‘WHAT MAKES A FILM TICK?’: CINEMATIC AFFECT, MATERIALITY AND MIMETIC INNERVATION

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I confirm that this work has not been submitted for a higher degree at any other institution. All work is my original work.

Anne Rutherford
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Abstract

‘What Makes a Film Tick?’: Cinematic Affect, Materiality and Mimetic Innervation

This PhD explores questions of cinematic affect and its relationship to mimetic experience. Through an examination of cinematic materiality, it argues that film must be inscribed across the sensorium if it is to arouse affective experience for the spectator. Drawing on Miriam Hansen’s readings of Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer, the thesis argues that cinematic affect can most productively be understood in film as a process of mimetic innervation.

The thesis is comprised of seven published essays and an overarching chapter. The introductory chapter, ‘A Paradigm Shift in Film Studies’, situates the published essays in the context of recent debates about embodied spectatorship and affect, arguing the need for a revision of key paradigms of film theory.

The first series of essays argues the centrality of embodied affect to cinema spectatorship, and proposes a nexus between mimetic visuality, affect and mise-en-scène, linking the analysis of mise-en-scène to Kracauer’s discussions of cinematic materiality. The essays extend this nexus to rethink genre through the lens of affective mimetic experience, arguing that both genre and visual style work mimetically. The arguments are explored through studies of the work of Mizoguchi Kenji, Theodorus Angelopoulos and Lee Myung-Se.

The second series examines spectatorship in documentary cinema, raising questions about historiography, embodied knowledge, inter-cultural dialogue, and the affective elements of cultural specificity. The essays interrogate the universalist claims of conventional documentary form, and its assumptions of a disembodied spectator. They contest the assumed opposition in documentary theory between affect and signification and draw affect and mimetic experience into the core conceptualisation of documentary film. The studies explore an
Australian television documentary series, an Indonesian political docudrama and three hybrid documentaries—two Indian and one French.

Through these studies, the thesis argues that affective embodied mimetic experience is at the core of cinema spectatorship.
Acknowledgments

For their support during the final year in which I have written the introductory chapter, I am most grateful to my supervisors, Peter Hutchings and Anna Gibbs. Anna Gibbs’ initial enthusiastic response to the published essays was crucial in my decision to go ahead with the PhD by publication, and she was unfailingly positive and encouraging in the face of many drafts full of wayward tangents and of indeterminate quality. Her many suggestions and her knack for creative problem-solving were invaluable in shaping the work, and her final injunction, ‘Do not digress’, channelled me on the arduous path to completion. Peter Hutchings’ thorough work on every section of the manuscript saved me from committing any more folly than I might have in the work’s final form. He pulled out all stops to support me in the final stages of writing and thesis preparation and his generosity has made the completion process much smoother than it might have been. His unflinching willingness to answer any question, from the most arcane to the most tediously technical, and at the most inopportune times, has been exemplary.

I have benefitted from the assistance of many people in the preparation of each of the published works included here, and these people are acknowledged at the foot of each essay.

In addition, I am particularly grateful to Anjali Monteiro and K. P. Jayasankar for their generous hospitality and advice during my stay in Mumbai in 2003, and for making available the video library and studio resources of the Unit for Media and Communications at Tata Institute of Social Sciences. This made it possible for me to view a large range of Indian documentary films in a very short time. Even among a cohort of imaginative and challenging work, Monteiro and Jayasankar’s films stand out for their wit and innovativeness. I thank them also for providing the stills included with “Buddhas Made of Ice and Butter”, and I would like to thank Sudhir Patwardhan for kind permission to publish the reproductions of his paintings with that essay.
I would like to thank Louise Malcolm, who transcribed what was an exceptionally long and challenging interview with Amar Kanwar, at very short notice and with great care.

I am very grateful to Rob Leggo, who prepared the images in the introductory chapter for print with great diligence and patience under the pressure-cooker conditions of the final thesis production deadline.

I would also like to thank my Head of School, Carol Liston, who gave me a little room to move when the pressure seemed insurmountable.

Much of this project has been written during a period of very difficult personal circumstances that threatened to derail it at many points. For repeatedly helping me get back on the horse to continue, I am indebted to Margaret Bruce, Peter Green and Myra.
Note on spelling, abbreviations, names and reference styles

I have retained the original spelling in all citations, despite the possibility of confusion. This is most pertinent with the use of the term, mise-en-scène, spelt and punctuated differently by each writer, and sometimes shifting over time within the work of a given writer.

I have retained the East Asian tradition of listing family name first for all East Asian names, except where the author or filmmaker uses the Western tradition.

Where possible I have included scanned copies of the published versions of the essays. Where this has not been possible, due to layout or formatting constraints, I have included the originals as provided to the publishers. Each essay, therefore, may have a different style for referencing and notes.

Where several sources from a given author are referred to repeatedly, I have used acronyms for the source title. A list of these is given at the beginning of the list of works cited.
Preface

Giuliana Bruno writes of discovering the ‘map of the land of tenderness’ of Madelaine de Scudéry, drawn up in the seventeenth century—a map that marks out the emotional sites that form the ‘topos’ of Scudéry’s novel, that she says ‘makes a world of affects visible to us’. With this as her model, Bruno draws a cartography of architecture, art and the moving image as a geography of the emotions. The compilation of essays presented here works in a similar way, drawing together films from diverse physical geographies into a cartography that explores the contours of cinematic affect. Key to this cartography is an understanding that the body is central to understanding cinematic affect—that film spectatorship is an embodied process and that film itself is embodied—that the film with which the embodied spectator engages is a material body.

This project explores a certain kind of embodied affective experience in cinema spectatorship. Through an analysis of films from widely disparate contexts, the essays form a portfolio of works that each pursues a common enquiry through a different terrain. All but one of the films can be read as an exploration of ways to ground the affective work of film in an enhanced sensory encounter with the materiality of the image and sound. The one exception is a television documentary interrogated here for the far-reaching implications of the way it marginalises this encounter.

The first part of this project explores the centrality of sensory-affective, mimetic experience in feature film. The essays cover Mizoguchi Kenji’s Japanese classic, Story of the Last Chrysanthemums; Theodorus Angelopoulos’ historical epic, Ulysses’ Gaze; often described—in a nomenclature that this essay contests—as a modernist film, and Lee Myung-Se’s hybrid Korean action film, Nowhere to Hide. Through close analyses of these films, the essays extend questions of

mimetic experience and affect into the understanding of mise-en-scène, genre, visual style and spectatorship. These three essays lay out the major theoretical frameworks for the whole project.

The second part of the project extends the discussion of affect and mimetic experience to documentary. The first essay here discusses the assumptions of a disembodied language of documentary in the Australian television documentary series, *Frontier.* Through an interrogation of the paucity of sensory-affective grounding in the film, its political justification, and its limitations, this essay functions as the springboard for the subsequent enquiry into the role of embodied affect in documentary aesthetics and its theoretical exposition. The following essays examine the affective work of the Indonesian political docu-drama, *A Poet,* directed by Garin Nugroho, and two hybrid documentaries—Indian director Amar Kanwar’s *A Season Outside* and *The Gleaners and I,* directed by one of the founders of the French New Wave, Agnès Varda. The final essay brings together the threads of the two parts of the project through a study of *Saacha,* directed by Indian documentary makers, Anjali Monteiro and K. P. Jayasankar. This piece explores the centrality of affective mimetic experience in the film to challenge many of the key assumptions of documentary theory.

In writing of the film theory and practice of Jean-Luc Godard, Jonathan Rosenbaum writes that, as well as being an often insightful and rigorous writer of criticism, Godard also produces ‘criticism composed in the language of the medium’—that the films themselves are vigorous interrogations of cinematic aesthetics. The same could be said of each of the directors whose work is featured here. Each pushes the parameters of film in dynamic and invigorating ways. In each film there is a rigorous exploration of cinematic ideas that is often much more incisive than is common in film theory. It is no accident that every one

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of the filmmakers featured is also to a certain extent an aesthetic theorist, an eloquent interpreter of cinematic ideas in the form of interviews or critical writings, and an articulate exponent of the aesthetic traditions and precepts they are working with in their films.\textsuperscript{11} Notable in this work is the hybridity of the intellectual and aesthetic frameworks that each filmmaker draws on to explain his/her work. Several are situated in a context of cross-cultural aesthetics that is taken for granted in their own context but very undeveloped in the conceptual frameworks of much of the film theory written in English.

While the national/transnational contexts of the films do figure in the analyses, this is essentially not a cultural study. The project inverts the standard question that informs a cultural studies approach to film, within which aesthetics is often located as only a small exploration of a deftly drawn, in-depth, context-based study of a specific cinema or cultural formation. There is a common assumption in much of this work that, while Western European or American films may be studied as aesthetic explorations, films from outside this narrow ambit can only be studied by locating them within their “other” cultural contexts.\textsuperscript{12} In this deflection onto contextual studies, the film itself often vanishes or survives only as a vestigial trace or illustration of pre-existing cultural traits. The vital challenges these films pose to our ways of thinking about cinematic ideas and strategies are often sidelined in the attempts to establish the legitimacy of contextual readings. Although contextual studies inform my own discussions of the films, in this enquiry they can only be a point of departure to give access to the broad lineaments of a film. In this project I accept, and take as given, the limitations and aporias implicit in cultural translation. In this sense, the spectator whose

\textsuperscript{11} The one exception here is \textit{Frontier}. As it is a documentary series made for television, its director is not granted the same speaking position as the other film directors. However, Marcia Langton, a consultant on the series, has been profoundly engaged in interdisciplinary pursuits as an anthropologist, political activist, part-time actor, film critic and cultural advocate. Her critical writings are pivotal in the reading of this series.

\textsuperscript{12} Noël Carroll serves as a typical example here. He writes: ‘when we are watching films that are remote from us in time and place, we will not be able to depend on our own emotional responses to the film because we do not have the appropriate cultural background. [...] Film historians and ethnographers can supply us with the background necessary to make the emotive address of films from other cultures and other periods in our own culture emotionally accessible to us’. Noël Carroll. ‘Film, Emotion, and Genre.’ \textit{Passionate Views: Film, Cognition and Emotion}. Eds. Carl Plantinga and Greg M. Smith. Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999: 34.
experience I engage with is the one located in my own skin, not in the unknowable skin of the assumed other.

This current project is essentially an aesthetic enquiry that proceeds largely through close analyses of the films. The essays insist on returning to the centrality of image and sound and of the experience of the cinematic moment for a productive film theory. They zoom in repeatedly to ways of thinking about the “language” of cinema, its materiality. This is not to claim that aesthetics are divorced from culture. On the contrary, the essays that delve more deeply into specific cultural contexts argue the opposite—that culture and politics are embodied and that there is an intimate imbrication of cultural contexts and aesthetic form. In particular, the enquiry into documentary aesthetics is inflected by a discussion of the cultural imperatives that underpin documentary form. However, the starting point is always an aesthetic analysis.

As the essays progress, the question of the cultural and aesthetic traditions that ground the work becomes more explicit, particularly as the later work draws on in-depth interviews with the filmmakers to clarify and test the assumptions of the essays. Several of the filmmakers work with an aesthetic reservoir that gives the film a sense of layers—a grounding in sensory-aesthetic experiences that cannot be contained by, for example, a conventional analysis of narrative or documentary. Nor could a conventional cultural analysis ever approach the hybrid, syncretic aesthetic/cinematic ideas deployed by the filmmakers in their own imaginative schemas and the attempts to translate these to an Australian interlocutor. Jayasankar, for example, draws on an eclectic range of references from the Mahabharata, Buddhist ethics and German philosophy to explain the partly-intuitive, partly-theoretical frameworks he and Monteiro work with. Lee evokes Buddhist concepts of emotion and the aesthetic precepts of T.S. Eliot. Amar Kanwar talks about how to work with the heterogeneity of the self and of audiences in ways that are grounded in the aesthetic traditions of Indian classical dance. In this respect, each opens up ways to think film differently. By starting from the aesthetic, the essays come in to a cultural framework from the other direction to a cultural studies approach—from inside the work of the films. The contextual frameworks here feed the analyses only as part of a dialogue. In the
context of this dialogue, the essays situate themselves, at times uncomfortably, in the gaps between the frameworks available in much of Anglophone film theory.

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At the outset of this project, when I told a colleague I was working on cinematic affect, she asked if I was working from a Deleuzian or a Benjaminian framework. My response, that seemed to sink into a conceptual black hole in the space between us, was that I was working from mise-en-scène. Her question, at this end of the project, seems a much more prescient and cogent one. Indeed, this work has drawn increasingly on the conceptual frameworks of Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer, particularly their recent interpretations in the scholarly contextual readings of Miriam Hansen. My answer, however, would remain the same. This exploration starts from a question: how can a film theory be developed that is adequate to the intensities generated by the best cinema—those moments in which I as a viewer feel enlivened, fully. It starts explicitly from sound and image, from the attempt to stay stubbornly with the film and questions raised by and returning to the nature of cinematic experience. It insists that this approach be given enough breathing space to at least explore the parameters of this kind of enquiry and its possible development: in this sense it tests itself constantly against the murky ground of cinematic experience. The rigour of the work is in its refusal to accept conceptual frameworks that do not do justice to the complexity and intensity of cinematic experience as I know it. Miriam Hansen writes that Siegfried Kracauer’s work offers ‘a theory of a particular type of film experience’ and a similar claim could be made for the essays presented here.¹³ Not intimidated by the difficulties in categorising and specifying in any rigorous way the qualities of this experience, rather, they take this amorphousness as their terrain.

This project was instigated by a long-standing frustration with the terms laid out by mainstream film studies as a discipline, and has been emboldened by moves on a number of fronts to open up a new paradigm for thinking film experience. Hansen’s work has been the most productive point of reference here. The

increasingly confident reinvigoration of explorations of the ‘delirious
enchantment’ of cinephilia and its attendant pleasures have also assured me that I
am not alone in my understanding of what constitutes this experience.\textsuperscript{14} My recent
work shares the underlying principle expressed by Adrian Martin in his declaration
that, ‘these days, film criticism—even the best written—does little for me, finally,
unless it can unearth, propose and in a way prove the existence of the logic that
makes a film “tick”’.\textsuperscript{15} It is this imperative to try to understand ‘what makes a film
tick’ that drives this study.

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This project is riven by a constant tension—a tension within the individual essays
but most strongly between the essays and the introductory chapter. There is a pull
between contradictory modes of writing and the divergent imperatives that drive
them. The PhD by publication, by its nature, fosters this tension. Unlike a
conventional PhD process, in which the review of established work comes first,
and the subsequent research builds from that outline of the field, in the PhD by
publication the introductory chapter is the final piece written. As a retrospective
overview, it attempts to impose upon the previous work the very disciplinary,
exegetical mode from which the preceding work attempted to break free.

In this project, the writing of the published work has been a process of starting to
prise my writing away from the exegetical mode and to explore uncharted
territory, not only in its content but in its rhetorical strategies. These essays work
at various points toward developing a mode of affective writing that can somehow
evoke the experience of being inside the film—to develop what we could call an
immanent criticism. It is not that the essays ever reach this goal, but increasingly
it becomes a goal aspired to. Part of this aspiration is tied to a frustration with the
“dead hand” of much academic writing, felt particularly in the context of film
studies where the gulf between the writing of film theory and the actuality of the

\textsuperscript{14} This term comes from Adrian Martin. ‘Delirious Enchantment.’ \textit{Senses of Cinema} 5 (2000): 1
(henceforth DE). On cinephilia, see particularly Jonathan Rosenbaum and Adrian Martin, eds.

\textsuperscript{15} Martin, Adrian. ‘That Summer Feeling.’ 7 May 2004. Fipresci, The International Federation of
films themselves often seems an unbridgeable chasm. This gulf is felt even more deeply when the writing attempts to come to grips with the affective nature of cinematic experience—the texture, the feel, the intensity of cinematic affect—and when this affect is understood as something that is inscribed in and resonates across the sensorium. The overarching chapter, however, of necessity, returns to the exegetical mode.

The writing of this introductory chapter has been plagued by the difficulty of situating my published work within an evolving field that is no longer what it was at the time of writing. Some recent work by other writers develops key premisses of my early work in ways that take for granted the assumptions argued polemically in the early essays. In some cases, contemporaneous work has developed in a parallel trajectory to my own. In other cases, work that may have been published a decade ago has only come to my attention during the writing of this final chapter. The vagaries of academic publishing have also meant that the publication of my work has not necessarily kept step with the chronology of its production. In one instance, this has meant that the currency of the work has been lost to a broader readership for at least five years since its completion. At times my own interpretations of key sources have changed over the many readings since my initial encounter with them, and they are deployed in different ways across the essays. I have outlined, at the beginning of each essay, a brief publication history that should help to contextualise the essays historically in the field.

In a sense this retrospective reconstruction runs the risk of taking the clambering energy of a vine spreading in all directions, its exploratory tendrils and efflorescences, and turning it into a still-life. Imposing this frame on the work, in retrospect, is in some measure to do the very thing that the whole spirit of the work bucked against from its inception, even as it is simultaneously a process of recognising, despite myself, the pedagogical value of the established process of thesis production.
Bruno writes:

Maps, records of learning, after all, follow experience. They come into existence after the path has been traveled, much like the introduction of a book which […] can be drafted only after one has already finished the work. It is then that the writer/cartographer can map out her territory. This includes what she could not or did not reach in her exploration: her terrae incognitae, those seductive voids that, if one knows the topophilia of the lacunae, are not there to be conquered but are textures exposed, where the markings of time take place (5).

This work should be read as one that, in cycling back on itself to consolidate those roots, holds at bay, for the moment, the many ‘textures exposed’. Hopefully the reader can glimpse, beyond the “topiary”, the soft young shoots waiting to take off again.
Introductory Chapter: A Paradigm Shift in Film Studies
Days of Heaven.

Days of Heaven.
A Paradigm Shift in Film Studies

‘A particular type of film experience’

A pulse beats all the way through Terrence Malick’s *Days of Heaven*. At the climax of the film, the pulse starts in the wind, rears into the foreground with the beating of a wind-cock, the volume ratcheted up so that it wrenches the sound out of any naturalistic frame and into the beat of intensity, passes it across to a heartbeat, amplified in an aural close-up, ripples it across a field of wheat swirling in the wind, across a clutter of ducks pecking frantically at locusts and shimmies it down the manes of a group of bucking horses. An apparent lull takes the pulse in to a close-up of a locust, but everything is wrong as the locust is inside, in the domestic space, poised on a cabbage, and this locust becomes many locusts in a frenzy of swatting that lurches back outside into the confusion of locusts jumping every which way and the chaotic milling of workers as they run in every direction, arms flailing blankets in the wheat in the attempt to ward off the plague. When the pulse passes the baton to human figures they have no priority, their gestures simply another chaotic kinetic energy. Sporadic fragments of dialogue break through the cacophony and recede again, drowned out by the clanging of harvesters as if they are mere peripheral flourishes in a musical phrasing. The film leaps from panorama to extreme close-up—from fields of wheat to a locust in close-up chewing its way mechanically, inexorably through a grain of wheat—and back out to the fields. As the pulse swells to an operatic crescendo, the fields are set alight, swarms of locusts churn in silhouette with the black billowing smoke that swirls with spewing sparks and flames through the darkened sky, and machines and horses run out of control as humans and nature run amok. The blackened stubble that is left as the chaos burns itself out is set against the red glow of a smouldering line of fire that cleaves the horizon.

