darkness as well as metaphoric conceptions of opacity. In doing so, she connects the representation and reification of black bodies to dynamics that have historically eluded and resisted white-centered systems for intelligibility and recognition in such a way that lay bare and disturb dominant, light-centered ontologies of the visual that are accepted as neutral and natural. She writes, “the concept of dark matter might bring to mind opacity, the color black, limitlessness and the limitations imposed on blackness, the dark, antimatter, that which is not optically available, black holes, the Big Bang theory, and other concerns of cosmology where dark matter is that nonluminous component of the universe that is said to exist but cannot be observed, cannot be re-created in laboratory conditions.”³⁰⁶ Here, I draw on the complex assemblage encoded in Browne’s concept to argue that the night in *Moonlight* serves as a visual, narrative, and affective dynamic through which the film simultaneously showcases a visual (and implicitly digital) aesthetic that redefines the cinematic black body from a position of discursive insufficiency to one of sensuous visibility, while simultaneously preventing the racialized and queered body from turning into a totalizing corporeal norm for sexual or racial intelligibility.

In many ways, the discourse around *Moonlight* posits the film as an exemplary instance of how politics is encrypted into the imagistic dimension of the film to an equal, if not greater extent, than in its representative meaning. *Moonlight*, in fact, belongs in a constellation of diverse films such as *Girlhood* (2014), *The Fits* (2015), *Pariah* (2011), *Mother of George* (2013), and *Black Panther* (2018), as well as television shows, such as *Insecure* (2016–) and *Atlanta* (2016–), that have been praised for rendering black skin rich and opulent, rather than washed-out or illegible, displaying black faces that are strikingly sculpted by light and darkness. All of these films, with the exception of *Pariah*, were shot on digital cameras (Reds and Alexas), and have been strongly associated with what the *Washington Post* describes as “the aesthetic politics of

³⁰⁶ Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 9.

filming black skin” forged largely, though not exclusively, by digital cinematography and post-production coloring.³⁰⁷

The powerful perceptual difference of these productions has, in turn, prompted critical scrutiny, notably even outside of academic or filmmaking trade presses, towards the hitherto ignored biases built into the technological principles and lighting practices of film and television.³⁰⁸ For the cinematographer Anna Berkokfsky, *Insecure*'s DP, a decisive milestone was the widespread implantation of digital cameras that can process darker tones through a greater dynamic range. In an interview with *Vox*, she notes that improved standards in representing black skin “turned around in 2010... When the [video camera] Arri Alexa came out, it really changed how people were shooting digital and what kind of results we could get.”³⁰⁹ Gathering quotes from several leading cinematographers, the aforementioned *Post* article repeatedly cites examples of nocturnal scenes that are digitally rendered, noting how digital cinematography seems to have allowed for the emergence of darker skin to appear in low-light conditions using minimal or naturalistic light, leading to a tonal atmosphere rarely inhabited by black subjects on screen. The cinematographer Daniel Patterson, for instance, discusses how using a Sony PMW-F55 digital camera on Spike Lee's *Da Sweet Blood of Jesus* enabled him to shoot darker skin tones in nocturnal conditions without the use of excessive key lighting: “I just changed the wattage of the bulb, used a dimmer, and I didn't have to use any film lights. That kind of blew me away... The camera was able to hold both [actors] during the scene without any issues.”³¹⁰

³⁰⁷ Ann Hornaday, “12 Years a Slave, Mother of George, and the Aesthetic Politics of Filming Black Skin,” *The Washington Post*, October 17, 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/movies/12-years-a-slave-mother-of-george-and-the-aesthetic-politics-of-filming-black-skin/2013/10/17/282af868-35cd-11e3-80c6-7e6dd8d22d8f_story.html?utm_term=.83de574ed681.

³⁰⁸ Rosie Cima, “How Photography Was Optimized for How Photography Was Optimized for White Skin Color,” *Priceonomics*, April 24, 2015, <https://priceonomics.com/how-photography-was-optimized-for-white-skin/>; Dodai Stewart, “The Truth About Photography and Brown Skin,” *Jezebel*, March 4, 2014, <https://jezebel.com/the-truth-about-photography-and-brown-skin-1557656792>.

³⁰⁹ Estelle Caswell, “Color film was built for white people: Here's what it did to dark skin,” *Vox*, September 18, 2015, <https://www.vox.com/2015/9/18/9348821/photography-race-bias>.