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17 I have taken some licence with the shot-by-shot development of this scene, in order to give a feel for the sweep of the scene. The actual scene lasts around twenty minutes and passes through many melodic paces in its development, through a tensile stillness, pared-back action, the ebb and flow of intensity and the full unleashing of the operatic crescendo.
In *Days of Heaven* it is not so much the narrative that moves but the intensity that is transported across the different registers of the film. When the agitation of the wind transmutes into locusts, ducks and flames, it’s like one impulse breaking out across multiple sites. The pulse that drives the film at times recedes into the background with the more prosaic narrative sequences, but rears back into the foreground as soon as the film has dispensed with the necessary linear segments. Sound figures prominently here. Each time the pulse surges forward it is cued in by sound—the mechanical beating, clanging of industrial machinery, the sudden amplification of bird sounds, the wind-cock that is always churning in the background—whipping, beating, pulsing, the jumpiness waiting to break out.

On one level *Days of Heaven* subscribes to many of the conventional plot tropes of melodrama—the focus on emotional relationships between a small family group, a triangular love situation, a series of missed encounters, glimpses of redemption that arrive too late for consummation, a tragic ending, the epic archetypal dimension of hidden values emerging through the events of daily life. But the more linear, quotidian segments of narrative that focus on the interpersonal interactions in the classic manner of family melodrama are only fragments of the whole, just one element in the ensemble that is dropped in only where necessary. Malick gives us just enough to know what is going on—no more. The film is not weighed down by the demands of a linear narrative structure, plodding, weighty, predictable. Narrative threads briefly come together as the elements coalesce into elliptical moments, and are then dispersed again, deflected across the registers of the film. Narrative is less like an anchor than like driftwood that occasionally hits the bank, snags in a branch, swirls around in an eddy before it takes off on another current. When the voice-over comes in, it’s often cut in to the rhythm of Ennio Morricone’s score like a vocal accompaniment, more like a parallel thread than an explanation. On the level of character, the staging of the melodrama is restrained, pared back; nothing is laboured. The intensity is not in the characters, it’s in the sensory density that’s splayed across the whole environment; the plot structures of impossibility and thwarted love are a framework for this orchestration of operatic intensities. The final showdown of death and grief-stricken wailing cuts to a long shot of people watching impassively on a river bank, to a group of mounted police, and then dissolves into the moving keys and up-beat music of a pianola, segueing
seamlessly, economically, into the next sequence in another time, another place. The narrative slips away at the end of the film as easily as it came together and as elliptically as it moves from scene to scene and within each scene—just one inconclusive fragment—a dot on the landscape of the poverty, exploitation and aspiration of the 1916 Texas Panhandle.

How to capture what it is that is so amazing about this film that seems to elude many accounts? It’s partly about choreography—the way Malick choreographs, orchestrates every element of sound and image with a consummate skill reminiscent of the Martin Scorsese-Thelma Schoonmaker team at their *Raging Bull* best. It is also about the way a moment is articulated: how a moment comes alive for the viewer. In *Days of Heaven* this is largely about structure. The film moves not by linear causality but by details, by fragments of sound and image that lodge themselves under the skin as moments of sensory-affective intensity. The film inverts what are normally understood as the hierarchies between narrative progression and this register of sensory-affective experience. Rather than these intensities being deployed in the service of the narrative, the inverse is true—sensory-affective moments are the film, they are the stuff through which the film unfolds.

Malick works with a radical conception of what narrative is—that turns conventional understandings of narrative on their heads and exposes how clunky and archaic they are in their conception and realisation. Jean-Louis Comolli, writing of John Cassavetes’ film, *Faces*, claims that ‘the characters in *Faces* […] are not […] put there once and for all, arbitrarily, at the beginning of the film; rather, they define themselves gesture by gesture and

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18 See for instance, Hannah Patterson, (ed). *The Cinema of Terrence Malick: Poetic Visions of America*. London & New York: Wallflower Press, 2003. Many of the accounts in this anthology focus on symbolism in the film. Ben McCann, for example, explores ‘[the way] landscape assumes a symbolic weight’ (76) and the ‘expressive externalisation of emotions’ (77). (Ben McCann. “‘Enjoying the Scenery’: Landscape and the Fetishisation of Nature in *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*. Patterson 75-85). Ron Mottram discusses the way the film is ‘couched in imagery and events that are Biblical in nature.’ (Ron Mottram. ‘All Things Shining: The Struggle for Wholeness and Redemption and Transcendence in the Films of Terrence Malick.’ Patterson 13-23: 17). The materiality of the film is missing from these accounts with their focus on symbolic aspects of the film.

word by word as the film proceeds’. Malick seems to work from a similar principle of how to build a scene moment by moment, but this understanding is extended beyond simply the gestures and words of actors; the actors form only one fragment of the performative dimensions of the scene. It proceeds, rather, through a series of intense encounters with sound and image, moments of experience that accumulate layer upon layer to build the film. It is this accretion that carries the ongoing movement through the narrative field. The film works from a structural principle that is conceived from the outset, not on the basis of the linear chains of cause and effect conventionally understood as the building blocks of narrative, but on the basis of sensory intensity—how to put together a scene that unfolds across the sensorium of the viewer. The structure of the film, the way it unfolds, is conceived as an energetic charge that cycles through the sensorium of the spectator. The narrative cannot be separated out from this action as the film is made up moment by moment of sensory intensities.

*Days of Heaven* exemplifies what a narrative film can be if it starts from an explicit understanding that the film is made of sensory-affective moments. Malick’s film reveals the potential to shake the disparate elements of the film free from the conventional narrative sequences and use them more flexibly, and reveals how the format of narrative can be adapted to open onto a cinematic experience that is rich, layered and exhilarating. What’s exciting in its structure is the way it moves like a score across a number of instruments: at times the plot has its solo moments, only fragmentary. At times the sound is the virtuoso performer as it takes off in a montage of aural perspectives and layers. At times the image takes centre-stage as Malick plays with the way the wind animates the environment, giving it a haptic density, stirring up the fields, scraping and corroding the smooth surface of a pond, or with the texture of sheaves of wheat flailing into the lens of the camera or the lush painterliness of the pastoral landscape. At times narrative transitions are articulated through other solos—more conventional performative

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21 James Wierzbicki gives an interesting account of how Malick constructs ‘discrete sound pieces’ throughout the film. His account of Malick’s musical use of noise grapples with the complex materiality of the film, escaping the tyranny of symbolic interpretation. James Wierzbicki. ‘Sound as Music in the Films of Terrence Malick.’ Patterson 110-122: 114.
moments like a tap dancer showing his skill and a violinist playing. Almost in the manner of a Bollywood song and dance sequence, these key narrative turning points are given an energetic charge that breaks out through the carnivalesque energy of the performances, in lieu of any blow-by-blow detailed plot information.

At the climax of the film, this energetic charge is focused on the locusts. This intensity is not about emotion: how can you claim an emotional response to the texture of the segmented exoskeleton of a locust, the lateral position of its eyes, the angle of its elbows as it grasps a grain of wheat and the relentless mechanical motion of its mandibles as its chews? An anthropomorphic moment it may be, on one level—but this is more about the way the motion, texture and sound are experienced across the sensorium of the viewer, the way they stir up the viewer, hook them into the moment on a level of heightened awareness, out of the habitual, into the senses, into the materiality of the image. It is a sensory-affective encounter. Whereas conventional melodrama is often described as the orchestration of emotion, *Days of Heaven* works rather with the orchestration of this material pulse, often sidestepping a conventional emotional series and registering the feeling of the moment through the senses. To understand this as emotion is a misnomer—it is an intensity tied to the motion of the locust’s chewing and to the way the close-up has suddenly cut in to another sequence, flipping the narrative onto another level, triggering another dimension.

What is a close-up? On one level it is a shift in physical scale. We can think of a close-up as a way of organising the space of the profilmic—of segmenting, isolating a fragment of that space as a detail inserted into a new series. We can describe it as a function of the camera, a principle of composition. But how is a close-up experienced? If we consider a close-up in terms of the experience of the spectator it is an entirely different thing. A close-up is not only a zoom into a detail of a sequence, it is a shift in registers: it brings to life a certain kind of encounter, draws the spectator into proximity, into a close encounter with the image or sound. This is about mimetic experience—the close-up is a mimetic hook, bringing the spectator into contact with the image in a way that blurs the boundaries between self and other, viewer and locust, inside and outside of the image. This contact lures the spectator onto another level of intensity. Béla Balász
knew this in his work on physiognomy; Walter Benjamin approached a similar idea with his discussion of the optical unconscious.\(^{22}\) We can never understand the close-up as just a unit of narrative information: if we want to understand anything about the close-up, we must understand it experientially—the way it mobilises a certain kind of experience for the spectator.

Malick works with dramatic shifts in scale—from an extreme close-up of wheat stalks to an extreme wide shot of the horizon, from a long shot of harvesters slashing the crop to a close-up of birds scattering, in a sudden flip from the human scale to the other life that lurks underneath. He uses the aural and visual close-up to suddenly bring forward another dimension—the wind is always there but it suddenly breaks out into the aural foreground—the rabbits are there lurking in the wheat field but they suddenly come forward into a tremulous hypervigilant presence. The close-up is like an exclamation mark—like the deflection onto a gestural moment of intensity.

We can partly understand this as an anthropomorphisation of insects, birds and landscape. The separation of human and natural world is at best partial, transitory; the dramatic action co-exists on the plane of the animals and the environment as if the human world is punctuated by or filtered through it.\(^{23}\) Birds recur at almost every transitional moment, responding to and commenting on the dramatic action. Human figures in the landscape are often on a par with animals, obscured by or blending into the wheat. The black and white speckles on the breasts of the peahens are echoed in the costumes of the main characters. Malick is a master of affective wind—a haptic register that captures everything in its sway, subjecting


\(^{23}\) In his discussions of the soundtrack, Richard Power argues that the ‘zoological’ nature of ‘The Aquarium’, the piece from Saint-Saëns’ *Carnival of the Animals* that features in Morricone’s score, ‘adds a depth of meaning’ to this interpretation for those who recognise the piece. I would argue, however, the peripheral nature of this reference for most viewers. Richard Power. ‘Listening to The Aquarium: The Symbolic Use of Music in *Days of Heaven.*’ Patterson 100-109: 100.
everything to the same restless energy—human figures, animals, fields. These moments are not entirely disconnected from the narrative dimension—Malick plays with the narrative expectations. On one level the scattering birds take on the intensity of human interactions, but the deployment of the natural world in the film is much more than a simple anthropomorphic gesture. At one point the pulse passes momentarily from the linear dramatic action—a domestic scene—to a leaf in close-up glistening wet in the moonlight, and then back to the action. We could say, metaphorically, that the leaf is watching, a silent witness to the dramatic action, or that it signals time passing, but this doesn’t capture the transformative nature of the shot—it is not just about narrative information. The momentary suspension of the leaf, poised between two actions, is a certain way of hooking the spectator in to a register of intensity that is not explained. The leaf is not given an emotional coding, it is given a material presence.

Siegfried Kracauer attempts to explain a particular type of film experience, in which film ‘puts the material world into play’. He says that the image speaks: ‘And I? says the leaf which is falling.—And we? say the orange peel, the gust of wind …’. Kracauer gives us a key to understand how Malick does what he does. In *Days of Heaven*, the leaf captures within it a conception of how to work with a particular kind of film experience that starts from the materiality of the image and sound to generate a sensory-affective intensity. The brief interval the leaf opens up between the moments of narrative dramatic action is not like a moment of rest in the manner of an Ozu pillow shot. If we were to use the linear language of syntax to describe it, it’s not a neutral ellipsis. The shot jumps out of this kind of linear series—it is of a different order, more like a mathematical charge, like the previous shot to the power of ten. It is more like the live wire in a spark plug where the current leaps across the gap from one terminal to another. This is a way of working with sound and image that engages the spectator in a mimetic encounter.

24 Hansen, Miriam Bratu. “‘With Skin and Hair’: Kracauer’s Theory of Film, Marseille 1940.” *Critical Inquiry* 19 (Spring 1993) 437-469: 457 (henceforth WSH).
This project starts from an exploration of this kind of mimetic encounter to explore a material understanding of both film and cinema spectatorship that is embodied, sensory and affective.26

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26 In this project, I work with Miriam Hansen’s understanding of Benjamin’s concept of mimetic experience, and its further explication in the work of Michael Taussig, as a perceptual experience that brings the perceiver into contact, into proximity, with the perceived. Hansen writes that Benjamin’s use of the term dissociates those understandings of mimesis associated with verisimilitude: ‘beyond naturalist or realist norms of representation and a particular relation (copy, reflection, semblance) of the representation to reality, the mimetic is invoked as a kind of practice that transcends the traditional subject-object dichotomy […] a mode of cognition involving sensuous, somatic, and tactile forms of perception’ (‘Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street.’ Critical Inquiry: 25:2 (Winter 1999): 9). Hansen writes that the Frankfurt School concept of the mimetic faculty, which she refers to, ‘envisions a relationship with nature that is alternative to the dominant forms of mastery and exploitation, one that would dissolve the contours of the subject/object dichotomy’. In her discussions of the mimetic, she makes clear the absolute distinction between her use of the term and its Platonic use. In the Frankfurt School revision of the term, she argues, it is ‘[nothing] resembling a realistic concept of representation’. It is also clearly demarcated from the semiotic notion of ‘an iconic relationship, a perceptual likeness between sign and reality’. She writes, ‘if the correspondences actualized by the mimetic faculty pertain to any aspect of signification, then it is to the realm of the indexical, which is the relationship of material contiguity’ (‘Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: “The Blue Flower in The Land of Technology”.’ New German Critique 40 (Winter 1987): 179-224: 195 (henceforth BCE); Michael Taussig. Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses. New York & London: Routledge, 1993).
A paradigm shift in film studies

The smouldering volcano

In a lucid scholarly intervention into the theorisation of “classical narrative cinema”, Rick Altman highlights the importance of the intensities of melodrama to the way so-called classical narrative operates, and in so doing lays one of the foundations for a major paradigm shift in film studies.27 Going back into literary theory, Altman reveals that the models of classical narrative that underpin the dominance of the notion in cinema studies are both contested and largely superseded in the very literary theory from which they initially derived. The model of French classicism, with Balzac and Racine as its epitomies and Aristotelian logic and order as its guiding principles, has increasingly been undermined, he argues, in theoretical moves that emphasise the tensions and chaos that pull on and distort the nineteenth century novel. Altman writes, ‘little by little, literary scholars have revised their model of classical unity [ … for example] Maulnier reveals Racine’s tendency to stretch a civilized, finely crafted surface over the chaotic energy of a smoldering volcano’ (16).

Barely disguised beneath the surface of the classical novel simmers a theatrical substratum that, Altman argues, draws directly from popular melodrama. He cites Peter Brooks’ claim that the ‘fictional representations [of Balzac’s novels] repose on a theatrical substratum—necessary because a certain type of meaning could not be generated without it’ (Altman 19):28 ‘embedded melodrama is essential to its meaning’ (21). Similarly, Altman argues, the so-called classical narrative Hollywood film draws its structures from its heritage in the popular melodramatic stage and other popular traditions and ‘their characteristic forms of spectacle and narrative’ (26). Altman is, of course, by no means the first or the only writer to draw attention to the heritage of melodrama in cinema, but his work is exemplary,

both for the clarity of his analysis and the systematic way it exposes the shaky foundations of the key paradigm of narrative film theory.\textsuperscript{29}

In his elaboration of ‘a melodramatic substratum ready to erupt through [the] classical covering’ of the 19th century novel (25), Altman highlights what he calls ‘a realm of permanence and power’ (22), a second, competing logic in the text characterised by spectacle and strong emotions. Altman focuses on the less controlled textual elements—unmotivated events, rhythmic montage, highlighted parallelism and overlong spectacle—and narrative structures based on episodic construction and cross-cutting. He also emphasises those elements of character that escape detailed psychological rendition and embody mythic stereotypes, and the manichean conflicts of good and evil, the underlying schema of archetypal values that animate and motivate the surface plots.

Altman calls for ‘a vast upheaval’ in the writing of cinema history as a geology of multi-levelled explorations: ‘cinema history must become a geology, charting the soils, the strata, and the seams that permit the text’s second voice to be heard’ (42). He opens up models within textual studies that can provide tools for rethinking the structural principles of narrative as dynamic, and dialogic, proposing a closer attention to paradigmatic elements, as opposed to simply syntagmatic elements that construct the linear chains of meaning and causality.\textsuperscript{30} Altman counters the rhetoric of textual excess that he argues has been used to explain away those elements that break out of the classical mould while keeping the framework of classical narrative intact. A major force of his argument is thus to unravel the binary oppositions that have propelled decades of film theory, particularly the modernist/classical distinction and the mainstream/alternative opposition.


\textsuperscript{30} Altman calls for a ‘dual-focus’ analytical methodology that recognises narrative as a ‘dynamic, multi-levelled system’ motivated by contradictory forces in dialogic relationship with each other, forces which are inaccessible to a theoretical methodology that focuses on only the surface of the text, its linear causality and character-driven plots (20 ff.; 27).
In a sense, even as Altman extends textual analysis to the furthest reaches of its explanatory potential, his work simultaneously crystallises and illuminates the limitations of his own methodology, and of the textual models that had become prevalent in film studies in the 1970s and 1980s. To really unravel the productivity of Altman’s essay, however, it must be extended beyond textual analysis to explore implications of the heritage of melodrama that are much deeper and more pervasive than the question of episodic structures, mythic archetypes and manichean schemas suggests. His analysis begs for a theoretical framework that can actually begin to address the energies of the smouldering volcano, that can unpick the heritage of melodramatic spectacle, its method of visual storytelling, and its focus on intensities for the spectator—to address what textual analysis simply cannot encompass—the performative moment of the cinematic encounter.

A scaffold for aesthetic experience
Miriam Hansen takes up Altman’s consideration of ‘what is left out, marginalized or repressed in thetotalizing account of classical [narrative] cinema’, but moves beyond questions accessible to textual analysis to a recognition that the received idea of classical narrative cinema also ‘brackets the history of reception and film culture’.31 This bracketing disregards not only the substratum of melodrama, ‘but also genres such as comedy, horror and pornography which involve the viewer’s body and sensory-affective responses in ways that may not exactly conform to classical ideals’ (337).

Hansen contests the cognitivist understanding of classical narrative as ‘a method of how optimally to guide the viewer’s attention and how to maximize his or her response by way of more intricate plots and emotional tensions’ (339).32 She argues the centrality to the operation of narrative of the sensory economies of

31 Hansen, Miriam Bratu. ‘The mass production of the senses: classical cinema as vernacular modernism’, op. cit.: 337.
32 Hansen identifies this assumption particularly with the assimilation of principles of cognitive psychology in the work of David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson and Janet Staiger, who use this understanding of the core of narrative to focus on ‘principles of narrative dominance, linear and unobtrusive narration centering on psychology and agency of individual characters, and continuity editing’ (336). (David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson and Janet Staiger. The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).
popular genres ‘that thrive on something other than or, at the very least, oblique to the classical norm’ (334). The classical model, she argues, leads to the assumption of a ‘homogeneity that locates side-streams and counter-currents on the outside or margins, rather than addressing the ways in which they at once become part of the institution and blur its boundaries’ (339). While not jettisoning the concept of classical narrative cinema, Hansen takes it ‘to refer less to a system of functionally interrelated norms and a corresponding set of empirical objects than to a scaffold, matrix, or web that allows for a wide range of aesthetic effects and experiences’ (339).

Hansen’s analysis is a historically-specific one, couched in a polemic about the understanding of modernism. She contests the common binary understanding of classical and modernist avant-garde cinema as incompatible opposites. Both, she argues, are ways of responding to and reflecting on modernity—both are ‘reflexive modernisms’. She writes of Hollywood cinema from the 1920s to the 1950s as a vernacular modernism. This challenge to the conventional ‘bifurcation’ in the writing of film history, according to which classical and modernist are set up as binary opposites, is essential to the approach Hansen takes. It is also pivotal to her argument that she is not writing about avant-garde film, in which it is often taken as self-evident that an anti-narrative, sensory dimension is predominant. Hansen, rather, draws sensory-affective experience into centre-stage in the understanding of narrative film. She explores the dimensions within Hollywood narrative film that exceed or cannot be explained by a conventional narrative analysis. She writes: ‘the reflexive dimension of Hollywood films in relation to modernity may take cognitive, discursive, and narrativized forms, but it is crucially anchored in sensory experience and sensational affect—in processes of mimetic identification that are more often than not partial and excessive in relation to narrative comprehension’ (343).

Hansen’s historical approach to reception mandates an attention to what she calls the ‘public horizon of reception’ (341). Her analysis devolves around an understanding of the ways Hollywood ‘produced and globalized a new sensorium’ (344). She writes of the role of slapstick films in ‘[propelling] their viewers’ bodies into laughter’, of the ‘new immediacy, energy and sexual economy’ of
adventure serials, and the ‘physicality’ of things, the ‘material presence of the quotidien’ in the films of the period (343). She does not go into great detail about this new sensorium. However, she signals the far-reaching implications of this approach, arguing that film ‘opened up hitherto unperceived modes of sensory perception and experience’ (344). Evoking Benjamin’s notion of the optical unconscious, she links the heuristic model of narrative as a scaffold ‘that allows for a wide range of aesthetic effects and experiences’ to a much broader agenda, and opens the way to work that potentially extends these insights in new directions.

Hansen argues that these aesthetic experiences ‘are more complex and dynamic than the most accurate account of their function within any single system may convey and [...] require more open-ended, promiscuous, and imaginative types of inquiry’ (339).

An energetic field

This shift from textual analysis to questions of reception and sensory-affective experience marks a pivotal moment in contemporary film theory and a crucial move in the theorisation of spectatorship, shifting the focus toward questions of affect—questions which would explore the volcano smouldering not only beneath the structures of the text but in the relationship between film and spectator. A key moment in this shift is marked by Tom Gunning’s work on the ‘cinema of attractions’. Whereas Altman focuses his analysis of melodrama on character types and the articulation of hidden values, Gunning’s focus on mode of address and spectatorship reframes this question within an understanding of the dynamic relationship set up between screen and auditorium. Through his detailed research into the historical conditions of reception of early cinema, Gunning broadens the understanding of the heritage of popular forms from the textual characteristics of the melodramatic stage to traits adopted from what the spectacular elements of the melodramatic stage provide to the forms of reception. Linking this to the reception contexts of other popular entertainments such as the fairground, Gunning draws

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33 Hansen elaborates on her understanding of the optical unconscious and its link with mimetic experience in Hansen, Miriam Bratu. ‘Benjamin, Cinema and Experience’, op. cit.: 207ff.; and in ‘Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street.’ op. cit.

out the ways these popular forms provide early cinema’s mode of address. The focus on reception gives Gunning a key to begin to unpick the nature of popular spectacle as a particular mode of engaging the spectator—a direct mode of address which he describes as exhibitionist, as both inciting and pandering to a visual fascination and curiosity, and characterised by a series of visual shocks, as an assault on the senses.

A corollary of this recognition of the sensory aspects of early cinema spectatorship is the acknowledgment of the cinema itself as a physical space in the here and now and a formulation of the cinematic moment as an event in the present. These three factors—the corporeality of spectatorship, the temporality of the instant and film as an event, an encounter—coalesce to provide the groundwork for a formulation of spectatorship that eludes an analysis focused on diegetic absorption. Gunning highlights the departure of this mode from the classical modes of contemplation—or at least those assumed by analyses of ‘classical narrative’. Like Altman, he identifies a heterogeneity in narrative forms, but whereas Altman identifies this heterogeneity in textual forms for Gunning it is characterised by an ambivalence in modes of address, the way each film sets up relations for its spectator. Gunning does not see this alternative mode of address as disappearing with the development of narrative diegetic cinema. He argues that it survives, not only in ‘genres [such as] musicals [and crazy] comedies [in which] the attractions actually threaten to mutiny’, but more broadly as an ‘underground current’ (AA 38) in the synthesis of narrative and spectacle, ‘the primal power of the attraction running beneath the armature of narrative regulation’ (CA 68).

Gunning frames this mode of address as a question of the energy that connects spectator and screen. He articulates this energy as a moving force that, in the cinema of attractions, ‘moves outward towards an acknowledged spectator rather than inward towards the character-based situations essential to classical narrative’.


(CA 66). This formulation of an energetic field opens the way for a major paradigm shift toward a recognition of spectatorship as embodied.

*Embodied spectatorship*

Early work contemporaneous with Gunning’s that plays around the edges of this paradigm shift begins to unpick the idea of an energetic connection that Gunning had postulated. Linda Williams explores this spectator-screen relation in her work on what she calls ‘body genres’, genres that ‘sensationally display bodies on the screen and register effects in the bodies of spectators’. Williams posits a system of ‘bodily excess’ in operation in these films. She focuses on the relationship between the body on screen—the ‘spectacle of a body caught in the grip of intense sensation or emotion’—and the bodies of spectators. Questioning an assumption that this relationship is one of ‘involuntary mimicry’ of one body by another, her tentative explanation of the relationship moves beyond the bodily, and is deflected onto the psychic formations of fantasy as the intermediary between sensation and sense.

Subsequent work exploring the corporeality of cinema spectatorship starts to focus more consistently on a broader interrogation of vision itself. The first major interventions in the field take on the polemical task of arguing the embodied nature of vision and, by extension, of cinema spectatorship. Jonathan Crary’s work, *Techniques of the Observer*, is pivotal to this project of redeeming vision from the metaphor of the disembodied eye, tracing the crucial shift in the nineteenth century to an understanding of the grounding of vision in the body.

Vivien Sobchack’s *The Address of the Eye* also challenges the established paradigms, according to which, she argues, the idea ‘that a film as it is experienced might be engaged as something more than just an object of consciousness is a possibility that has not been entertained’ (20). Drawing on the phenomenology of

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Merleau-Ponty, Sobchack grounds ‘the origin and locus of cinematic signification and significance in the experience of vision as an embodied and meaningful existential activity’ (xvii).\(^40\) Sobchack continues this theme in her more recent work, which gives a cogent account of the ways in which film theory has marginalised questions of the body and embodied spectatorship.\(^41\) She writes, in 2000, of the paucity in contemporary film theory of any sustained work that explores the ‘carnality and sensuality of the film experience’ (2):

film theory has attempted (somewhat defensively, I think) to put the ambiguous and unruly, *subjectively* sensuous, embodied experience of going to the movies back where it “properly”—that is, *objectively*—belongs: that is, it has located the sensuous *on* the screen as the semantic property of cinematic objects and the semiotic effects of cinematic representation, or *off* the screen in the spectator’s fantasmatic psychic formations, cognitive processes, and basic sensory reflexes (4).\(^42\)

Contesting the ‘elision of the body’ in film theory, Sobchack posits the ‘film viewer's lived body as a carnal “third term” that chiasmatically mediates vision and language, experience and image’, arguing that ‘vision is not isolated from our other senses […] We see and comprehend and feel films with our entire bodily being, informed by the full history and knowledge of our sensorium’ (6). She suggests the notion of a ‘cinesthetic subject’, acknowledging and foregrounding the experience of the ‘lived body’: a notion that ‘subverts the prevalent objectification of vision that would reduce our sensorial experience at the movies to an impoverished “cinematic sight” or posit anorexic theories of identification that have no flesh on them’ (9).

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\(^{40}\) Sobchack here implicitly challenges the assumptions of Williams about the role of fantasy in the relationship.


\(^{42}\) Sobchack cites the early work of Eisenstein, on the synchronisation of the senses, empirical studies in the 1930s of somatic responses of film viewers and the work of Kracauer in the 1940s, and she limits contemporary work on cinematic corporeality to a handful of scholars: Steven Shaviro, Linda Williams, Jonathan Crary, Elena del Rio and Laura Marks.
Steven Shaviro also takes up this challenge to established paradigms, exploring cinematic fascination from the premise that ‘film viewing offers an immediacy and violence of sensation that powerfully engages the eye and body of the spectator’ [italics mine]. He argues, from Crary, that vision ‘is grounded […] in the rhythms and delays of ungraspable temporality, and in the materiality of the agitated flesh’ (45). Shaviro extends this understanding of the essential corporeality of cinematic experience to contest the premises of semiotic, psychoanalytic and poststructuralist film theory, which ‘[endeavor] to subdue and regulate the visual, to destroy the power of images, or at least to restrain them within the bounds of linguistic discursivity and patriarchal Law’ (15). Shaviro rejects the assumptions of a homology with language, arguing that ‘cinematic images are not representations, but events’ (24). Cinematic experience, he argues, is characterised by a visceral immediacy that makes it ‘radically different to language’ (36). Shaviro contends that cinema ‘confronts the viewer directly in ways that language cannot’, ways that are ‘more literal’: ‘cinema […] forces me to stay within the orbit of the senses’ (32); its ‘duration […] visual and aural impressions […] are important in a way that the material content of language […] is not’ (35). The cinematic image, to Shaviro, is ‘not an object of representation, it is a zone of affective intensity’ (267) and ‘film theory should be less a theory of fantasy […] than a theory of affects and the transformation of bodies’ (257).

Shaviro challenges the models of visual pleasure derived from psychoanalytic film theory, in particular the psychoanalytic assumption that the ‘gap between the film and spectator is irreducible’. Evoking Maurice Blanchot, Walter Benjamin and Michael Taussig, he challenges the distance and separation assumed in this understanding of vision and posits a model of spectatorship based instead on proximity, touch and contact, on mimetic ‘tactile convergences’ (46). To Shaviro, this tactile, corporeal spectatorship is integrally linked to the ‘loss of ego boundaries’, ‘a restless shattering mobility’, in which the ‘self is repetitively shattered by an ecstatic excess of affect’ (56). His account of film spectatorship is characterised by a type of visual fascination that is grounded in the affective

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economies of masochism, a powerlessness before the image—he says, ‘I am powerless not to see’ (48). He describes this as an ‘involuntary fascination’ (49), ‘a forced ecstatic abjection before the image […] a form of captivation […] passivity’ (49). The energetic model Shaviro assumes privileges what he describes as a bondage to the image (25), an energetic excitation, derived from restraint and powerlessness, that is intensified by the encounter with the image but cannot be discharged: he writes that ‘cinema seduces its viewers by mimaetically exacerbating erotic tension, in an orgy of unproductive expenditure’ (57).
‘Cinema and Embodied Affect’

The first essay here, ‘Cinema and Embodied Affect’, written in 1998, shares an affinity with these early works in its polemical approach, written as something of a manifesto whose primary goal is to shatter the assumptions of those traditions of film theory that insist on and ground their methodologies in the assumptions of disembodied viewing. The essay shares with Williams, Shaviro and Sobchack a context in a broad range of cognate studies that seek to redress the somatophobic foundations of contemporary thought and to reintegrate the body and the question of embodiment across a number of disciplines.

The essay starts from the assumption of the lived body as ‘the existential ground of perception’, and its emphasis is on establishing the primacy of embodied experience for the spectator. In this point of departure it shares a phenomenological heritage with Sobchack, but it frames spectatorship as essentially a question of affect and argues the core link between embodiment and affective experience, extending this framework into territory that was relatively uncharted at the time. Like Shaviro, it starts from the demand that the theorisation of film should address the affective experience of my own viewing, but, unlike Shaviro, it does not go to the received formulations of cinema spectatorship, such as established frameworks for thinking about masochistic spectatorship. It works

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45 This paper was presented at a conference in 1998 (Cinema and the Senses, University of New South Wales). It was accepted for an anthology of refereed conference papers, but its publication was delayed until 2003, as the original anthology did not proceed after several years in planning.


47 This term comes from Csordas, op. cit.

instead from a broader range of literature that argues the nature of affect, challenging the model of the disembodied eye from a perspective different to either Sobchack or Shaviro.

Starting from a discussion of physiological optics, this essay explores the refiguring of vision developed in James Gibson’s notion of ecological perception, a model of haptic vision that integrates embodied perceptual engagement with the world with affective experience. In this refiguring of our understanding of sense perception, Gibson’s study offers a conceptual framework for understanding the inalienable relationship between vision, the body, movement, tactility and affect. In this regard, it fills a gap in Crary’s theorisation of the ‘corporeality of vision’, which lacks a sensuous, affective dimension. The paper draws on the work of the philosopher Sue Cataldi, who evokes Gibson to extend Merleau-Ponty’s concept of ‘carnal ideality’ into the realm of emotional experience (op. cit.). Cataldi argues that, in his theses on embodiment, Merleau-Ponty does not consider questions of emotion. She develops his work in two directions: she argues firstly, following Gibson, that perception and embodied experience always have an affective dimension; and secondly, that emotional situation connects with bodily memory and this gives a ‘thickness’ to emotional experience—that emotion is felt in the flesh. The paper furthers this discussion of the affective axes of perception with a consideration of the contemporary theorisation of emotion in the work of Glen Mazis (op. cit.). Like Cataldi, Mazis considers emotional experience both as embodied, and as an experience of a blurring of the boundaries between self and the world.

In this exploration of the affective dimensions of embodied experience, the paper goes beyond the application of Merleau-Ponty’s work that informs Sobchack’s inquiry, to develop a thesis on the relationships between embodied experience and affect, drawing Cataldi’s groundbreaking affective revision of Merleau-Ponty into our understanding of film spectatorship. Cataldi imports Gibson’s model of ecological perception—the perception of self in relation to the environment and

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1972; and Gaylyn Studlar. *In the Realm of Pleasure: Von Sternberg, Dietrich, and the Masochistic Aesthetic*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988. I do not intend here to discount theories of masochistic spectatorship, but Shaviro’s particular version of them is a very limited one.

the blurring of boundaries between the two—into her core understanding that emotional experience ‘communicatively [intertwines] the bodily flesh that we live with the flesh of the world’ (119).

Cataldi provides an essential bridge from the contemporary rethinking of emotion, embodiment and perception into the consideration of cinema spectatorship, one that enables an exploration of the coalescence of body, vision, tactility, movement, affect, and sensory experience. It is this bridge that is most often bypassed in much of the contemporary writing on cinematic affect. This is essentially a mimetic understanding of emotion that links it to a contact/sensuous tactile mode of perception that blurs the boundaries between perceiver and object. This first essay links Cataldi’s and Gibson’s work with the exploration by Michael Taussig of Walter Benjamin’s understanding of mimetic experience, its capacity to generate a ‘palpable sensuous connection between the very body of the perceiver and the perceived’ (Mimesis 21). Increasingly, as this project develops, the concept of mimesis becomes central as a shorthand term that can name a kind of perceptual experience that opens onto the body and the senses, the critical link between this ecological perception, its affective dimension, and its resonance for an understanding of cinema spectatorship.

In its proposal of a nexus between this embodied, mimetic, tactile vision, affect and mise-en-scène, this first essay raises the question of mise-en-scène that will become the focus of the next two essays. In particular, it begins to unfold a theory of mise-en-scène that understands the film as part of the ‘flesh of the world’. The essay proposes an aesthetics of embodiment, arguing that this aesthetics must explain the visceral dimension of affective experience, and must ‘address the centrality of embodied affect to understanding cinema spectatorship’.

50 As Taussig elaborates the concept of mimesis, it has two parts: the first, the idea of imitation or copy, as in the capacity to mimic, and the second, the idea of contact, a ‘palpable sensuous connection between the very body of the perceiver and the perceived’ (21). It is this second aspect of mimesis that I am most interested in, this much more complex visceral experience of a relation, a porousness between one’s self, one’s own body and the objects or images of the world. Here we have a mirroring of Gibson’s ecological model of perception.

51 Peter Brooks also talks of an aesthetics of embodiment, but to him it means one in which ‘the most important meanings have to be inscribed on and with the body’ [italics mine]. Peter Brooks. ‘Melodrama, Body, Revolution.’ Bratton, Cook and Gledhill: 17.
afford is this linkage, which puts in the one frame, at every moment, the self and environment, the film and affective experience, in a complex intertwining. Just as visual perception, for Gibson, always involves information about both the environment and the self, the essay assumes that the understanding of cinema spectatorship must always encompass both the environment of the film—what is on the screen—and the embodied experience of the viewer, and most importantly the blurring of boundaries between the two.

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‘Cinema and Embodied Affect’ lays out a set of problems that will be explored and transformed through the development of the work: what is cinematic affect? what is its relationship with embodied experience? what is the connection between affect, embodied experience and mise-en-scène? how is it possible to develop a critical practice that keeps both the film and the spectator in the one frame, and to write about these relationships without losing the presence of the film in the writing? These questions inform all the later work even as they shift through different inflections. They unfold and develop in the ensuing work in ways that depart significantly from the work’s earlier cohort and, I believe, go much further in their exploration of the image.