³¹⁰ Hornaday, “12 Years.”

In these articles and interviews, it is unsurprising that nighttime scenes serve as a sort of litmus test for cinematographers and critics alike when assessing digital cameras enable a richer aesthetic spectrum for black life. Given the embedded biases of earlier visual technologies, film productions on both television and film had the tendency to over-expose dark-skinned actors. As a result, films featuring black actors in mostly white actor-ensemble productions tended to overlight and thus mute the texture and tones of their cast's appearance. Similarly, while television shows like *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* and *The Cosby Show* shifted representational dynamics by featuring (upper middle-class) black families on television, from an aesthetic view point these representations appear overly bright, producing images that appear "flat." As director Ava DuVernay has noted, hesitations to film darker skin hues against dark backdrops due to the limitations of photochemical and early-digital media works to foreclose the emotive and psychological range of the aesthetic spaces black subjects can inhabit on screen.³¹¹ But also, and at the same time, the requirement for black people to make themselves more luminous and thus more intelligible for normative mechanisms of cultural and technological apprehension, complies to a cultural gaze organized around white privilege. The expectation for black subjects to be luminous, or self-luminous, deflects attention from how exclusionary representational norms centered around white visibility are repeatedly naturalized as a given and natural standard. It also reinforces a cultural narrative wherein the non-white body is tacitly accepted as an aberrant "problem" in the visual field that engenders greater surveillance, scrutiny, and oversight in contrast to the transparent, unmarked visibility of whiteness.

Moonlight's arresting aestheticization of black bodies, its textured skin tones and rich, and at times anti-naturalistic pigmentation of flesh, is repeatedly cited in the largely glowing critical response to Jenkins' film. For A.O. Scott, for instance, *Moonlight* "dwells on the dignity, beauty and terrible vulnerability of black bodies, on the existential and physical matter of black

³¹¹ Nadia Latif, "It's lit! How film finally learned to light black skin," *The Guardian*, September 21, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/sep/21/its-lit-how-film-finally-learned-how-to-light-black-skin>.

lives.”³¹² Writing in *Spin*, writer Brian Joseph argues that the film’s resonance derives from its aestheticized figuration of black masculinity that redresses an over-determined repertoire of representational tropes linked to an almost pre-destined sense of social gloom, violence, and strife: “The black body is constantly brutalized, in art as in life, which is why it’s cathartic for a black audience to see it beautifully rendered human and watching that pure humanity be acknowledged.”³¹³

While the film is not entirely nocturnal, night scenes forecast the film’s limpid, visual precision enabled by the Arri Alexxa camera (shooting in a more manageable compressed-mode rather than in RAW) that was sharpened in the post-production coloring process. An emblematic case is a long take of Chiron as a young boy that has been repeatedly used as a promotional still. In this shot, we see Chiron as a solitary figure in profile as he faces the sea at dusk. Like the palm trees and landscape in the distance, he appears almost, but not entirely silhouetted by shadow. There is a striking absence of additional lighting in this image, as it hovers between visibility and opacity. Blue tones contour Chiron’s face and torso, graphically accentuating his cheek bone and shoulder blades and offering his darkened figure an unmistakable corporeal density, while also hinting at the particularity of his psychic interiority. Against the diffuse light of dusk, the interplay of light and shadow evoke his gait, evoking the child’s awkward posture, as well as his resolutely determined absorption in what lies in the horizon but outside of our own frame of vision.

When dramatic key lighting is used for nighttime exteriors in the film, it appears expressive and warranted, augmenting the emotive tenor of particular scenes. In one pivotal moment, Chiron meets his only friend, Kevin, on a beach at night. They share some playful banter and share a joint, after which an equivocal gesture allowed to linger just a little too long – Kevin’s hand on the back of Chiron’s neck – opens up a space of mutual recognition of each other’s desire. The boys rapidly kiss leading to Chiron’s first sexual experience, a quick and

³¹² A.O. Scott, “‘Moonlight’: Is this the Year’s Best Movie?,” *The New York Times*, October 20, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/21/movies/moonlight-review.html>.