Shaviro’s work is very useful in clearing a path for a consideration of spectatorship that escapes the models of disembodied vision inherent in semiotic and psychoanalytic film theory, and challenging the psychoanalytic models of scopophilia based on mastery and sadism. However, its assumption of a corollary between mimetic spectatorship and his particular interpretation of masochism imposes unnecessary strictures on the understanding of visual fascination and mimesis itself. As Shaviro acknowledges, his is only a very partial explanation of visual fascination, of the particular psychophysiological make-up of certain spectators in certain situations. While this argument fills out one aspect of the ‘wide range of sensory-aesthetic experiences’ that Hansen posits in operation in
narrative film, in a sense Shaviro’s work sheds more light on the excitement, the affective economy of certain spectators, than it tells us about the film.\textsuperscript{52}

Like Shaviro, Sobchack takes up the polemical imperative to establish the fact of embodied spectatorship, the corporeality of vision. Sobchack’s heritage in phenomenology and semiotics mandates a concern with the relationship between the body and language, between ‘sense and the senses’, ‘the meaningful relationship between cinema and our sensate bodies’ and her account returns continually to the question of language and the subject (‘What My Fingers Knew’ 2). It is worth quoting Sobchack at length on her account of her own embodied cinematic experience:

Watching *The Piano*, for example, my skin’s potentiality streams toward the screen to rebound back on itself. It becomes literally and intensely sensitized to texture and tactility, but it is neither the particularity of Ada’s taffetas and woolens nor the particularity of the silk blouse I’m actually wearing that I feel on its surface. On the one hand (so much for figures of speech!), I cannot fully touch taffeta and wool in this scenario although I can cross-modally grasp their texture and weight diffusely. On the other hand, while I have the capacity to fully—and literally—feel the texture and weight of the silk of my blouse, my tactile intentions are located elsewhere in the taffeta and wool and so, intending elsewhere, I feel the specificity of the silk on my skin only partially and diffusely. What is more, in this unthought carnal movement of an on-going streaming toward and turning back, my sense of touch—“rebounding” from its partiality in relation to the screen to its completion in and by my own body—is intensified. My skin becomes extremely sensitized. Indeed, this reflexive and reflective exchange between and dispersion of my “sense” of touch in both the literal and the figural has opened me to *all* these fabrics and their textures—indeed, has made the

\textsuperscript{52} Shaviro does not lay claim to a totalising theory of visual fascination—he qualifies his approach by declaring its personal nature (267). Shaviro does analyse the film, *Blue Steel*, in depth, but Laura Marks makes a pertinent critique of Shaviro’s account of the image, which she describes as ‘propulsive or projectile’, and his account of masochistic spectatorship, which she says ‘maintains a radical alterity between self and film’. Laura U. Marks. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2000: 151.
literal touch of even a specific fabric on my skin an overwhelmingly general and intensely extensive mode of being (13).

This description provides a lot of information about the self, the subject, what is happening for the subject at the moment of viewing, but where is the film? Despite Sobchack’s rhetoric here, her writing speaks of a critical imperative to maintain the ‘I’ at all times: the separation of author from text, viewer from viewed and body from image—to maintain the critical distance that allows this type of description even as it claims to describe an experience of the blurring of these boundaries, their dissolution. While I do not want to challenge the validity of this experience or the attempt to encapsulate it in words, there is something in the writing of it that, even as it registers the body of the viewer, disincarnates the film in equal measure to the way semiotic, psychoanalytic or poststructuralist writing about film does. Whereas Gunning proposed a model of energy, in which the energy moves out from the film toward the spectator, if we were to continue this metaphor of energy here, Sobchack’s model would be something like a complex electronic circuit board, in which the energy of the film enters a convoluted network of circuits, switches and reverses, translated at some point into code to enter the circuit and needing to be deciphered at the point of exit to be released back into the immediacy of experience. Where is the image, the sound? Is this ‘the flash of embodied meaning’ that Merleau-Ponty famously evokes? (qtd. Marks 141). Is this to be the form our writing should take if we are to address the ‘carnality’ of cinema spectatorship?

Sobchack’s work highlights the difficulty of trying to hold within one frame, at the time of writing, the film—its materiality—and the experience, affective and sensory, of the spectator. This difficulty marks much of the work that tries to address embodied spectatorship and indeed spectatorship itself. Is the focus the spectator or the film? A divergence in these two objects of study underpins decades of film theory, from the textual analysis of the 1970s, its grounding in structuralist methods of textual study and the concomitant foreclosure of the question of spectatorship, and the studies of spectatorship ranging from the models derived from psychoanalysis to more recent broader-based questions of audience reception and studies of culturally-specific audiences. On one extreme of this
polarisation are the cultural studies approaches to filmic interpretation in which the materiality of both film and spectator evaporate in ideological and thematic readings.

The question here is one of emphasis and critical methodology. If our analysis focuses on the body—on sensory experience—to the exclusion of the film and its materiality, we end up with the erasure of mise-en-scène, the loss of the film itself and the short-circuit of any real engagement with the film as film that frustrates the reader of Sobchack’s account of film experience. If, on the other hand, the analysis stays with the film as text, thereby marginalising the activation of its energetic charge for the spectator, its performative dimension in time, the understanding of the dynamics of the film can only ever be partial.

This dilemma demands a methodology—and a writing practice—that somehow occupies the space in between—that can hold, in the one frame—the materiality of the film and the materiality of the viewing experience—and can articulate the link between the two. To follow through the implications of embodied spectatorship and a materialist understanding of film requires a different methodology and a writing practice different from that of either Shaviro or Sobchack. This is what the next two essays will go on to explore.
The question of the relation between affect and emotion is a vexed one in film studies and indeed across a number of disciplines. One of the difficulties in talking about cinematic affect is the indeterminacy of the term affect, and the multiple and often contradictory meanings ascribed to it. At the crux of this problem is the way affect and emotion are often used interchangeably and, in fact, the multiple and contested understandings of emotion. On one hand are the studies, such as many of those based in cognitive psychology, which define affect as identical to emotion. On the other hand are definitions that clearly demarcate affect and emotion into separate terms but often belie the complex interaction between them. In the middle lie the vast majority of studies that putatively owe their allegiance to one or other camp, but slide constantly in their usage from precise to very slippery and vague understandings, without any clear demarcation or explication of the terms or their relationship.

As this project develops, the later essays progressively emphasise a distinction between the concept of affect and concepts of emotion, and increasingly assert the importance of maintaining the two as separate concepts, even if to describe contexts where they may overlap significantly. In this first paper, however, affect is understood as co-terminous with emotion, but its focus is on establishing, for film theory, the core premise that emotion is embodied—that the concept of affect brings the body back in to the understanding of emotion. This first essay thus draws on the literature that emphasises the embodied nature of emotional experience.

A whole corpus of work over decades has contested understandings of emotion that define it as a cognitive process. The work of Silvan Tomkins, the most influential contemporary theorist of affect, is pivotal in the theorisation of affect as embodied. Tomkins challenges the claim that there is any cognitive system that can be understood as separate from the affects and, as Anna Gibbs writes, ‘makes

53 For a discussion of this shifting terrain, see Anna Gibbs. ‘Disaffected.’ Continuum 16:3 (2002): 335-341.
clear that there can be no “pure cognition”, no cognition uncontaminated by the richness of sensate experience, including affective experience’ (340). In his identification of nine specific affects, Tomkins insists on the physiological aspects of affective experience. His focus on the embodiment of the human organism and the networks of affective exchange between bodies and faces—what he describes as ‘affect contagion’—opens up potentially productive avenues to explore the operations of ‘sympathetic communication’ in film (Gibbs 338). However, while this level of analysis can enlighten aspects of engagement with character, it does not necessarily offer tools for understanding the specificity of cinematic affect.

Bill Nichols has argued that the attempt to situate ‘analytic philosophy and cognitive psychology as global theoretical frameworks’ for film theory constitutes ‘the most regressive current in contemporary film study.’55 He writes, ‘these approaches uphold the rule of reason and a philosophic tradition that can only accommodate affect, emotion, subjectivity, desire, the unconscious or the historical, material body within bounds that deny them foundational status or systematic integrity’ (42). Despite the contemporary work that returns the body to the understanding of emotion, such as the interventions of Tomkins, Cataldi and Mazis, much of the writing on filmic affect grounds itself in cognitivist, disembodied concepts of emotion. Ed Tan, for example, in his discussion of film as an ‘emotion machine’, draws his definition of emotion from a model of cognitive psychology in which emotion is understood as an aspect of information processing.56 He argues that emotion in the film spectator derives from the ‘situational meaning’ created within the fictional world, and this focus leads him to limit his analysis to narrative film, and the ‘creation, maintenance and modulation of emotions’ (4) that is generated by the manipulation of fictional situations.57

55 Nichols, Bill. ‘Film Theory and the Revolt Against Master Narratives’. Gledhill and Williams 34-52: 42.
57 Tan distinguishes this understanding of emotion from other prevalent psychological models, ‘those theories that stress that the origin of emotions is to be found in neural (Gray, 1982), motivational (Tomkins, 1962), or sensorimotor systems (James, 1890/1950)’ (44). In a glaringly tautological move, Tan claims as justification for his focus the fact that David Bordwell adopts the cognitive model for his understanding of emotion in narrative film (6). Tan claims that the models of narrative set up by Bordwell are so broadly accepted that he will take them as prima facie principles, uncontested. He asserts that, in the traditional feature film, the essential characteristics
Carl Plantinga overcomes some of the limitations of Tan’s work, outlining the moves within cognitive psychology to go beyond the ‘communication of information about emotion’. He moves to question the nature of empathy, which he describes as ‘emotional contagion’ or ‘affective mimicry’ (242). Plantinga offers a cogent critique of the limitations of psychoanalytic film theory, with its focus on pleasure and desire, and its marginalisation of questions of emotion, but his discussion is limited to the question of engagement with character and as such retains many of the blind spots of Tan’s approach.

The fictional situational elements that dominate Tan’s and Plantinga’s accounts are only a small part of what constitutes cinematic affect. Noël Carroll makes clear the implications of this approach, when he describes emotion as ‘a narrower subclass of affect, namely, what might be even more accurately called cognitive emotions’. Carroll acknowledges that ‘through the manipulation of sound and image, filmmakers often address audiences at a subcognitive, or cognitively impenetrable level […] calling forth responses barely mediated by thought’ (22), but his approach is ‘for methodological purposes to bracket consideration of them for the time being’ (22), to focus on what he calls ‘garden-variety emotions, like anger, fear, hatred, sorrow, and so on’ (23). Carroll’s proposed method begins by identifying the recognisable, nameable emotion produced in the viewer and then proceeds to examine how the film produces that response. He writes, ‘by following this procedure, one can pith the emotional structure of the film’ (33). But, by his own acknowledgment, Carroll can only explain the residue of the film left when he has ‘bracketed out’ those elements that this approach cannot explain. As Adrian Martin writes:

We commonly describe emotions in a language of motion—to be moved, to be transported, to be taken somewhere. The common, ersatz wisdom of the

of film technique are placed entirely at the service of the diegetic effect’ (55). Tan writes the body out of the spectator: he says, ‘events do not befall viewers physically […] as a viewer I am an observer’ (54).

film industry today speaks obsessively about stories as journeys, with characters who have arcs of sentimental and moral development. But that’s not even half of what can be moved in a film, or what moves us. The journey of a film is not only in its broad, mythic strokes, or its iconic characters. Some films, some characters, don’t have to move anywhere at all, or very far at all, in order to move us deeply; sometimes it’s we who move into the film, as it were, towards a realisation, understanding of feeling, even if the characters themselves precisely never do (DE 4) […] I suspect there is another register of feeling in our contact with [film …] the moment when, in the imaginary experience of viewing, hearing and being absorbed in something that is unfolding, we pass out of ourselves, just a precious little bit for a precious little while (DE 7).

This series of essays addresses this ‘other register’.

The cognitive approaches of writers such as Tan exemplify what Cataldi calls ‘somatophobic’ approaches to emotion (127). They are grounded in a methodology that ignores a whole swathe of contemporary studies that render these cognitive, disembodied models of emotion untenable. Not only is the body of the viewer absent from these accounts, but so also is the ‘body’ of the film. These models may elucidate some aspects of how a film draws the spectator into a close empathetic or antipathetic connection with character, but sideline the nature of film as a medium—the way this emotional connection with a spectator is mediated through the materiality of the film—the sound and image. (Indeed, films about affect do not necessarily generate affect.) It would seem redundant, but is an astonishingly recurrent need, to have to point out the facts of cinematic construction. As Jean-Luc Comolli wrote, back in the 1960s, ‘actions, gestures, faces or ideas’ and, we could add, emotions—the stuff of character—are actively produced, not reproduced, in film (326).60

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60 Comolli writes, ‘it is the movement of the film itself which produces the behaviour patterns, the relationships, the fiction and the characters’ (326). Comolli is writing here of the way Cassavetes is working with film, but his point can be generalised. In a sense, Cassavetes’ films make explicit this characteristic of all film.
The psychological approaches to film cited above share a tendency to separate out and hierarchise the fictional dimension of character from its cinematic construction. The foundational work of Thomas Lipps on empathy contests this extraction of character from environment, figure from ground.\(^61\) Robin Curtis has discussed Lipps’ largely untranslated treatise on empathy, emphasising its ‘explicit inclusion of inanimate objects, including spaces, colours and sounds (along, of course, with animate ones, such as human figures or animals).’\(^62\) Curtis points out that this concept of empathy ‘no longer requires the presence of another visible self, or an animate being, but instead, simply, the activity contained in the dynamic form of space, colour, or architecture’. Lipps does write that ‘the highest evocation of all arises from the sensuous appearance of the human being’ (409) but his approach allows for a more inclusive understanding of empathy than that which informs the studies of writers such as Tan.

Darius Cooper approaches a similar question from a different perspective when he elaborates the theory of *rasa* in classical Indian aesthetics and its operation in the work of Satyajit Ray.\(^63\) According to Cooper, *rasa* theory sees dramatic emotion within the context of the feeling produced by the affective impact of the work as a whole. Cooper extends this argument beyond an Indian context, relating it to the work of Suzanne Langer, who, he claims, ‘distinguishes between “the emotion presented in the work” by the characters and “the emotion presented by the work”, which refers to the unfolding of the work in its entirety’ (18).\(^64\) Martin also evokes Langer’s work on ‘structures of feeling, feeling “in the abstract”, before it is

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\(^{64}\) Cooper cites links between Langer’s work and that of V. K. Chari who writes: ‘the *rasa* theory too distinguishes between the symptomatic emotions occurring within the work (*bhavas*), presented descriptively through their objective correlates, which the persons in the work are shown suffering, and the emergent quality or dominant feeling tone of the whole (*rasa*)’ (18). V. K. Chari. *Sanskrit Criticism.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990: 242.
necessarily connected to any specific content of story’ (DE 2), which he links to ‘cinema’s affinity with music […] as a language of feeling and form’ (DE 2).^65

This deflection away from the exclusive focus on character and emotion deriving from fictional situation appears again and again, in many disparate contexts, in attempts to grasp the affective nature of aesthetic experience, as a kind of dispersed, fragmentary resistance to the ‘classical narrative’ model and its hierarchical assumptions about character and psychological engagement. Martin cites Richard Dyer, who laid out this conflict explicitly, albeit in the more conventional language of semiotics: ‘films use two kinds of signs, representational and non-representational […] “the reading of non-representational signs in the cinema is particularly undeveloped”’ (DE 3). Martin takes up this argument:

> It’s not as if critics […] don’t talk about stuff like colour, movement and editing. But it’s a question of where we place these non-representational signs or figures, how we locate their action, what particular economy or relation of form and content we put them in. Dyer observes that one dominant, essentially classical tradition in film studies “tends to treat the non-representational as function of the representational, simply a way of bringing out, emphasising, aspects of plot, character, situation”’ (DE 3).^66

‘Cinema and Embodied Affect’ proposes an aesthetics of embodiment that starts from the embodied relationship between the spectator and the film. It argues that the theorisation of spectatorship needs to move away from the concern with emotion understood in a cognitive way, as sentiment organised along the axis of narrative identification (or with desire), to an understanding of embodied affect. The essay argues that an aesthetics of embodiment must address the centrality of embodied affect to understanding cinema spectatorship, it must explain the visceral dimension of affective experience. This approach differs fundamentally from psychological readings of emotion by marginalising questions of character,

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^66 This is, in fact, exactly the methodology proposed by Carroll.
empathy and narrative, and also from Linda Williams’ work, by erasing the body on screen from centre-stage. By displacing the body of the actor away from centre-stage in this enquiry, the question of reception and the role of embodied affect in this reception is re-framed.

I increasingly use affect to describe embodied intensities that do not necessarily have an identifiable situational emotion, or are not necessarily initiated by a fictional emotional situation that reverberates through the body. Rather, I consider experiences that begin from an unidentifiable bodily arousal, feelings that have more to do with the undefinable intensity that accrues around the close-up of a coat hanger held too long for comfort in *Raging Bull*, the kind of ‘whoosh’ that sweeps the body into a kinaesthetic swoon with the vertiginous fluid camera track down a bell tower in *Andrey Rublyov*, or the ricochet of agitation in a queasy ripple of wind across a field of wheat in *Days of Heaven*. However, as an aesthetics of embodiment, this is more than a theory of spectatorship: it is attempting to address the relationships between the ‘body’ of the film—its materiality—and the embodied affective experience of spectators.

This first essay deflects the question of embodiment and affect onto a more diffuse, ‘environmental’ understanding of the ‘energy transference’ involved in reception, in the process refiguring the ways we think about mise-en-scène. It is no coincidence that this essay starts with a discussion of Mizoguchi Kenji, who is known as a director of mise-en-scène. Mizoguchi spoke of his weariness with the psychological work of the close-up and his actors are in many ways subordinated to the rhythmic pulsations of the entire mise-en-scène—the play of light, the textures, composition and movement of other elements in the frame. This essay and the subsequent papers attempt an exploration of a filmic system in which performative affect is understood in this expanded sense—the performance of the

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68 I feel an affinity here with Pasolini’s understanding of the spectator, who, ‘informed by passion […] first lets his/her bodily humors be moved by the text and then allows reason to enter the scene, rationally asking him/herself how and why s/he could have been moved like that’. (Maurizio Viano. *A Certain Realism: Making Use of Pasolini’s Film Theory and Practice*. Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1993: 59). Viano writes here of Pasolini’s understanding of the spectator of films of ‘a certain realism’.
whole cinematic system in which cinematography, editing, mise-en-scène and performance are equal elements.\(^6^9\)

To assert that emotion is embodied is not a radical move. To assert, however, that embodied experience is in and of itself affective—and, by extension, that the ability to awaken embodied experience is pivotal to the arousal of affect in film—is an entirely different proposition. This is a fundamental assumption of the work of these essays, which they explore through a discussion of mise-en-scène and its relation to mimetic experience.