³¹³ Brian Joseph, “Moonlight is a Stunning Deconstruction of Black Masculinity,” *Spin*, October 21, 2016, <https://www.spin.com/featured/barry-jenkins-moonlight-review/>.

nervous hand job. As DP James Laxton has mentioned, when they surveyed the beach for filming, his light meter was not registering any residual glow from the bordering night clubs and parking lots behind them, which Jenkins and Laxton were planning on using for the scene's fill lighting. Thus, in order to light the scene, the film's gaffer and key grip constructed a soft box with LEDs rigged above a diffusion cloth, which has the effect of softening the light. This produces a diffuse luminosity that does not compete with the more lurid sodium vapors of the artificial light just behind the beach, while the horizon beyond the sea appears like a looming and impenetrable expanse of black. While the luminosity of the shot does not appear entirely motivated by diegetic reality, its overall effect is expressive. It reinforces nighttime as a clandestine and liminal space precisely through the ambiguity of its source – Kevin and Chiron could be illuminated by the glow of the moon, or the reflected sheen of the social world just behind them. But this ambiguity regards not just the light's originating source, it is also intersubjective and temporal, as the uncertainty of how Chiron and Kevin will each react to this shift in their friendship looms in the air between them as both a promise but also a potential menace. This anti-naturalistic, indeterminate luminescence gives the scene an affective, rather than strictly expository, valence. It underscores both the pivotal nature of this exchange for Chiron's psyche, while investing the scene with the almost enameled clarity of a highly particularized memory, as if these images were being accessed retroactively or displaced into their own temporal perpetuity, outside the linear flow of time. Throughout the scene, the specific tonalities of each boy's skin remain distinct (an important detail, as Kevin's nickname for the darker Chiron is Black) though they are transformed by the muted luminescence of the dark. The reflective sheen of the moonlight and urban lights does not so much expose them into full, mutual intelligibility, so much as it reflects and rearticulates how they now appear and relate to each other.

In the popular critical press, the digital's poetics of dark skin offers an aesthetic realm not just for a valorized identification, but an affective commons for black audiences that might fortify a sense of political belonging and solidarity through the public sphere of cinema and television. In such a reading, it would be tempting to view *Moonlight* as the arthouse equivalent of *Black*

Panther (2018). Much of the critical commentary following the latter film's unprecedented commercial success has described it in terms of a publically-felt horizon of communal excitement not just for an unchartered domain of black representation but also of the symbolic authority and prestige associated with the blockbuster as a global event and financial epicenter of the modern studio system.

I have no intention of dismissing the importance of pleasure or economics as a significant vector for politics, or the imperative of creating an image-repertoire through which cultural value is expanded from its naturalized perimeter of white privilege. But there are also limits to viewing the poetics of digitally-rendered dark skin purely as an ennobling or reparative project. In the case of *Moonlight*, as Jared Sexton has remarked, "the wide enthusiasm for an ultimately uplifting cultural event has overshadowed much of what is most moving, and most productively disturbing, about the enterprise."³¹⁴ For Sexton, the critical and popular reception of the film equates high production value with a journey of self-empowerment that, in turn, mirrors a confirming and validating sense of recognition for the audiences, particularly black and black gay audiences. But this valuative assessment overlooks what Sexton views as the visual but also psychic and existential valences of "being blue" intimated in the original title of the film's unproduced source text, and which are aesthetically and thematically elaborated across the film.

In other words, the enthusiastic reception of the film has in many ways sidelined its more complex valorization of and attunement to feelings of negativity, affective opacity, and the repeated impossibility of any identity from obtaining fulsome or self-possessed coherence. Sexton, in fact, takes the film's nocturnality as the foundation of its aesthetics and politics, identifying in the indeterminate illumination of moonlight a structure of deferral that brings bodies and environments into view while also preventing their fully legible self-presence. "But what does [moonlight] tell us about the effect of staging *this* story as properly nocturnal, as other than or

³¹⁴ Jared Sexton, *Black Masculinity and the Cinema of Policing* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 184.

outside of the diurnal states of conscious awareness and enlightenment?" he asks³¹⁵ And later, he extends nocturnal light as a metaphor for a social presence that is not contingent on full access or knowledge of one's self or of others. "Given even this preliminary outline of the moon's deceptive luminescence, how could anyone fail to see the film as anything but an audiovisual poem about the beauty in the breakdown and failure of our powers of perception and apperception; or, rather, of their aesthetic deconstruction?"³¹⁶

In fact, there are dangers encrypted in simply celebrating digital cinematography for rendering black skin resplendent and beautiful, if beauty is steered, as it so often is, into the affective grounds for self-determination, predicated on the promise of fulsome self-possession. For one, it risks merely offering a positive, corporeal norm to the negative foil of epidermalization in which race is nonetheless locked into the presumed facticity of human physiology, albeit now as a spectacular and highly cathected visualization of black flesh. Such a discourse also lays bare a desire to redress imbalances of social and symbolic power by participating in existent parameters of value hitherto occupied by white privilege, rather than through the development of new strategies that hold sovereign agency and its modes of conferring worth and value into critical scrutiny. But as Sexton argues, the prominence of the nocturnal in *Moonlight*, as both visual image and thematic conceit, should incite attention towards the film's aestheticized disaggregation of categories that promise a fully-realized or absolutely intelligible identity. In what remains of this study, I will analyze how the film's intertextual hailings, in a manner reminiscent of my discussions of Denis, Apichatpong, and Carax, work against a tendency to reduce blackness to either a negative or positive figuration tethered to a corporeal enclosure. Through the night's blurred boundaries, and the interpellation of world cinema as a network, the film reflects shifting configurations of "blackness" that do not make recourse to visual norms sanctioned via white authority but draw, instead, relations between how ideas of blackness and East Asianess have been signified and elaborated across cinema. If the first half of this chapter surveyed, following

³¹⁵ Ibid., 182.

³¹⁶ Ibid., 183.

Raengo's observations, the way that blackness and (nocturnal) photography partake in the same hermeneutics, the second half offers speculative assessments on how blackness and nocturnality can be harnessed together towards novel and more dynamic discursive and geopolitical paradigms where white-centered structures of specular value do not serve as an implicit authority, counterfoil, or prototype that must be either imitated or acknowledged to attain intelligibility.

In the Mood for Moonlight

Across this dissertation, it has emerged that nighttime possess a privileged affinity with intertextuality. As a formal device, intertextuality's dynamic network of allusions mirrors the night as a *chronospace* wherein the borders of spatial and conceptual borders are breached but also where temporal structures, such as vectors of lineage and descent, are reworked from their normative coordinates. The night in *Moonlight* repeatedly serves as a narrative and thematic conceit through which such issues are explored. From a narrative point of view, the emotive crux of the film is grounded in Chiron's feelings of visceral rejection from his mother, as well as his psychic introjection of an inadvertent paternal figure, Juan, whom he will later emulate, professionally and aesthetically. Extratextually, questions of descent are also linked to the film's digital work flows. As has been widely noted, each of the film's three episodes has a distinct color palette that was calibrated in post-production to evoke the chromatic properties of three, earlier film stocks: Fuji for childhood, Agfa for adolescence, and Kodak for adulthood.³¹⁷ But perhaps less obviously, the night also thematizes refractive dynamics of heritage and space through its transnational invocation of world cinema. Jenkins has been vocal about the aesthetic influences embedded in the film, many of them not just canonical texts of international auteurism but films that are nocturnal in ambience and setting. *Moonlight's* tripartite structure, for instance, homages

³¹⁷ Chris O'Falt, "'Moonlight' Glow: Creating the Bold Color and Contrast of Barry Jenkins' Emotional Landscape," *Indiewire*, October 26, 2016, <https://www.indiewire.com/2016/10/moonlight-cinematography-color-barry-jenkins-james-laxton-alex-bickel-1201740402/>.

Hou Hsiao-Hsien's *Three Times* (2005), and the ways in which the film is attuned to the kineticism of masculine movement has been also compared to *Beau Travail* by Claire Denis, one of Jenkins' favorite filmmakers.³¹⁸ Jenkins also drew inspiration for his previous film, *Medicine for Melancholy* (2008), from Denis' *Friday Night* (2002), and an argument might even be made that the *Moonlight's* sense of rhythmic pulsation and predominantly black cast evokes *35 Shots of Rum*. However, *Moonlight's* most pervasive forefather is indubitably Wong Kar-wai. When adult Chiron drives towards his reconciliation with Kevin, the extradiegetic music playing in the background is marked by the unmistakable croon of Caetano Veloso's version of "Cucurrucucu Paloma." The use of the song is a direct reference to Wong's *Happy Together* (1997), as it plays in the first ten minutes of the film when its protagonists, a Hong Kong gay couple largely stranded in Argentina, are also seen driving, albeit towards the Aguazu waterfalls. The use of the song in *Moonlight* thus invokes layered metaphors of transnational transit: *Cucurrucucu Paloma* is a Spanish song covered by a Brazilian artist used in an American film in a scene in which its protagonist travels from Atlanta back to Miami in a way that echoes an earlier film about a queer Chinese couple in Argentina. Moreover, the song has been famously used in other celebrated films within the field of global art cinema, namely Pedro Almodovar's *Talk to Her* (2002), but also Werner Herzog's *My Son, My Son What Have Ye Done?* (2009) in what has become a transtemporal and transnational relay of echoes and oblique connections organized around its particular melody. Within Wong's oeuvre, however, *Moonlight's* most profound connection is indubitably with *In the Mood for Love*. The earlier film permeates *Moonlight's* aesthetic design through a series of sustained allusions to its chromatic palette and composition.