\(^6^9\) The polemical conflicts around the myopic tendency to bracket out sensory-affective experience from the understanding of character and narrative are encapsulated in an exchange from the 1960s. John Gibbs quotes Penelope Houston, editor of *Sight and Sound*, who, challenging the burgeoning English mise-en-scène critics, writes, ‘cinema is about the human situation, not about “spatial relationships”’. (John Gibbs. *Mise-en-Scène: Film Style and Interpretation*. London & New York: Wallflower, 2002: 63). Raymond Durgnat replies ‘the only formulation that begins to make sense is to say that “spatial relationships” in Ray, Lang, Antonioni, Mizoguchi et al. are the human relationships in metaphor’ (ibid 64). ‘Spatial relationships’ is a very one-dimensional understanding of mise-en-scène, and indeed to see mise-en-scène as a metaphor for something else elides the key fact of mise-en-scène—its materiality. Mise-en-scène does not stand in for, or represent, something that is absent—although it may also do this—it is the thing that is present. Durgnat’s polemic does, however, signal the crucial importance of mise-en-scène—that it is the stuff of our experience of the film. Gibbs cites Penelope Houston. ‘The Critical Question.’ *Sight and Sound* 29: 4 (1960): 160-5: 163; and Raymond Durgnat. ‘Standing up for Jesus.’ *Motion* 6 (1963): 25-8; 30-52: 39.
Days of Heaven.

Days of Heaven.
‘Precarious Boundaries: Affect, Mise-en-scène and the Senses’

The next two essays, ‘Precarious Boundaries: Affect, Mise-en-scène and the Senses in Theodorus Angelopoulos’s Balkans epic’ and ‘Nowhere To Hide: The Tumultuous Materialism of Lee Myung-Se’, start from the assumption of a nexus between mimetic and affective experience, and explore an analysis of mise-en-scène as a site of ‘mimetic innervation’. ‘Precarious Boundaries’ contends that the affective power of the film is neither equivalent to, nor dependent on, empathy with character; rather mise-en-scène is at its core: ‘mise-en-scène is the critical link in the relationship between the material dimensions of cinema and its affect’ (67). Nowhere To Hide extends this exploration of the mimetic into the understanding of genre and visual style.

In its analysis of Theodorus Angelopoulos’ film, Ulysses’ Gaze, ‘Precarious Boundaries’ begins with a discussion of the way Angelopoulos works with location, arguing that he understands and works with mise-en-scène as an “energetic field” that he puts into play in the film to heighten the sensory experience of the viewer. With the focus on mise-en-scène as a primary site of cinematic affect, the essay explores this nexus both in its argument and in its rhetorical strategies, which saturate themselves in sound and image, investigating the relationship between sensory experience and affective experience and following closely the affective trajectory of the film on its many levels. In so doing it explores a kind of writing that jettisons the distanced separations of commentary. The essay goes straight into the materiality of the film, attempts to read it from the inside, and to write from inside the moment of experience as it unfolds as a moment of engagement with the film. In this sense it is an attempt to produce an immanent criticism that tests itself constantly against the murky ground of cinematic experience. Whereas Sobchack attempts to describe this crossing of boundaries, ‘Precarious Boundaries’ attempts to write it as it is lived, to write sound and image as moments of affective experience from which there is no outside in the moment of cinematic viewing: it attempts to keep the two sites—

70 Henceforth PB and TM.
the environment and the self, body and film—always in the same frame in the writing.

The essay returns to the early writings of the critics and filmmakers of Cahiers du Cinéma in the 1950s and 60s for the enabling, dynamic concept of mise-en-scène they developed, to rescue mise-en-scène as a critical concept from its sterility in much of Anglophone film theory. It contests the endlessly recycled text-book definition of mise-en-scène as ‘what is put into the scene’, that generally progresses through a mechanical breakdown of the scene into discrete elements such as sets, costumes, et cetera. It argues that mise-en-scène must be understood as not just what has been put into the frame but what has been put into the moment of experience, that it cannot meaningfully be understood as inert elements in the frame—these elements must be explored for how they draw the spectator into the scene, materially, experientially, as the scene unfolds in time. It demands that an interrogation of mise-en-scène should explain how the embodied affect of the spectator is aroused, enhanced, brought into play. It brings reception into the foreground in the understanding of mise-en-scène and, by subjecting mise-en-scène to the moment of reception, it restores an understanding of mise-en-scène as energetic process. It argues that a theory of mise-en-scène must address this

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71 David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson’s omnipresent introductory film text (in English-language film studies) must bear a large part of the responsibility for the common critical shrivelling of the term (David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson. Film Art: an Introduction, 7th international edition. New York: The McGraw-Hill Companies, 2005). It is, however, duplicated in John Gibbs’ monograph, Mise-en-Scène: Film Style and Interpretation (op. cit.). Gibbs’ text is a much more inclusive, expansive account of mise-en-scène, but even though Gibbs does complicate the understanding somewhat by claiming that ‘in practice, it is the interplay of elements that is significant’ (26), he starts from a static definition of mise-en-scène as ‘the contents of the frame and they way that they are organised’ (5).

72 Bordwell and Thompson, particularly, define mise-en-scène in this way, which divorces the film from its performative moment. One example of the heritage of this thinking would be Emilie Yeh and Darrell Davis’ singling out of a rice cooker as a fetish object in the films of Tsai Ming-Liang, which has curiosity value, but does not elucidate much more about the aesthetic economy of the film as a whole (Emilie Yeh-yu Yeh and Darrell Davis. Taiwan Film Directors: A Treasure Island. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005: 227 ff.). A more developed analysis, which focuses on a system of graphic metaphors, is Keiko McDonald’s discussion of the symbolic meaning of the cross-hatch pattern of ‘lattice windows’ and ‘checked walls’ in Shinoda Masahiro’s Double Suicide (Shinju Ten No Amijima (1969) McDonald writes, for example, that ‘checked walls indicate giri [social obligation]. An audience steeped in the Japanese cultural tradition will automatically associate the checked design with the door of a feudal prison’ (52). McDonald’s analysis of symbols elucidates layers in the text in interesting ways, but produces what is essentially a static graphic analysis. (Keiko McDonald. ‘Giri, Ninjo, and Fatalism: Image Pattern and Thematic Conflict in Shinoda’s Double Suicide.’ Cinema East: A Critical Study of Major Japanese Films. Rutherford, Madison & Teaneck: Fairleigh University Press; London & Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1983).
double-edged materiality: how the elements of the material world, rendered cinematic, are both material and energetic at the same time.

This energetic understanding of mise-en-scène was never absent from the work of Cahiers critics such as Alexandre Astruc, but was erased from later formulations and translations of the term. It reappears in Thomas Elsaesser’s 1970s writing on melodrama. Elsaesser extends this understanding of mise-en-scène as energetic, through his exploration of the emotional effects of what he calls ‘melos’—‘spatial and musical categories as opposed to intellectual or literary ones’ (287)—as a material, affective counterpoint to the linear meaning-producing structures of language. Elsaesser writes of the deflection of dramatic intensity onto the mise-en-scène through the ‘dynamic use’ of melos—‘lighting, montage, visual rhythm, decor, style of acting, music’ (287, 291). These insights, however, remain a largely undeveloped potential, at least in English-language film theory.

My work on mise-en-scène shares an affinity with the critical work of Adrian Martin, who wrote, in 1990, of the collapse of attention to the material in the film studies that developed under the aegis of cultural studies. Martin decries the ‘alarmingly total absence of anything resembling the detailed mise-en-scène readings of yesteryear’, and claims that only residual traces of this work survive in a ‘marginal criticism […] across an incredibly dispersed network, and often in mangled, cryptic, necessarily compromised forms’ (3). He returns again to this theme in 2004, writing of what he describes as the ‘foundational ambiguity’ of the concept of mise-en-scène, its oscillation between a term that refers to ‘the way

75 Despite its exploration of an energetic understanding of mise-en-scène, Elsaesser’s approach is limited by its framing in terms of language. Martin also finds a similar limitation in writers of the 1970s who explored the dynamic of excess and hysteria in melodrama, but who ‘never seemed to connect with the materiality of what it is that directors actually do in order to achieve effects, structures and feelings’. (Adrian Martin. ‘Displacements.’ Raul Ruiz: Images of Passage. Ed. Helen Bandis, Adrian Martin and Grant McDonald. Rotterdam: Rouge Press, 2004: 52.
77 Martin does argue the anomalous status of Australian film criticism and theoretical work within this field (SOS 1).
scenes are blocked and shot within the decor’ and one that is much more expansive and refers much more broadly to the whole arena of style and aesthetics.  

Martin recounts a challenge mounted in 1967 by André Labarthe to the whole functionality of the concept of mise-en-scène. Labarthe wrote of the conventional use of the term to describe ‘how [the] subject is rendered or treated by way of the film’s form or style’ (MES 1). The Cahiers critics, he argued, working with ‘a radically expanded notion of mise en scène’, aimed to transform the term from its classical use, arguing that ‘mise en scène is not only rendering, merde alors, but also ideas’ (2). Labarthe’s response to this contest over the meaning of the term is to question its usefulness at all, given its ambiguity. He argues that it should be used, if at all, only as a circumscribed term to describe a classical practice. Martin asserts the validity of Labarthe’s challenge. On the one hand he affirms the productivity of the term to describe a classical technique, in which ‘what matters, fundamentally, is that mobile, modulating, sinuous relationship between the camera, the actor, and the environment’ […] And do not doubt it,’ he says, ‘when that organic moment of mise en scène happens with absolute grace and expressive perfection before your eyes in a film by Mizoguchi or Minelli or Rivette, it is magic—one of the primal pleasures of cinema, and a great generator of its sensorial and semantic riches’ (4). However, on the other hand, he argues the inadequacy of the term to deal with the role of montage in modern cinema. Continuity, he claims, is essential to the classical functioning of mise-en-scène. He describes this as a ‘simple but deadly limitation of mise en scène as a classical tool—without continuity these ‘careful modulations’ cannot happen (6). He writes, ‘strictly speaking, time and space—not to mention dramaturgy, rhythm, and the overall architectonic form of a film—can only in a very limited way be determined

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79 Martin here cites André Labarthe. ‘Mort d’un mot.’ Cahiers du Cinéma 195 (November 1967): 66. The words are Martin’s. He points out that the ‘rendering’ notion places the emphasis on the ‘principal photography phase’—the moment of shooting (4).

by *mise en scène* [...] *mise en scène* analysis needs a reunion with theories of *montage* [...] or at the very least, *découpage* (“shot breakdown”, shot-patterning), an intermediate term between *mise en scène* and *montage* that was once strongly alive in the writings of Noël Burch and Brian Henderson, and informs the regular reviewing of Jonathan Rosenbaum’ (7) [italics in original].

While I agree with Martin’s exasperation with the ambiguity of the term in its classical textbook usage, my understanding of the enabling potential of the concept of *mise-en-scène*, through its redefinition by the *Cahiers* critics, does encompass a sense of découpage (and includes montage and sound).\(^81\) The term découpage adds the crucial element of time and rhythm—in other words, it acknowledges that *mise-en-scène* exists, comes into being, in a shot or shot-sequence, not outside of or prior to it. But one of the advantages of the term *mise-en-scène*—as opposed to découpage, which tends towards emphasising the linear construction achieved through editing—is its focus on space, plasticity. This focus emphasises the materiality of those rhythmic figure-ground relationships, and their relationship to the camera.

John Gibbs writes of the fall from favour of detailed analyses of *mise-en-scène* with the rise of academic film theory, in an account that clearly makes a distinction between criticism—the place where *mise-en-scène* is centre stage—and theory, where supposedly other concerns more rightfully take priority. Gibbs quotes at length Robin Woods’ formulation of mise-en-scene from the 1960s, framed within the terms of an auteurist debate:

> It is [the director’s] business to place the actors significantly within the décor, so that the décor itself becomes an actor; with the advice and co-operation of the cameraman, to compose and frame the shots; regulate the tempo and rhythm of movement within the frame and of the movement of

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the camera: to determine the lighting of the scene […] All this is mise-en-scène.

And much more, for we have so far considered only one shot. The movement of the film from shot to shot, the relation of one shot to all the other shots already taken or not, which will make up the finished film, cutting, montage, all this is mise-en-scène. And still more. For mise-en-scène is not all these things considered as separate and detachable items: it is also what fuses all these into one organic unity, and consequently more, much more, than the sum of its parts. The tone and atmosphere of the film, visual metaphor, the establishment of relationships between characters, the relation of all parts to the whole: all this is mise-en-scène. It is this final consideration of the quality that fuses all the parts into a unity that led Astruc to define mise-en-scène as “a certain way of extending the élans of the soul in the movements of the body: a song, a rhythm, a dance”. It is this that makes the film, as an art, so much closer to music than literature. One can sum up by defining mise-en-scène, with Doniol-Valcroze, quite simply as “the organisation of time and space”.

In this definition, mise-en-scène is clearly a temporal, performative notion.

Martin queries this expanded definition on the grounds that it seems to propose mise-en-scène as ‘the catch-all for every notable aesthetic aspect of cinema’ (MES 4). He asks: ‘is the displacement of the word “style” by mise en scène blocking our full appreciation of the complex levels of aesthetic form in cinema?’ (4).

I would argue that to characterise mise-en-scène as style and mise-en-scène criticism as a stylistic analysis is a misnomer. Mise-en-scène, as the concept is used by Woods, Astruc and others, is the very stuff of our experience of film. And indeed, if we were to jettison the term simply because it has accrued a stultifying conventional usage in some contexts, would we then have to throw out all the other vocabulary of film analysis that has similarly been used in ways that still the energy of film? I would prefer to retain the term and subject it to a critique that

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brings out its enabling potential. This is not just a recalcitrant revisionism. The term is not just a term devoid of a context in a whole conceptual framework. To zoom in on the stagnation implied and reproduced in its common usage brings under the microscope all of the attendant assumptions in the ways of thinking about film that use the term in this way. Most importantly, it highlights the sterile use of the term that sees the ‘elements of film’, so-called, as simply discrete entities detached from the energetic synthesis that is unleashed in their performative moment, in other words how mise-en-scène works experientially—as Gibbs writes, the ‘transformative affect of film style’ (59). To sidestep this imperative to contest the conventional term, as for example Deleuze and many of his proselytes do, in favour of a new critical vocabulary, simply sets up incommensurate terms in a kind of parallel universe that never really locks horns with the limitations of the original concepts.

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Giuliana Bruno argues that film, like architecture, is a space that we inhabit. Evoking Benjamin’s account of the tactile appropriation of architecture, she reinvests the understanding of cinema with an awareness of a kinaesthetic sensibility—of the body in space, and the energies that play around the bodily incorporation of space—with an erotics of the kinaesthetic body (op. cit.). Bruno crucially injects time into the understanding of architecture—in much of architectural discourse, she argues, architecture is not understood as static spaces but as lived space, made and constantly transformed through use. This understanding of the dynamic appropriation or reception of space gives added impetus to the challenge to understandings of mise-en-scène as static spatial compositions, as props or objects. Bruno’s account of a tactile, kinaesthetic engagement with the environment echoes Gibson’s model of ecological perception, of the blurring of boundaries between self and environment: both bump the concept of mise-en-scène as a dead description of dead objects off its complacent academic perch, demanding it be understood as animate. For space, in a film, is as animate as the human figure—space moves, shifts with the camera, is malleable, its textures resonate. In film, mise-en-scène is one way to describe the inhabitation of space that restores the material elements of the film (and one could
include sonic textures) to an equivalence in the understanding of the cinematic moment. Mise-en-scène is an event; it comes into being as a performative moment.

Martin, despite his reservations, in his deployment of the term in his critical writing elsewhere also works with a concept of mise-en-scène that is tied to notions of energy. Martin extends this energetic model to his core understanding of film: ‘even the severest avant-garde film […] needs to have a current, some kind of energy […] that drives it from one end to the other and makes it a whole, coherent piece capable of being experienced […] in one sitting’ (‘Displacements’ 45). He turns to Raul Ruiz as an exemplary director who, he claims, works with ‘a different kind of emotion, not tied to character’ (53). Ruiz, he claims, evokes a ‘charged, almost thermodynamic language of intensity when describing his own work or the work of others: it’s strong, he might say, or it has an energy’ (45). He writes that Ruiz ‘works with a holistic conception of mise en scène to which he applies a malign, ingenious pressure’ (45). In this context, Martin explores the applicability of Freudian concepts of energy/intensity to explain the concentration and dispersal of energy that is the work of mise-en-scène: ‘mise en scène becomes a practice radically different to its time-honoured dramaturgical understanding and usage if conceived and executed in terms of condensing and displacing, loading and discharging psychic intensities’ (51). ‘There is a challenge to film criticism in Ruiz’s work’, he writes, ‘especially to mise en scène criticism, which would have to transform itself utterly in order to cope with what is going on here, picking up the road it rarely took when modernist filmmakers began radically reshaping mise en scène criticism in the ’60s’ (51).

83 Martin describes Ruiz’ movies as: ‘(take your pick) molotov cocktails, alchemical experiments or improvised cooking recipes’ (48).
Days of Heaven.

Days of Heaven.
‘Precarious Boundaries’ attempts to give a theoretical frame to the contemporary transformation of thinking about mise-en-scène. The essay draws extensively on Miriam Hansen’s interpretations of Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer, and the connections she outlines between the corporeal, material focus of what Kracauer calls ‘psychophysical correspondences’, and Benjamin’s related concept of ‘mimetic innervation’. ‘Precarious Boundaries’ argues that there is a congruence between these two key concepts and the way that Angelopoulos works with mise-en-scène. Drawing on both Hansen’s and Michael Taussig’s interpretations of Benjamin’s work on mimetic experience, this essay argues that the ‘elements’ of mise-en-scène become potential sites for mimetic innervation—sites that enhance the ‘porous interface’ between the spectator and the material world that characterises mimetic experience. The essay explores Angelopoulos’ vigilance to the senses and his search for the production contexts and locations that will arouse this vigilance in the spectator. It claims that the sensory/material focus in *Ulysses’ Gaze* situates Angelopoulos’ work as pivotal to attempts to reinscribe the question of cinematic materiality at the centre of contemporary theories of cinema. The materialities of cinematic experience and the mimetic capacity they evoke are understood here as intrinsically linked with the affective power of cinema. The essay argues that:

> the sensory intensification of experience [is] the vehicle by which an affective charge is translated from filmmaker to audience, and the material elements of the film, specifically the mise-en-scène, are the means to produce this (PB 65).