In a certain reading, these allusions produce a juxtaposition of incommensurable scale: from the highly localized space between Miami and Atlanta and the breadth of the global, or more accurately an affective investment in the idea of the global. But as Sexton notes, transnational relations are not just symbolically and phantasmatically invoked in the film, they are also textually

³¹⁸ Ibid.

present in its diegesis in a pivotal moment that pertains, once again, to the film's title. When Juan teaches Chiron how to swim, he divulges that his nickname came from an old lady in Cuba who christened him Blue owing to how his skin captured light in the dark. The anecdote seeks to expand Chiron's, and implicitly, the audience's, sense of blackness, from a property that inheres in an epidermal signifier into a discursive assemblage that is geopolitical in its historic construction but also present and futural horizon. Juan, in fact, begins his anecdote by noting: "I've been here a long time. I'm from Cuba. Lotta black folks in Cuba. You wouldn't know that from being here, though." For Sexton, Juan relays this story to "reveal that black people are diverse and can be found all over the world, due not only to the recent historical production of Diaspora (including the inauguration of racial slavery to the New World in and around the colonization of Cuba by the Catholic Monarchs of a newly unified Spain), but also to the larger evolutionary fact of human origination on the African continent."³¹⁹ But also, he goes on to note, "to introduce the possibility of individual transformation and growth, and of migration to other locales."³²⁰

While racialization delimits blackness as a specular given tethered to physiological pigmentation, critics like Gillespie and Raengo have been striving, instead, to conceive of blackness as a more dynamic configuration of relations that are ceaselessly reelaborated through the shifting interplay between historical archives, institutional practices, governmental legislations, cultural image repertoires, aesthetic strategies and technologies of visualization. I propose, then, that *Moonlight's* transnational intertexts do not merely suture Jenkins' auteurial persona and the lineage of black cinema into the cultural legitimacy world art cinema would putatively confer. Instead, the film's global allusions hail a notion of the world as a discursive device that challenges how culturally operative conceptions of blackness are framed and recognized. It seems telling, for instance, that none of the directors Jenkins cites as influences are white male auteurs, as the terms of visibility the film strives to develop do not seek recognition from conventions that

³¹⁹ Sexton, *Black Masculinity*, 81.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, 82.

romance dominant norms of value. Instead, Jenkins' film seeks an alternate system of recognition forged through less expected forms of interconnection and circulation with female and East Asian auteurs. In this way, I will argue, the film's invocation of a worldly commons gives rise to new coordinates for the affective sentience of blackness at the intersection of queerness and the world.

Such a bold enterprise can be detected in a nighttime scene that takes place in a diner between Chiron and Kevin. After their intimate exchange in the beach, Kevin betrays Chiron when a high school bully forces him to punch him. In order to put an end to what he knows will be an unremitting cycle of abuse, Chiron grabs a chair in the middle of class and crashes it against the bully's head. This event leads to his arrest and eventual detention in a juvenile center. Through the film's elliptical structure, we do not learn of Chiron's intervening years between adolescence and adulthood. When we see him, he is physically and financially transformed. He is no longer gangly but muscular, and he has amassed considerable wealth by selling drugs – a job we later learn he started after he got out of jail.

One night, assuming that a late-night phone-call is coming from his mother, Chiron is surprised to hear Kevin on the other line, whom he hasn't seen since his betrayal. While their exchange over the phone is initially awkward, Kevin's vague invitation to visit him should he ever return to Atlanta, prompts Chiron to surprise him one night in the diner where he works as a cook. It is here that their powerful but open-ended reconciliation will take place. The romantic undertones of the scene, as well as its plaintive sense of an irreducible loss, are vectored via the allusions to *In the Mood for Love* that the scene expresses and consolidates as *Moonlight's* primary intertext. Here, the nocturnal milieu does not only establish a spatial congruence between each film. But on a more meta-textual register, both films invoke the night as a conceit that disaggregates diurnal boundaries and temporal rhythms, leading to the development of new sensory configurations for relational and social inhabitance.

As Chiron parks his car in front of the restaurant where Kevin works, his entrance is marked by a startling jump cut, a close-up of the restaurant's door opening as it rings a bell, a direct citation of an almost identical shot in *In The Mood for Love*. Like many of the films surveyed in this dissertation, the night in this scene is evoked not through its more common association with darkness but rather with the brightness of artificial lights characteristic of spaces like the nondescript diner in which Kevin works. These liminal spaces allow for afterhours conviviality that sustain intimacies for those who exist, or digress from, normative metrics of societal time. As Vivian Sobchack has argued, in fact, places like "nightclubs, cocktail lounges, bars, anonymous hotel or motel rooms, boardinghouses, cheap roadhouses and diners" spatialize an interstitial temporality that provides an alternative to "family contiguity and generational continuity."³²¹ And as we have seen, such liminal spaces also often incite formal strategies such as intertextuality that denaturalizes a film's diegetically determined "real," bringing into view the symbolic conventions through which that reality's conventional character is iterated and upheld. The jumpcut of the opening door that initiates and ends this sequence, in fact, is but the first in a series of dense allusions to Wong's film, expressed with varying degrees of mimetic fidelity. As soon as Chiron enters the space of the diner, the charged anticipation of his encounter with Kevin is conveyed through the pulsating movement of the camera as it roams around its new surroundings but also by the sound of Aretha Franklin's song "One Step." The way the song, and the distinct timbre of Franklin's voice, seems to overwhelm the mood of the scene, recalls Wong's use of popular music from the 1950s and 60s, namely Nat King Cole's cover of Spanish-language ballads in *In the Mood for Love*. Once Kevin recognizes Chiron, he goes back to the kitchen to prepare him a meal he promised over the phone. The scene of Kevin cooking is almost overwhelmingly tender. The camera cuts to close-ups of his hands as they prepare Chiron's meal which become, within the context of the story, charged with the reparative desire for both

³²¹ Vivian Sobchack, "Lounge Time: Postwar Crises and the Chronotype of Film Noir," in *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley: University of California Press), 156–158.

atonement and care, and an aching wish to impress his friend (and potential lover) with the skills he has developed in the intervening years since they were separated. The extradiegetic score underwrites the scene's potent affect while also evoking a similar melancholic timber to Yumeji's theme, the famous violin theme song that repeats across Wong's film.

This theme music, in fact, is played over analogous scenes in *In the Mood for Love*. First, as its protagonist Chow Mo–Wan (Tony Leung) crosses paths with Su Li–zhen (Maggie Cheung) in the night market where she buys her nightly dinner, then again, when the couple begin to fall in love, as Li–Zhen cooks him the soup he is craving, a covert expression of the burgeoning attraction between the couple, both of whom are married to other people. Later, as Kevin and Chiron sit to enjoy their meal in the diner's booth, the frontal framing of their conversation displays the two men sitting across from each other in profile. These shots are compositionally identical to pivotal scenes in *In the Mood for Love* where Mo–wan and Li–Zhen routinely meet to discuss suspicions that their partners are having an affair with each other. Here, in fact, they begin roleplaying each other's spouses in a game which ultimately and inadvertently engenders their unprogrammed attraction to each other.