One of the most generative frameworks for thinking about embodied spectatorship comes from Hansen’s reinvigoration of the work of Kracauer as a ‘potential interlocutor’ to address some of the gaps in contemporary film theory (WSH 84). Hansen explores these links across a number of works, including Miriam Bratu Hansen. ‘America, Paris, the Alps: Kracauer (and Benjamin) on Cinema and Modernity.’ Charney and Schwartz 362-402; ‘“With Skin and Hair”’; and ‘Introduction.’ Theory of Film.
The core of Kracauer’s argument focuses around the idea that there is a ‘basic layer’ in film that operates on a level ‘below’ the social or political, on what he calls the ‘material dimension’: ‘film comes into its own when it grasps the material dimension’ (WSH 452). In Kracauer’s understanding of spectatorship, this material dimension engages the viewer on the physiological level of the senses. Kracauer argues that ‘film […] addresses its viewer as a “corporeal-material being”: it seizes the “human being with skin and hair”’ (458). In Hansen’s account, the idea of the material dimension explored in Kracauer’s early work is ‘far more comprehensive than the term “physical reality”’ (TOF xvi). Firstly, Kracauer argues that film ‘brings the whole material world into play’ (WSH 447), it ‘[stirs] up the elements of nature’ (457); things are brought to life in ways that far exceed their existence in the physical world. Secondly, the ‘material dimension’ includes the material elements of the film—such as ‘sound, speech [and] colour’ (TOF xvii). Thirdly, this notion ‘is bound up with the problematic of the subject (rather than simply film’s referential relation to the material world’ (xvi); ‘the material dimension crucially includes the subject and the subject’s relation to the Other’ (WSH 452).

The notion of the ‘material dimension’ gives Kracauer a way of conceptualising the relationships between the materiality of the film—the image and sound—and the spectator, that is much more fluid and dynamic than the models provided by many of the other contributors to the debates around embodied spectatorship. Kracauer writes that ‘the material layers that present themselves in film directly stimulate the material layers of the human being: his nerves, his senses, his entire physiological substance’ (458). This is a relational model—each element of this equation is understood energetically and the film here comes into being in the relation between these three elements—the material world, the materiality of the cinematic elements and the material-corporeal aspects of the viewer.

The productivity of Kracauer’s work, in this frame, lies in this relational model—in the way he explicitly links the materiality of the world, of objects, and of the film, with the materiality/corporeality of the viewer. It does not isolate one

85 Unless otherwise specified, Hansen cites Kracauer’s Marseille notebooks, held in the Deutsches Literaturarchiv in Marbach am Neckar.
element from another, does not involve ‘a body’, a ‘self’ a ‘world’ or an ‘image’ as
discrete, given entities, as the world and the image are ‘in play’, the body and the
self are mobile, and the boundaries between each are blurred. Kracauer’s notion of
the material dimension, conceived as it is in relational terms, can redress some of
the blind spots of other ways of thinking about embodied spectatorship. Whereas
Sobchack’s work opens onto descriptions of what ‘my body’ is feeling, Kracauer’s
body is not an intact body in a ‘sovereign subject’ (TOF xvii). If we follow
through the implications of the way the materiality of the film draws in and
engages the materiality of the corporeal viewer, then to describe what ‘my body’
is experiencing cannot come anywhere near encompassing the ways in which the
cinematic experience transforms the body, the self, the image and the material
world, blurring the boundaries between each and generating modes of perception
that elude this kind of description.

This framework also inflects Kracauer’s notion of indexicality. In Kracauer,
indexicality is relational: film does not just record the material world, the trace of
the moment of inscription, it ‘brings the material world into play’. It does not
make sense here to disentangle the object and its meanings from their cinematic
configuration, and as the material dimension of film is always subject to the
question of reception, the operation of objects in the film and the ways they are
brought to life cannot be grasped outside of the ways they are experienced by the
spectator. The whole question of representation is secondary here, of another order
to this ‘basic layer’ of film and its experience. What is primary here is experience.

This model potentially opens onto an analysis of mise-en-scène—by seeing mise-
en-scène as that which is brought into play in the encounter with the spectator—as
dynamic, energetic, stirred up, as relational. This potential is partly signalled in
Kracauer’s early work on slapstick, with its focus on ‘kinetic energy’; as Hansen
writes, ‘human beings turned into things and objects assuming a life of their own’
(TOF xxi). We could see this as a performative model of film—one in which the
film comes into being as it unfolds in time, moment by moment. It makes a
nonsense of the textbook descriptors of mise-en-scène as the sets/costumes/objects
in the frame divorced from the cinematic alchemy that transforms them, their
subjection to the pressures of time, their reconfiguration in the moment of reception.

In Hansen’s account of Kracauer, this materiality is linked to a mimetic notion of spectatorship, one that explicitly challenges the boundaries between self and other. This is understood as an assault on the unity of the spectatorial self, an experience of disintegration: ‘the cinema assaults the viewer on the level of sensory, bodily perception, shattering the boundaries of individual identity’ (TOF xxi). Hansen demarcates Kracauer’s ‘attempt to define cinematic materiality from the perspective of the subject’ very clearly from the focus on unity and mastery that underlies psychoanalytic understandings of spectatorship (WSH 462). She writes that, in both the ‘sadistic and fetishistic variants of voyeurism […] spectatorship is posited as a process of identification that abstracts the viewer from his own body, links his accession to subjecthood to a proper distance from both spectacle and the material conditions of perception’ (464). Kracauer’s understanding, she argues is ‘almost the opposite: [he is interested in] the way in which cinema involves the viewer’s physiological base, assaults the boundaries of an ostensibly coherent, autonomous self’ (464). To Kracauer, ‘film viewing […] not only requires a “mobile self” […] but it also provides a framework for mobilizing the self’ (TOF xxviii).

Hansen writes:

Nothing could be further from more recent attempts to theorize cinematic spectatorship in terms of the pleasures of perceptual (imaginary, disembodied) mastery and identification, or for that matter, from cognitivist conceptions of film viewing as an operation of “scanning”, of processing hypotheses relevant for the construction of a story from the film’s representational materials (xxi).  

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86 Hansen writes that ‘Kracauer participates in an alternative tradition that locates the film experience in psychic regions closer to those explored by Freud in Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ (TOF xvi).
In Kracauer, film ‘communicates less as a whole with consciousness than in a fragmentary manner with the corporeal-material layers’. (WSH 462). In a series of what Hansen describes as ‘topographical’ metaphors, Kracauer emphasises the idea that film ‘looks downward’: ‘film looks under the table’ (TOF xvii); ‘it does not aim upward, toward intention, but pushes toward the bottom’ (WSH 447).

Hansen locates Kracauer within the trajectory of work exploring the nonnarrative aspects of cinema, a tradition that runs from phenomenological and physiognomic approaches in 1920s film theory, often entwined with the artistic avant-garde and experimental film practice, through more recent and systematic studies such as the work of Gilles Deleuze and Tom Gunning’ (TOF xxxii).

She points out that Kracauer is not anti-narrative but anti-classical: ‘Theory of Film may well be one of the most substantial attempts to gather the cross- and counter-currents, as it were below the paradigm of “classical cinema”’ (xxxii). She writes:

The opposition of material endlessness and fictional closure is a genuine antimony for Kracauer, not simply an alternative. As long as narrative films preserve the tension between the two, “the action below the action”, as long as they […] keep touching the earth, the material dimension, films can tell stories and still remain close to the “basic layer” (WSH 461).

This basic layer that comes in under the level of narrative radically reshapes the way we understand narrative and the role of embodied experience in it. Rather than moments of intensity that rupture the narrative in fleeting, ephemeral experiences of contact—flashes of embodied meaning—this is more like the glue that holds narrative together—the materials out of which each moment of experience is made. It is this accumulation of sensory-affective intensity, that builds up layer upon layer, that carries the viewer through the narrative on the level that matters—on the level that activates the embodied self in an experience of mimetic engagement in the film in all its dimensions.
Gunning sees this energetic dimension (albeit framed in different terms) as an ‘undercurrent’ that survives in the synthesis of narrative and spectacle. Hansen’s model of narrative as a ‘scaffold’ or ‘matrix’ that allows for the elaboration of this sensory-affective experience has the potential to invert the hierarchy, to suggest, with Kracauer, that this non-narrative dimension is the core of cinema spectatorship (and thereby, of narrative film itself). *Days of Heaven* is one of many examples of how film can develop when it takes this understanding, from the outset, into the core of its way of working with sound and image. It is a method of construction that is based more on the accumulation, moment by moment, of layers of sensory-affective experience, and it is this accretion that carries the ongoing movement through the narrative field. Narrative moves not along a linear path, but loops its way through the senses as it ‘keeps touching the earth’. When we identify this in one film, we start to see it everywhere.87

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Hansen’s own project is an explicitly historical one—to historicise Kracauer’s work. Treating Kracauer’s major opus of the 1960s, *Theory of Film*, as a palimpsest, Hansen traces the genealogy of this understanding of materiality in Kracauer’s thinking through the 1920s and 30s, arguing that ‘the significance of Kracauer’s *Theory of Film* can only be grasped in the tension between the early drafts and the later book’ (WSH 439). She locates her project in the context of other ‘attempts to reread canonical texts in their contexts of origin and reception and to confront them with contemporary questions’ (442), to ‘give us a sense of ‘roads not taken, of virtual histories that may hibernate into the present’ (442). Hansen argues that this process always involves two dimensions— both ‘reconstructing a historical horizon for the text [and …] suggesting constellations in which it raises questions relevant to current concerns’ (442). However, she argues that these two aspects of enquiry cannot be severed from each other—that the historical investigation ‘cannot be foreshortened to a discussion of an earlier

theory’s current use-value’ (442). Hansen specifies that a crucial aspect of this historical work involves not using the excavated text ‘to formulate questions that will confirm what we already know’ (443), but evoking its ‘historical distance to defamiliarize our own thinking on film and mass culture’ (443). Despite this argument, she acknowledges the ‘impulse’ in Kracauer’s work to ‘eliminate that dimension’, which, she claims, ‘to some extent […] comes with the territory [of […] the kind of theory that pitches its hypotheses at a level presumably above historical variability’ (442).

A particular kind of critical enterprise, this genealogical approach produces a nuanced reading of a dense, cryptic text and allows the possibility of redeeming other layers of an argument, contextualising it to redeem the thought of a major thinker in its complexity and historical specificity. Hansen has spoken of the attempt to ‘[keep] alive […] the many roads not taken’, of an archive of possibilities. She says, ‘that forward look backward […] still makes me more of a film historian than say somebody who develops theoretical guidelines for a better film practice’ (100). She has spoken of the need to keep a focus on the historical enterprise ‘and the interdisciplinarity of the enterprise’ while ‘not to lose track of what used to be called cinematic specificity’ (106).

Despite Hansen’s cautionary note, however, the methodology of this current project does extract the theoretical concepts from the historical frame. Driven by a different imperative, this project aims to put the ideas to work, to mobilise them in a close engagement with specific films, to test them in situ. To a reader for whom much of the film theory of the 1970s and 80s is very familiar but, despite its many insights, remains distant, these suppressed histories have the potential to break out in all directions, beyond the scholarly historical endeavour. And indeed, the film theory of the 1970s and 80s, read for its historical contingency, particularly the institutional constraints of discipline-building, in the long term, may well be seen


89 Hansen distinguishes this approach from what she calls a Bordwellian approach to a ‘historical poetics of style’ (Jayamanne and Rutherford 103 ff.). While she does give some credence to this project, she contests the normative model that defines Bordwell’s account of stylistic options, and particularly the cognitivist idea that underpins this work, that ‘the capacities that allow us to understand a cinematic narrative are hardwired’ (104).
as an aberrant moment, set against another trajectory in which Kracauer and many others have kept alive a very different, much more passionately engaged, understanding of film.

While Hansen’s methodological focus is on the written texts, the thought of Kracauer the writer and thinker, the focus here is on the films. While Hansen’s analysis refers to the historical frame, its productivity for an understanding of mise-en-scène really emerges when it is brought into the present, put into play, tested in the contemporary analysis of a film and contemporary spectatorship. If the material dimension of film engages the material layers of the viewer, how do we understand this in the concrete, how can we put these ideas to work in our understanding of film? For this contemporary engagement, essentially, is where the concepts will come to life. For me as a reader, this is what leaps off the page of Hansen’s writings. In her two major essays on Kracauer, Hansen—tantalisingly—does not cross into this territory. This is one of the goals of this current project—to take the excitement of the ideas and bring them to life, put them into play in the frisson of engagement with a film text. There is a precedent for this in Kracauer’s idea of a ‘basic layer’ in film that operates below the social and political levels—as Hansen says, there is this ‘impulse’ in Kracauer’s work. The idea of the ‘basic layer’ allows us to start to prise some of his concepts away from the historical, to recontextualise them and give them a life of their own in the new contexts on which they are brought to bear, to start to draw on the conceptual riches brought to light by Hansen’s historical excavations and mobilise them in a new frame. This is not to assert that this dimension is ‘above historical variability’, but to develop an analysis that, in further work, might be extended into historical and cultural variability from a different perspective—from inside the film.
Days of Heaven.

Days of Heaven.
**Shock and mimetic innervation**

The historical perspective is pivotal to understanding Kracauer’s ‘messianic’ approach to the disintegration of the spectatorial self, which, Hansen argues, can bring the spectator into contact with the experience of crisis, contingency and dissociation (TOF xxi). Kracauer’s adherence to the model of shock is integral here to his understanding of the way cinema ‘[assaults] the viewer, as it were, below the belt’ (WSH 451). The accretion of these ideas around the motif of shock has a very clear historical genealogy and clear affiliations with the historical avant-gardes and the theorisation of fin-de-siècle modernity, but does the proposition of the material-corporeal aspects of spectatorship and the mimetic processes they engender necessarily have to be tied to this conceptual frame?

‘Precarious Boundaries’ challenges the centrality of shock—with its heritage in Benjamin and Kracauer—to the established conceptual frameworks for thinking about sensory-affective experience in cinema spectatorship. The essay does not start from a theoretical critique of this concept, but starts from a close reading of the film itself. *Ulysses’ Gaze*, it argues, just does not work that way. It does not shock the senses into awakening but lures them in a process that is more like hypnosis, mesmerism. In its temporality, it does not work with the shock of the instant, but rather with the intensification of the experience through duration: by ‘osmosis not rupture’.

As a counter to the prevalence of the model of shock, ‘Precarious Boundaries’ develops the concept of mimetic innervation, from Hansen’s account of Benjamin. It argues the centrality of mimetic innervation to understanding the way Angelopoulos works with the material, lived experience of history. Angelopoulos’ spectator, it argues, does not need a shock or rupture from the senses to grasp this history—it is enacted across the sensorium. While Hansen herself does not elaborate a theory of mise-en-scène, the reinvigoration of the concept of mimetic innervation opens the way for work that explores how it is that film has the potential to awaken this form of experience, and to develop an

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analysis with this at its core. It opens the way for an exploration of mise-en-scène as an encounter that mobilises the corporeal, mimetic capacities of the spectator in an enlivening that we can understand as the core of affect, in which the performative engagement with film draws the viewer into a mimetic blurring of boundaries.

Susan Buck-Morss explains innervation as ‘Benjamin’s term for a mimetic reception of the external world, one that is empowering, in contrast to a defensive mimetic adaptation that protects at the price of paralyzing the organism, robbing it of its capacity of imagination, and therefore of active response’. Buck-Morss argues, however, that in Benjamin’s understanding of modern experience, ‘mimetic capacities, rather than incorporating the outside world as a form of empowerment, or “innervation”, are used as a deflection against it […] “as a mimetic shock absorber”’ (17). Buck-Morss is unequivocal on this point: ‘Benjamin’s understanding of modern experience […] centers on shock […] shock is the very essence of modern experience’ (16). She traces Benjamin’s admiring summation of the poetry of Baudelaire, who ‘placed the shock experience at the very center of his artistic work’ (17). Shock is also the key nexus of Buck-Morss’ account of cinema spectatorship, which she characterises by an ongoing tension between stimulation and anaesthetisation—the numbing of the sensorium to protect against shock experience:

- on the one hand there is an extreme heightening of the senses, a hypersensitivity of nervous stimulation. On the other there is a dulling of sensation, a numbing of the nervous system that is tantamount to corporeal anaesthetization.

The corollary of this conceptual nexus is an assumption that the body is absent from the spectatorial process. Buck-Morss writes:

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Precisely because the bodies of the beings that inhabit the screen are absent, cinema viewers can perform certain cognitive operations that would otherwise be humanly intolerable—intolerable for the cinema bodies as well as the cinema viewers. The prosthetic organ of the cinema assures that both are anaesthetized, because both are absent from the scene (Seremetakis 56).\(^94\) [italics mine]

This blind spot in Buck-Morss about the implications of embodied spectatorship is surprising, given the key role she has played in restoring the body to the understanding of aesthetics, highlighting Benjamin’s definition of *aisthitikos*, from the Greek, as ‘a discourse of the body’.\(^95\)

To make sense of this apparent paradox requires a closer investigation of these ideas from Benjamin and how they are deployed. The most productive source here is Hansen’s excavation of the many drafts of Benjamin’s ‘Work of Art’ essay—the concepts explored, revised and abandoned, the issues of translation and the controversial editing of the most well-known English translation.\(^96\) The concept of mimetic innervation in Hansen’s account of Benjamin’s work is more ambivalent than Buck-Morss’ understanding. Hansen emphasises the capacity for mimetic innervation, as the ‘possibility of undoing this alienation [of the senses]’ (NOW 2), as the antidote Benjamin proposes to the deadening of the sensorium that derives from the constant escalation of shock, and its corollary—the heightened stimuli needed to rupture or break through its numbing effects (5). She points out that, in

\(^94\) Buck-Morss writes that cinema ‘[exposes] the nerve endings to extreme stimulation from the most shocking physical sensations […] the viewer is bombarded by physical and psychic shock, but feels no pain. […] The shocking, hypersensory cinema events are absorbed passively, severing the connection between perception and muscular innervation […] in the ambivalent position of the viewer [s/he] shares with the camera the all-powerful ocular appropriation of reality, and, as passive viewer, [s/he] relinquishes all power of corporeal response’ (The Cinema Screen’: 56-7). Her account contrasts dramatically with Kracauer’s account of the active corporeality of cinema reception.

\(^95\) ‘Aesthetics’ 6. Buck-Morss recounts the transformation in modern times that shifted the field of aesthetics ‘from sensible experience’ ‘to cultural forms’ (‘Aesthetics’ 7). In Benjamin, she argues, the focus returns to the original Greek meaning of *aisthitikos* as ‘perceptive by feeling […] a discourse of the body […] the whole corporeal sensorium’ (6).

an earlier version of the essay, mimetic innervation was a key term that was substituted only later by the focus on distraction, which she describes as a ‘weak version’ of the concept (3). Hansen’s account of mimetic innervation has the potential to undercut, at its source, Buck-Morss’s construction of the film-viewing experience.

Hansen’s aim is to ‘to reanimate a trajectory […] between the alienation of the senses that preoccupied the later Benjamin and the possibility of undoing this alienation that he began to theorise as early as “One-Way Street” (1928), particularly through the concept of innervation’ (2). Hansen takes issue with Buck-Morss’ focus on shock, at the expense of this other half of Benjamin’s argument—the argument about mimetic innervation. She argues that it is crucial to recognise the ‘antinomies’ in Benjamin’s thinking—what she describes as ‘position A’ and ‘position B’. The first rejects the auratic and attempts to redeem shock in the culture of distraction. This of course is the underpinning for Gunning’s argument about the cinema of attractions. Position B ‘laments the decline of experience, synonymous with “the disintegration of the aura in the experience of shock”’ (2). In this second position, ‘innervation comes to function as an antidote—and counterconcept—to technologically multiplied shock and its anaesthetic economy’ (5).