In Jean Ma's reading of Wong's auteurial text, she notes that the characters' "game of charades continues the play of identities in Wong's earlier films and introduces a virtual aspect to the narrative in the form of alternative possible formations of past and future, which are not always clearly distinguished from the reality of the present."³²² This fragmentary effect is also achieved via *In the Mood for Love*'s own constellation of transnational intertexts, ranging from films, music and short stories, that reflect how Hong Kong is figured in Wong's film as a "history of interchange between [the nation] and Latin America, to a large extent mediated by the Philippines, within a transpacific cultural nexus."³²³ Given how the couple at the heart of *In the Mood for Love* serves as a cipher for a sense of virtual possibility, we might then read *Moonlight's*

³²² Jean Ma, *Melancholy Drift: Marking Time in Chinese Cinema* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 145.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 146.

invocation of the earlier film as an extratextual repetition of the central characters in Wong's film, whose encounters are themselves implicated in a cycle of returning to each other so they may rehearse alternative outcomes and possibilities for their present. Seen then, through the prism of mutual reciprocity, rather than the inheritance of influence, *Moonlight's* invocation of *In the Mood for Love* can be more accurately recognized as an encounter not only between two nations. But more specifically, we may instead view the correspondence between the two films as an encounter between texts whose structure of transnational allusions complicate any facile notion of a pure and stable national essence that isn't always and already implicated in geopolitical circuits and flows. To this end, Jenkins hails and adapts the earlier film's aesthetic trademarks – its mnemonically evocative use of music, the vibrant textures of Maggie Cheung's *cheong sam*, the saturated tones of the Kodak stock its digital cinematography mimics – to contest a reductive view of (American) blackness tethered to an epidermal schema.

In a certain reading, the sumptuous sonic and chromatic properties both films share across the digital divide, redress entrenched cultural models that mark racialized bodies from aesthetic significance or symbolic value. But at the same time, and not in contradiction to this dynamic, the invocation of *In the Mood for Love's* atmospheric properties simultaneously invests raced and queered bodies with libidinal validation while also preventing this very process of idealization from reifying them into corporeal signifiers upon which race and sexuality are fetishistically fixated and enclosed. Once the diner has emptied out, Chiron asks Kevin why, across the distance of years of ignoring each other, he finally called him. Kevin's response is atmospheric rather than semantic. He gets up from the booth and the camera's pan lags slowly behind him, ceasing only when the organ riff of the doo-wop song he selects, Barbara Lewis' "Hello Stranger," permeates the environment with its feeling of a certain guarded and languorous romanticism. The camera lingers on Kevin as he turns around to face Chiron, as if the song's lyrics ("hello stranger, it seems so good to see you back again, how long has it been"?) speaks eloquently on behalf of what he is leaving unsaid, the supple, knowing warmth of Lewis' voice cutting through the coyness of the song's lyrics.

Kevin's vulnerable figure appears particularly striking in the shot as he stands against the diner's wallpaper, its checkered pattern of subdued brown, yellow, and green does not only complement, but also seems to correspond, with the way the film's digital camera renders the rich tonalities of his features. The shot's emphasis on a kind of visual matching between skin tone and objectal color recalls an earlier scene right after Chiron receives Kevin's phone call. Here, we witness Kevin in a series of desirous close-ups, standing against the creamy yellow wall of the restaurant's exterior as he smokes a cigarette, the color of the wall once again rhyming with the tones the reflective light draws out from his skin tone. Similarly, both scenes create a parallel between Kevin's figuration and the ways in which the "blueness" of the night is described, both by Juan's anecdote and the optics of the camera, not as a sphere in which black skin disappears, as with earlier filmic media, but rather as a kind of limpidly visible but also intangible atmospheric property that seems at once to correspond to Juan and Chiron's skin while also breaching and extending out of their corporeal borders.

This attunement to aestheticized surfaces as complementary surrogates for bodies is a sensibility *Moonlight* clearly shares with *In the Mood for Love*. In her description of Wong's film, Rosalind Galt states that "direct representation is precisely what is impossible, and instead the film disperses emotion and meaning across the detailed patterns of the mise-en-scène. Wallpaper, period objects, and, most notably, 1960s cheongsam fabric produce a feminized historical scene in which spectatorial cathexis depends not on words, but on the Asiatic floweriness of the decorative image."³²⁴ In the film, in fact, Maggie Cheung's procession of striking *cheong-sams* frequently resembles the wallpaper of the rooms she inhabits, destabilizing the seemingly rigid borders between bodies, clothing, and their environment. In her recent work, Anne Cheng theorizes the political affordances that might be gleaned from linking gendered and raced bodies to the putatively inorganic properties of ornamentation, thingliness, and even shine,

³²⁴ Rosalind Galt, *Pretty: Film and the Decorative Image* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 248.

even though such a discourse is “haunted by the material, legal, and imaginative history of persons made into things.”³²⁵