Hansen emphasises the dialectical nature of Benjamin’s thinking, pointing out that, despite the importance he places on shock, ‘the recuperation of cinema as a medium of experience brings into play a constitutive ambiguity in Benjamin’s concept of “shock”’ (BCE 210). She challenges Buck-Morss’ reading of

97 Hansen writes: ‘related to the notion of an optical unconscious familiar from the artwork essay, innervation refers, broadly, to a neurophysiological process that mediates between internal and external, psychic and motoric, human and mechanical registers. The term still appears in the second and in the third (French) versions of the artwork essay, but is missing in the essay’s fourth, dubiously canonic version’ (NOW 4). Hansen writes that, ‘what drops out of the concept [of the optical unconscious in the final version of the ‘Work of Art’ essay] is the specificity of the cinema experience, in particular its sensory-somatic immediacy, anonymous collectivity, and unpredictability. Accordingly, collective reception is segregated into the following section, subsumed under the notion of distraction, which in turn is reduced to a Brechtian attitude of critical testing and thus robbed of its mimetic, “excentric,” as well as mnemotechnical dimensions’ (NOW 14).

98 Hansen explores similar arguments in Benjamin’s later work, in ‘Benjamin, Cinema and Experience’ (op. cit.), in which she sees the ‘Work of Art’ essay as something of an anomaly in the context of his later speculations on the aura.
Benjamin, in which, she claims, ‘the historical trajectory of shock-anaesthetics-aestheticization appears less like a dialectic than an accelerating spiral or vortex of decline’ (NOW 3). She writes that Benjamin’s understanding of shock is tied at one pole to destructiveness, defensiveness and anaesthetization—but at the other pole to the redemptive possibilities of mimetic experience—‘as an artificial means of propelling the human body into moments of recognition’ (BCE 211). Benjamin’s argument about innervation suggested that ‘the cinema, rather than thriving on and exacerbating the spiral of shock, anaesthetics, and aestheticization, could work to diffuse the deadly violence unleashed by capitalist technology’ (NOW 14).

Why is it that shock has been so pivotal to articulating a paradigm of embodied spectatorship? This is partly because of the way this work grew out of the theorisation of the transformation of perception and experience that accompanied the birth of modernity. The heritage of Benjamin as intellectual exemplar of this analytical framework is pivotal, just as is the ease with which it dovetails into avant-garde notions of the moment of epiphany, the shock of the instant that breaks through the monotony of habitual perception into moments of heightened sensory awareness and intensity. The model of shock in all its incarnations implies this rupture, a momentary flash that shatters the equanimity of the familiar and takes hold of the spectator in an ephemeral moment saturated in sensory intensity.

Leo Charney traces a whole trajectory of thinking about the temporality of modernity, linked to the idea of shock, that runs from the 19th century aesthetcian, Walter Pater, through Georg Simmel, Sergei Eisenstein, Jean Epstein, the Russian formalists, Martin Heidegger and Walter Benjamin. Pater described ‘unique moments of sensual immersion […] whose intensity was […] recognized from its contrast with the more ordinary moments that surrounded it’ (280). Charney identifies the search for this ‘immediate tangible sensation’ as the

99 Hansen quotes Benjamin: ‘If the theory is correct that sensory perception [Empfindung] does not reside in the head, that we perceive a window, a cloud, a tree not in our brains but rather in the place where we see them, then we are, in looking at our beloved, too, outside ourselves’ (‘One-Way Street’: 449). Hansen writes, ‘I’d like to think that Benjamin recognized something of this affectively charged, excentric perception at work as well in the dispersed subjectivity of the cinema experience’ (NOW 10).

100 Leo Charney. ‘In a Moment: Film and the Philosophy of Modernity.’ Charney and Schwartz 279-294.
aesthetic goal for all of these writers (279): to ‘fully inhabit [the moment]’, in Simmel (279); the ‘sensual present as antidote to the alienation of modernity’, in Benjamin (282); the ‘transporting moment’ of sensation, of ‘ecstasy, bliss, rapture’, in Heidegger (282); the ‘evanescent moments of powerful feeling’ produced by photogénie, in Epstein (286); the break from habitualization to ‘return the subject’s awareness of sensation, in Victor Shklovsky (288); the ‘momentary apex of attention or stimulation’, in Eisenstein (289). All of these provide the common threads through this work that emerge most influentially, for contemporary cultural theory, in Benjamin’s formulation of shock as the core experience of modernity.¹⁰¹ Charney links Gunning’s theorisation of the cinema of attractions as ‘a cinema of visual shocks’ with this trajectory, with its focus on the ‘assault on the senses’, its ‘jagged rhythms’ and disjunctive temporality that wrench the audience into an experience of ‘pure present tense’ (288-9).¹⁰²

The links of this work into film theory are myriad—Gunning’s formulation of the cinema of attractions is only one of the more recent threads, but one that highlights both the productivity of this conceptual nexus and its limitations. It is no accident that Gunning frames his argument within this model, as it gives him a way to focus on the temporality of early cinema as a ‘cinema of instants’ (AA 38). The long lineage of the model of shock—and its familiarity—provide a very useful lever to wedge apart assumptions about spectatorship that derive from conventional understandings of narrative cinema. Gunning makes a pertinent link here when he recounts the appeal of the direct ‘assaultive’ strategies of the cinema of attractions to the American avant-garde.¹⁰³ The appeal of a model of spectatorship that resides largely outside the confines of diegetic absorption is also clear in its affinity with the modernist appropriation of Brechtian techniques. The easy translation of this model into the contemporary cinema of special effects is also obvious. However, in one of his most productive but least explored aphorisms, Gunning writes, ‘but special effects are tamed attractions’ (CA 68).

¹⁰¹ The argument about shock is developed, among other sites, in Walter Benjamin. ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire.’ Arendt: 155-200.
¹⁰² Gunning develops this argument about temporality in “‘Now you see it, now you don’t’”, op. cit.: 45. Gunning uses the term ‘jagged rhythm’ here to describe the films of Georges Méliès, which, he says, ‘we experience […] as rapidly juxtaposed jolts of activity’ (46).
If special effects are ‘tamed attractions’, what would unleash this energy, let it loose in the film? This latent dynamism lurks in the model of the energetic connection between spectator and screen, and its implications go way beyond a notion of sensation as it could be applied to special effects. To explore this, we need to explore the possibility of techniques that arouse that energetic connection, that engagement with the performative energy of the moment, the event, the instant, and deepen, develop or amplify it—that go beyond sensation and work with that sensory arousal in the spectator in a more sustained way—not through narrative absorption but through a sensory awakening. As long as the encounter with the senses is thought within the paradigm of shock, this amplification cannot be envisaged.

In Gunning’s account of the spectatorial economy of early cinema, the energetic engagement that Gunning proposes goes in two directions—the exhibitionist address propels the film outwards in an assault on the spectator, and the spectator is drawn into the film in a kind of visual fascination that Gunning calls *curiositas*—‘the lust of the eyes’ (AA 38). The binary opposition that Benjamin proposes in the ‘Work of Art’ essay, between contemplation and distraction, gives Gunning a very useful frame to articulate the shifts in spectatorship instigated by this particular historical moment (WOA 240 ff.). To Gunning, this visual curiosity is the antithesis of contemplative absorption—it is a distracted mode of viewing ‘aroused and fulfilled through […] a succession of shocks’ (AA 38).

However, other accounts of early cinema take up the question of visual fascination in ways that go beyond moments of shock, exploring more the dynamics of the lure, without necessarily implying a contemplative mode. Hansen cites the research of Emilie Altenloh, who uncovered the fascination female viewers had for images such as waterfalls (BCE 218).104 This research suggests a kinaesthetic pleasure that involves absorption, an ability of the image to lure the spectator into a heightened sensory experience, rather than to instigate it through assaulting the

senses. Mary Ann Doane writes of the affective dimensions of early Russian melodrama, in which, ‘pathos […] is expansive rather than sharp; it is dependent on duration instead of privileged moments’.\(^{105}\) Doane’s description of the hypnotic intensity these films can produce cites Yuri Tsivian’s account of an ‘aesthetics of immobility’ (80). Tsivian writes that, ‘instead of a rapidly changing kaleidoscope of images, [this cinema] aspires to \textit{rivet} the attention of the audience on to a single image’ (28-29, qtd. in Doane 80). Such an approach, Doane argues ‘tends to undermine the Benjaminian notion of the cinema as a machine for the generation of “shocks”’ (82–3).

This economy of visual fascination, of course, extends beyond the context of early cinema. Gertrud Koch, like Hansen, discerns a similar interest in the antithesis of the shock experience, at the core of Benjamin’s own work, in the concept of mimetic experience. Koch discusses the centrality of the concept of mimesis in the work of Benjamin, Adorno and Kracauer, and its heritage in a phenomenological approach that offers a fundamental challenge to the understanding of cinematic fascination and identification. Highlighting the affinities this work has with anthropology, she writes that:

spectators may get riveted to any detail within the frame, they may identify—in a sort of mimetic process—with a landscape, with individual objects or clusters of objects. […] This implies a more emotional, one could even say, animistic relationship to the object.\(^{106}\)

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Gunning’s work on the cinema of attractions is resolutely historical: he writes: ‘each period constructs its spectator in a new way’ (CA 68). An awareness of this


historical aspect, and its link to the theorisation of modernity, puts the emphasis on shock in perspective. Indeed, as much as his understanding of spectatorship in early cinema can be productively translated into contemporary contexts, if we were to explore the ‘paths not taken’ in this adaptation of Gunning’s work and its adoption into contemporary film theory, we find a whole other logic.

Gunning’s formulation of the notion of a ‘cinema of attractions’, of course, took its lead from Eisenstein’s definition of film as a ‘montage of attractions’.107 One key historical thread that opens up this work is to look at what Eisenstein did with the notion of attraction. Central to the theorisation of cinema in his early work, and tied to a focus on sensation understood in a crude behaviourist model of efficacy, the concept of attraction is transformed in Eisenstein’s later work. Jacques Aumont traces the way the concept evolves from a focus on pure sensation and the jolting of the spectator into momentary sensation to the much more broad-ranging concept of ecstasy, a ““purely” passionate sphere of “pure” feeling, sensation, being’ (61): ‘the passage to something else, something of a different quality’ (64) an ‘ecstatic “vibration”’ (60).108 Aumont describes this as an experience of the loss of boundaries, ‘making the subject “leave himself behind”, “transcend himself” or “lose himself”, in and for this feeling of union’ (60). Eisenstein’s concept of ecstasy has strong resonances with the concept of mimetic innervation. Taussig reinvigorates this connection with the links he traces between Eisenstein’s and Benjamin’s work: Eisenstein, he writes, ‘was ‘surely a profound influence on Benjamin [and] time and again in word and image expressed those principles at the heart of Benjamin’s fascination with the mimetic faculty’ (28).109

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109 Taussig writes, ‘especially pertinent was the way Eisenstein came to understand […] the interdependence of montage with physiognomic aspects of visual worlds’ (Mimesis 28). In Eisenstein, this is linked to a concept of “pre-logical” or “sensory” thought (Aumont 63–4). Interestingly, Eisenstein’s argument that “the “sole condition for obtaining a valid work of art” (!) is to maintain sufficient balance between two “forms of thought,” “logical” and “pre-logical.”” (Aumont 63) is echoed in Langer’s argument about aesthetic experience and in Dyer’s argument about representative and non-representative signs.
By side-stepping the model of shock, the notion of mimetic innervation opens onto an understanding of sensory experience that is not tied in to a moment of rupture. ‘Precarious Boundaries’ argues that the spectator of *Ulysses*’ *Gaze* does not need a shock—a break or rupture from the senses—to grasp the history Angelopoulos presents, as it is enacted across the sensorium. The essay rejects a common understanding of the film that focuses on modernist techniques of shock and distantiation. It strives to explain the way Angelopoulos works with the heightening of sensory experience to reinvent narrative form, sliding between the narrative, epic and mythic layers, ‘as if narrative and mythic time and space, past and present, are permeable membranes of a single field’ (PB 80). It argues that:

mimetic innervation is the closest we can come to explaining this process: the materiality of sensory experience evokes an affective resonance with other embodied experience, a blurring of history with fiction, myth and memory. At the core of this fusion between history and memory, between memory and the senses, and between sensory experience and affect is a profound understanding of cinematic experience as simultaneously corporeal and affective and of mise-en-scène as the material substratum of embodied cinematic experience. (80)

Discovering the work of Nadia Seremetakis, several years after completing these speculations on Angelopoulos, has given a new dimension to the argument about the role of the senses in Angelopoulos’ work with history.\(^{110}\) Seremetakis explores both material culture and etymology to articulate the sensory economies of traditional Greek culture, making clear an integration of the senses with meaning and memory, and of the senses and history, lived in a way that the English language cannot encompass. She writes:

In Greek there is a semantic circuit that weds the sensorial to agency, memory, finitude, and therefore history—all of which are contained within the etymological strata of the senses. […] In these semantic currents we find

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no clear cut boundaries between the senses and the emotions, the mind and body […] the affective and aesthetic experience (4–5).

Talking of the standardisation of produce that followed Greece’s entry into the EEC (now the EU), Seremetakis traces the increasing erasure of the sensory residues accrued in material objects and artefacts. She writes of the contemporary marginalisation of cultural practices—and the traditional sensory-linguistic accounts of them—that blur the boundaries between language, the senses and storytelling, and blend across these layers into the practices of everyday life. She talks, for example, of a traditional way of thinking and speaking in which a local variety of peach, the *rodhákino*—known as ‘the breast of Aphrodite’—does not represent Aphrodite’s breast but bears its material, sensory and erotic traces.111 She says, ‘the sensory is not only encapsulated within the body as an internal capacity of power, but is also dispersed out there on the surface of things as the latter’s autonomous characteristics, which can then invade the body as perceptual experience’ (6). This is a mimetic economy—here the mythic, the sensory, memory, affect and history all move across these layers seamlessly in the language used to describe these practices. Seremetakis writes that ‘the sensory landscape and its meaning-endowed objects bear within them emotional and historical sedimentation that can provoke and ignite gestures, discourses and acts […]’ (7). She writes of ‘the cross-communication of senses and things’: ‘sensory interiors and exteriors constantly pass into each other in the creation of extra-personal significance’ (6).

I don’t want to essentialise Angelopoulos by drawing this connection—and clearly his own influences may be much more diverse, internationalist or modern than the residual regional cultures that Seremetakis is studying. However, there is a remarkable affinity between Seremetakis’ articulation of the traditional ground and residues of Greek sensibility—and the way this sensibility is embedded in every level in the semantic frames offered by Greek language—and Angelopoulos’ work

111 Seremetakis is talking of the residual sensory experiences and practices that persist around the fringes of modernisation—in the outlying regions, among older people, in the nostalgic memories sensations, tastes, the flavour of myth and storytelling and the blending of the two in the quality of everyday life and the intimate corporealities of blood relationships.
with history. Seremetakis argues that ‘the memory of the senses speaks to a reception theory of material culture’ (11). From a different point of departure, ‘Precarious Boundaries’ also works from a reception theory of the materiality of film. It works from mise-en-scène through ideas of materiality and the senses, from a close engagement with the film, from inside the film, watching it, analysing it, trying to understand its dynamic for the spectator, to arrive at an argument about the blurring of boundaries between history, memory, storytelling and the senses in Angelopoulos’ aesthetic sensibility. To have these conclusions echoed in another work from a very different perspective—Seremetakis’ explicit articulation of a similar sensibility—provides some affirmation of this method. Of course, my approach tells us nothing about how Greek audiences—either modern, urban or traditional, regional ones—might respond to this sensibility in Angelopoulos’ work. What is clear, though, is that a conventional cultural studies approach to the film, that would perhaps look at its national/historical context, maybe contextualise it within Greek cinema, or might look at local audiences, would probably never arrive at this kind of deep insight about the core sensory-affective economy of the film. The core of the methodology I’ve worked with here, to start to understand the film, is to get inside it, to lock horns with the sound, the image, the rhythm, the music, the camera, and from that point of departure to keep going until the logic of the film, what makes it tick, starts to emerge. This is no doubt a precarious methodology—and some aspects of a film may never be accessible to this approach. This is the leap of faith—to take this risk—that this method entails.

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Seremetakis is an anthropologist and, by definition, her study involves close ethnographic fieldwork to uncover the local nuances of material culture and its reception. Like Hansen, Seremetakis works with the historically and culturally-specific ‘public horizon of reception’ (Hansen, MPS 341). In film studies, the turn to detailed research into historical conditions of reception—in the work of Hansen, Gunning and others—has played a key role in pushing aside universalist assumptions about spectatorship.112 Hansen draws on this research to contest the

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112 This includes assumptions such as those in apparatus theory and psychoanalytic film theory.
cognitivist claims of immutable, ‘hardwired’ mechanisms of perception and sensory experience. In working from my own spectatorial experience, my project takes off at a tangent from the historical studies. This tangent does not imply a challenge to those studies, rather it is a different project, informed by a different imperative.

Hansen writes of the ‘eclectic’ reception of Hollywood in its global contexts of reception (MPS 341). Close studies of reception reveal the often surprising and unpredictable reception of these films in contexts outside their context of origin. Whereas it is widely acknowledged that international audiences receive and interpret Hollywood product in diverse and innovative ways, in a strange neo-colonial twist, there often seems to be an unspoken assumption that the task of scholars from Anglo-American contexts is to focus their study on the context of origin of other films in order to provide an authoritative reading for non-indigenous viewers. There is a disavowal, an erasure, of the self as experiencing spectator in these readings. In some respects, this claim for legitimation defies the global circulation of films—that it is not only Hollywood films that are distributed and exhibited in global contexts. It also belies the century-old tradition of hybridity in which the aesthetic insights of films, the mimetic economies which they are able to bring into play, partake in incredibly rich and promiscuous interminglings. One need only look at the recent radically heterogeneous infiltration of the aesthetic strategies of Hong Kong martial arts cinema into new films from contexts as diverse as Bollywood, Palestine and Korea to recognise this process. One need only look at the spell-binding Palestinian intifada ninja sequence in Elia Suleiman’s *Divine Intervention*, performed to Natacha Atlas singing Screamin’ Jay Hawkins’ ‘I Put a Spell on You’ in Arabic, to appreciate the circulation and incorporation of kinaesthetic, mimetic insights, like found objects or raw materials, into new cinematic syntheses and new networks of circulation.