Through this poetics of style, Cheng argues that the sensorial excess linked to Asian femininity and sartorial surfaces “troubles the certitude of racial embodiment and jeopardizes the ‘fact’ of yellowness.”³²⁶ In fact, rather than upholding how marginalized subjects are dehumanized, ornamentalism, as an aesthetic strategy, might incite attention, and possibly revise, the processes through which marked subjectivities such as the yellow woman have been regulated and foreclosed to “being ... at the interface of ontology and objectness.”³²⁷ For Cheng, in fact, “the reasons that the turn to the ornament as heuristic model has been productive for me has to do with precisely this insight that flesh is an aggregate, an incorporation indebted to a logic of serial attachment that is at once violent and aesthetic, material and abstract.”³²⁸ By hyperbolizing and visualizing, rather than muting or repressing, the cultural interarticulation of raced and gendered personhood with objectness, ornamentalism might not only lay bare but also rework the mechanisms through which the human is constituted. It can serve as the grounds to interpellate and frame subjectivity in such a way that does not make mimetic recourse to cherished notions of self–possessed agency or symbolic plenitude that would implicitly confirm and compound structural norms of white–centered privilege.

While Cheng is primarily concerned with the discursively marginalized figure of the yellow woman, owing also to an academic tendency to delimit race to blackness, her theory is implicated, and also transferable, to conceptualizations of the black body. She positions her intervention, for instance, in conversation with Fanon’s notion of the epidermal racial schema and Hortense Spillers “hieroglyphics of the flesh,” drawing on but also expanding how these models

³²⁵ Anne Cheng, “Ornamentalism: A Feminist Theory for the Yellow Woman,” *Critical Inquiry* 44, no. 3 (2018): 442.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, 415.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*, 432.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, 445.

enable us to think about the materialist vectors of racializing practices.³²⁹ Furthermore, her essay ends with an exegesis on Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Through her discussion on Morrison's novel on slavery, she traces how its evocative metaphors of damaged personhood and flesh are put into analogy with nonhuman matter. This conjunction, Cheng argues, reveals how flesh does not offer a guarantee of uncoded facticity but is rather continuously inscribed as a composite of cultural forces, fantasies, and objectal presences that exceed the animate. A similar conversation to the one Cheng stages can be perceived in *Moonlight*, as Jenkins' distinctly aesthetic relation to black bodies incorporates the fluctuation between bodies and objectal materials such as wallpapers and chenongsams in *In the Mood for Love*. But at the same time, Jenkins also extends the earlier film's logic to encompass intangible atmospherics: the sonic surround that serves as a surrogate to Kevin's implicit address to Chiron, or the "dark matter" of nighttime blue. Nocturnal blue, in particular, showcases not just the limpid, fulsome visibility of perspiring black flesh digital cameras enable but it is also encrypted with histories of transmigration and future horizons through which a more capacious approach to blackness, and queer male blackness specifically, might be experienced, reconceived, and lived.

Thus, as I have been arguing, the film's concern with the capacities of digital protocols for black flesh and night (and black flesh at night) do not simply evince the production of a new idealized corporeal norm. They also allow for this bodily schema to be repeatedly breached, in keeping with the symbolic operations the night incites in recent world cinema. The film's chromatic saturation generated by its digital camera and post-production work posits color (of flesh, nighttime air, artificial lights, and objects) as a property that inheres in but also exceeds the constraints and rationality of graphic composition, as Galt and Batchelor have suggested. In doing so, the affective force of atmospheric color seems to signify an extra-discursive sphere, an emergent sensorium I have linked to the liminality of the night, a structure of feeling present

³²⁹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 1997); Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe; An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 64–81.

conditions do not fully allow to materialize. This extradiscursive sphere does not seem delimited to any singular function. Within the visual design of the film, it bespeaks a spectacular, limpid darkness that disables the symbolic reification of the black body while still materializing its physical presence in the field of vision. This extensibility into objects and air also fosters a gaze towards black subjects that not only redresses how filmic technologies have colluded in the social construction of its specular and ontological deficiency. But moreover, it develops a mode of idealization akin to what Kaja Silverman has theorized as an “excorporative” mode of identification, wherein libidinal cathexis is not oriented towards the fantasy of an integrated, fulsome body but rather on a shared recognition of how all bodies and identities are permeable, repeatedly breached, and thus coextensive with the surrounding world.³³⁰

³³⁰ Kaja Silverman, *Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 23.

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