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113 Hansen, for example, cites several studies that explore this eclectic process, including Rosie Thomas. ‘Indian Cinema: Pleasures and Popularity.’ *Screen* 26: 1 (1985): 116-31.
Laura Marks takes up Seremetakis’ recognition of ‘cultural differences in the organization of the sensorium’, emphasising that ‘the sensuous geography characteristic of one culture will not be transparent to a viewer from another culture’ (Marks 230). In my own interventions there is a recognition of the limitations of grounding the study of films from outside my own cultural context in my own experience as a spectator, my own sensory, mimetic geographies. There is no claim to authority about the reception of the films in their contexts of origin—where there are speculations about this, they are acknowledged as hypotheses.

As the essays develop, however, and as several of them are increasingly informed by in-depth interviews with the filmmakers, what emerges is that the close attention to the sensory-affective economy of the films, as I experience them, opens the way to a dialogue with the filmmakers that, in itself, generates quite profound aesthetic insights. In this dialogue, I do not forfeit my own grounded cultural experience to attempt to acquire an authoritative knowledge of the other—this is a dialogue in which both self and other are present, in a constant interchange. At times the insights of this approach seem to reach deeper when the dialogue hits a block, a barrier between incommensurate frameworks for thinking about film, when the exchange butts my own experience and interpretive frameworks up against those of my interlocutors.

What emerges from these dialogues and the speculations they engender, is that the core principles of our aesthetic systems—the ways we think about images, what images are, how to work with them, what a frame is, what movement is, what cinema can do or be—are profoundly cultural principles. That these are not just elements of visual style, accessible by a ‘historical poetics’, but have deep resonance as embodied frameworks for thinking and working with sound and image.
‘Tumultuous Materialism’

‘Nowhere to Hide: The Tumultuous Materialism of Lee Myung-Se’ links the discussion of affect and mise-en-scène, and theories of cinematic materiality and mimesis, with the theorisation of genre, through an exploration of the work of Korean director, Lee Myung-Se. The essay rethinks conventional genre criticism, rewriting the operations of genre through the lens of affective mimetic experience. Examining the role of kinetic energy in Lee’s reworking of the action genre, the essay argues that both genre and visual style work viscerally, mimetically, and should be understood within the terms of affective experience.

Nowhere to Hide is a detective film, but it is no ordinary action film. Lee talks of Nowhere to Hide as being all about movement and kinetic energy, and the principles of stillness in motion, after the manner of a Monet waterlily painting. The film does not separate the kinetic energies of the bodies of actors from those of rain or leaves—in fact it renders those inanimate things performative. Mise-en-scène becomes a performance element, a rendition of kinetic energy, a mobilisation of lines of force, rhythms, and energies within a shot and a sequence. The analysis looks at how Lee works with mise-en-scène, movement and kinetic energy—with motion and stasis, live action and comic-style frozen moments and the qualities of movement and light—as the building blocks, the raw material of generic play, and argues that these are the stuff of genre—that this is where genre happens.

Christine Gledhill, in her synopsis of the contemporary issues facing genre theory, describes genre as ‘first and foremost a boundary phenomenon’ and outlines the foundation of genre studies as a taxonomic enterprise, complete with ‘boundary skirmishes’.115 As a system of categorisation based on characteristics of the text, conventional genre criticism is intricately tied up with conventional narrative analyses of plot and character: genre is seen to be acted out through the variation and repetition of character types, and conventional plot lines and structures.116

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115 Gledhill, Christine. ‘Rethinking Genre.’ Gledhill and Williams 221-243: 221; 223.
116 For an analysis of Nowhere to Hide along these lines, see Darcy Paquet. ‘Genrebending in Contemporary Korean Cinema.’ New Directions in Asian Cinema. Catalogue of the First Sydney Asia Pacific Film Festival, March, 2000.
soon as we understand cinematic experience as operating on a much more dispersed plane than this, the question of genre must also be rethought.

‘Tumultuous Materialism’ takes the understanding of cinematic experience as something that happens on the level of the mimetic—the arousal of mimetic sensory-affective experience—and feeds this understanding into its way of thinking about genre. The essay builds on contemporary work that shifts from a taxonomic approach to genre to an understanding of genre as a contract between filmmaker, film and audience. Taking its lead from Steve Neale and Marcia Landy, who propose to understand genre, rather, as a set of expectations and hypotheses or as a contract with the spectator, the essay argues that the analysis of genre must be loosened from the stultifying framework of taxonomic criticism—it must address the question of how genre is experienced. It challenges the taxonomic models of genre that derive from textual analysis, subjecting the core understanding of genre to the question of reception. The essay thus rewrites genre from the point of view of spectatorship. In so doing it takes genre criticism into a new terrain. This essay applies to genre the rigours of a performative analysis. It argues that the recognition of familiar tropes that trigger generic identification and expectation does not operate simply on the broader level of narrative convention, character type and type of film, but is established, engaged or thwarted as the film is experienced on the level of the senses, mimetically, energetically, moment by moment.

The essay argues that there is an implicit understanding in Lee’s work that genre works in this way—that his work derives from a consummate literacy in the language, the syntax of genre, as it is inscribed in the subtle modulations and

\[117\] Neale, Steve. ‘Questions of Genre.’ *Screen* 31:1 (Spring 1990). Neale writes, ‘genres do not consist only of films: they consist also, and equally, of specific systems of expectation and hypothesis which spectators bring with them to the cinema and which interact with films during the course of the viewing process’ (46). Marcia Landy argues that ‘genre study has called attention to the reciprocal function of texts, that they are a contract between the audience and the film.’ Marcia Landy. ‘Introduction.’ Landy, ed. *Imitations of Life: a Reader on Film and Television Melodrama*. Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 1991; 20. Gledhill acknowledges Neale’s challenge on one level: ‘Neale’s 1980 study, *Genre*, argued that genres are not discrete phenomena, contained within mutually exclusive boundaries, but deal rather in a shared and changing pool of plot mechanisms, icons and discourses’ (223–4); but while she takes up some issues raised in ‘Questions of Genre’, she does not take on the challenges addressed to the taxonomic approach itself.
resonances of sound and image—and that Lee deploys this understanding of genre to radically expand the possibilities of genre play. This is not simply a polemical claim aiming to shift the focus from characteristics of the text to the engagement between text and spectator. It is, rather, an attempt to catch up with the ways genre works on the ground, the ways genre play is developing rapidly in contemporary cinema into a sophisticated, nuanced, dynamic, inventive and enormously pleasurable form of play.

‘Tumultuous Materialism’ starts from the film and asks, how does genre work in this film? The answer it finds is that generic expectation and play work not only on the macro level of narrative and character but on the micro level of immediate sensory experience—sound and image as they are performed, transformed and shifted at each moment—on the corporeal level of mimetic experience. It argues, ‘Lee works with genre like a digital paintbox program—colour, rhythm, light, shadow, movement, music, sound effects and cinematic reference all become tools in a tool-kit of experiential moments’. There is nothing intrinsically radical about this claim. As a contemporary filmmaker working on the cutting edge of genre hybridisation, Lee pushes to a new limit what other filmmakers know and work with intuitively, if not in a verbally articulated way. This is the productivity of genre in contemporary cinema. This is what makes generic play exciting as a contemporary form. It is our critical understanding of genre that has to catch up with this and to do so has to shake off the old, rigid theoretical frameworks.

Conventional genre criticism is often bolstered by the pedestrian understanding of mise-en-scène as objects in the frame—props, costumes, setting, et cetera—leading to the endless banality of taxonomic tables of iconography—cowboy hats, horses and guns in westerns, et cetera ad infinitum. This essay sees mise-en-scène rather as part of the contract between film, filmmaker and audience—as a question of the engagement between text and spectator on the level of the senses, as something that is enacted on the sensorium as a mimetic innervation. Through its analysis of the way the film works mimaetically with mise-en-scène, the essay

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contests a reduction of mise-en-scène to ‘visual style’, arguing that, in *Nowhere to Hide*, it is at the core of a corporeal, materialist approach to sound and image. The analysis of the way the film works with the senses and mimetic experience, therefore, is much more than a stylistic analysis—it is not just about surface—but is about a conceptual approach to the image and its relationship to embodied affective experience.\footnote{In his recent essay on embodiment in Hong Kong action cinema, Wong Kin-yuen gives a fascinating genealogy for similar work with motion and stasis, tracing it back through Daoist philosophy, Peking Opera and into Hong Kong action films. As an in-depth study of the cultural-philosophical precepts informing a way of working with the image, and particularly their manifestation in the genre cinema that is the direct precursor to Lee’s film, Wong’s study gives further credence to the argument that this way of working with the image is much more than just a visual style. Wong Kin-yuen. ‘Technoscience Culture, Embodiment and *Wuda Pian.*’ *Hong Kong Connections: Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema.* Eds. Meaghan Morris, Siu Leung Li and Stephen Chan Ching-kiu. Durham & London: Duke University Press, and Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005.}
Ekphrasis: toward an affective writing

‘Precarious Boundaries’ initiates the move away from the attempt to explain in longwinded literal chains the nature of embodied spectatorship—a quantum leap from the commentary-style of this writing—to attempt to write from inside the moment of experience as it unfolds as a moment of engagement with the film. Like ‘Precarious Boundaries’, ‘Tumultuous Materialism’ stays close to the film. The essay takes up the question that is implicit in the earlier essay, about how to write about film, and explores further its attempt to develop an affective writing. Underpinning this writing practice is an assumption that, to follow through the implications of embodied spectatorship for a film theory that acknowledges that the film is constituted in the moment of experience, requires not only a shift in theoretical focus but also a shift in writing practice. The writing process itself raises questions about the status and stakes of film theory: why do we write about film; what is the purpose of the writing; and what is the most appropriate way to write about the complex, energetic, spatio-temporal phenomenon that is cinema? It raises questions about the relationship between film theory and filmmaking practice, and also between film theory and film criticism.

The question of how to write about film is a very loaded, although often marginalised, one in film theory. This question is bounded on one hand by the dead weight of 1970s film theory, written under the sign of semiotics, psychoanalysis and poststructuralism, in which the film vanished into the abyss of theoretical edifices constructed to legitimise the study of film within the terms of the “master” disciplines. On the other side it is squeezed in a contemporary context by what Adrian Martin calls ‘Bordwell’s vision of an academic hell where all of us say exactly the same thing about every identifiable film’ (SOS 3), in which ‘cinema study has become one big sausage machine, with all manner of films squashed down to fit the few select critical/theoretical “schemata” in force (or in fashion) at any given time’ (1). It is the rejection of this stultifying impoverishment of cinematic thinking that shapes this current project, and its affinity with the call for a critical practice that explores ‘the logic that makes a film tick’.
The question of the relationship between film theory and film practice is a vexed one, or should be so if the lacunae of the relationship are acknowledged. Hansen has staked the claim for the relative independence of film theory from any demands to serve filmmaking practice:

As long as you keep a certain division of labour between film practice and film theory or cinema studies I believe it is legitimate to study film history, to study the institution of cinema, to study film aesthetics without thinking about its immediate applicability for a different kind of film practice (Jayamanne & Rutherford 100).

While acknowledging the legitimacy of this kind of cinema studies, my own work has been driven by a different imperative, more akin to the position of Trinh T. Minh-ha, who affirms a productive tension generated by the gaps between theory and film practice:

Try as much as you wish, you can’t make a film out of a theory. Similarly, there is no theory that can entirely capture a practice. They are two different realities, each with its own light, its own precise workings. Always in excess, they escape one another. It is that challenge between the two that one keeps alive in the process of film-making.

A key tenet of my approach to writing about film is that the theoretical work should be enabling for a filmmaking practice. The question that animates the enquiry is always a question about aesthetics and spectatorship—the search for insights that would enable the development of a different filmmaking practice, would enable the kind of thought that comes from the same place as a kind of filmmaking practice comes from: embodied thought. This is what motivates the focus of its study on an attempt to grasp and further the understanding of certain

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120 Hansen adds, ‘but I do think that cinema studies can do a lot for the future of film making by keeping alive a view of a different kind of cinema than the most dominant and successful ones’ (100).
aesthetic principles, and ‘the challenge between the two’ shadows the development of the theoretical arguments.

This project speaks to a longing for a more fluid relationship between film theory, criticism and film practice. The essays work at various points toward developing a mode of affective writing that can somehow evoke the experience of being inside the film—what I have called an immanent criticism. In this endeavour, the essays have a strong affinity with some of the writing that appears as film criticism, and they situate themselves to some extent as a synthesis of the imperatives of criticism with those of film theory. To some, these are antithetical modes.

Jonathan Rosenbaum, for example, in some of the most eloquent and intellectually engaging film criticism in English, often sets the two at loggerheads. He writes with admiration, for example, of the impatience that characterises the critical writing of Jean-Luc Godard. He says that Godard:

> proceeds by leaps and bounds across vast reaches of contemporary culture […] this sense of urgency creates a form of criticism in the present tense […] It is essential to this method that everything remains in process: ideas are introduced in order to spawn other ideas rather than flesh out careful exegeses, and movement invariably takes precedence over explanation (Rosenbaum 19-21).

Similarly, in the critical work of Manny Farber, he praises the impatient scramble that drives the excitement and intellectual vigour of Farber’s impassioned engagement with individual films. He cites Bill Krohn’s claim that Farber produces ‘a text […] that “can be entered at any point, without hierarchy, center, or horizon-line. […] There is no thesis, no antithesis, no possibility of synthesis”’ (63). He describes Farber’s writing as ‘a soft-shoe dance with comic twists and bends’ (64), marked by a ‘radical distance from what is commonly regarded as academic film study […] but perfectly ‘suited to perform the work of evocation, suggestion, analysis and mimesis that it sets out to do: […] it captures] the world as we experience it’ (71).

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Laleen Jayamanne has talked of the divide, in contemporary work, between the critical and theoretical endeavours, and the attempt to restore some of the close critical engagement with a film to theoretical writing:

film studies has opened up a huge gap between film criticism and academic, theoretical writing on film. I think the gap is not a healthy situation. Not healthy especially for academic work, because it becomes much too hermetic and talks only to itself. This is a shame because film criticism existed before the institutionalisation of film studies. It’s a rich discourse. It’s got a history. It’s linked to various volatile public cultures.¹²³

Steven Shaviro writes of the tension within a film theory that, on the one hand, ‘cannot be separated from the bodily agitations, the movements of fascination, the reactions of attraction and repulsion’ (10) that animate the pleasures of film viewing, and that ‘seeks compulsively to reproduce the experiences of which it is the abstraction’, but on the other hand ‘tries to assume as great a distance as possible from its object, [whether … to praise …] or condemn it or dispassionately observe it’ (10). Shaviro eschews this ‘scientific’ approach to film theory, attempting a ‘visceral writing’ which he proclaims as a ‘participatory and pornographic criticism’ (267).

Lesley Stern and George Kouvaros displace this question of the role of theory onto a discussion of language itself, and the relationship between the film object and the language that attempts to describe or encapsulate it for the reader.¹²⁴ They identify

¹²³ Davis, Therese. ‘Interview with Laleen Jayamanne.’ Senses Of Cinema 20 (2002): 1. <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/02/20/jayamanne.html>. Jayamanne singles out the US/British academy here as the site of the most rigorous and unproductive division: ‘I am painfully aware of this gap in the Anglo-American situation, whereas in France there is an academic culture and still a very powerful film culture. In Australia, for well over a decade, there has been some pretty exciting writing. I find the Australian academic film writing of people like Jodi Brooks, George Kouvaros, Adrian Martin, Meaghan Morris, Sam Rohdie, Bill Routt, Anne Rutherford and Lesley Stern, among others, enormously exciting. They don’t come out of an academic machine. Their writing is singular and as such can speak to film with greater flexibility’ (1). For a further discussion of the attempt to leave behind a ‘theory largely detached from criticism and often disdainful of it’, see Gilberto Perez. The Material Ghost: Films and their Medium. Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1998: 15.
the issue as a methodological problem around the status of description, linking this question to the problem of ‘ekphrasis’, the much more familiar discussion in art history and literary theory about the status of commentary and its relationship to the object: ‘a description in words of a plastic art’ (10). Stern and Kouvaros start from the question of performance: how to find a writing practice that is adequate to the task of conveying the ‘sense of corporeal presence’ of a performance (11), that can bridge the gap between the ‘presence’ of an actor on the screen and his or her absence in the discursive practice of writing on the page. To Stern and Kouvaros, also, the core question becomes one of affect—how to ‘[convey] a sense of performative affect’ (12) and to address the ‘affect circulating between performer and spectator’ (21). They discuss the rhetorical strategies that attempt to evoke the energetic charge of corporeal presences on screen, moving from an understanding of critical writing itself as performance to a proposal that the writing should explore an element of fictionalisation as a rhetorical strategy to convey the affective nature of performance. Their approach clearly aims not to ‘decipher’ a film, but to evoke it, and they propose ‘evoking rather than effacing the fictional charge’ of the ekphrasis: ‘an attentiveness to the fictional impulse at the heart of any ekphrastic endeavour’ (17).

While the problem posed by Stern and Kouvaros resonates strongly with my own work, a different angle of incidence in my enquiry has produced rather different reflections. Stern and Kouvaros pose this as a question of writing, of ekphrasis, but it is just as much a question of conceptualisation. This is not simply a question of prose style, for the way one writes about film is intimately linked to what the core questions are in the understanding of film. How we think about the aim of this writing depends on how we think about film in the first place—what its energetic charge is. In my work this is not understood so much as fictional, but as mimetic. The purpose of writing, the goal which the work aspires to, becomes the attempt to evoke that mimetic experience, which Laura Marks describes as the breakthrough of embodied experience into the film (141). It aims to grasp the encounter with the film as it unfolds moment by moment and to find an ekphrastic practice and a conceptual framework that grows directly out of this encounter. The energy of the writing, in other words, must attempt to meet the energy of the film. A rhetorical acknowledgement of fiction cannot address these aspects of spectatorship.
question explored here is not so much the ‘fictional charge’ as the affective mimetic charge: to understand how ‘movement, voice and gesture […] can generate affect’ (Stern and Kouvaros 20) requires an understanding of mimetic experience; the rhetorical strategies need to explore not ‘fictionalisation’, but the mimetic capacity in writing.

That mimesis ‘might […] restore the body to its senses’ is a redemptive claim for mimesis, and by extension, a claim for the redemptive powers of a film writing that can bring alive the mimetic encounter with cinema (143). Marks comes close to positing this possibility when she explores a ‘language that draws close enough to its object to make the sign ignite’, to evoke the ‘flash of embodied meaning’ in language that Merleau-Ponty discusses (Marks 141). In this sense, the dual exploration of the mimetic and the affective, in both the essays’ analytical work and in their writing strategies, is central to their methodological framework. This attempt to write affectively—to evoke, through the writing, some of the affective charge of the film—can only ever be partially successful. However, there is an implicit assumption that the commitment to developing an affective writing practice itself has theoretical implications that go beyond the surface question of writing style or the ‘impressionistic’ imperatives of criticism.

The stakes of a challenge to commentary-style academic writing are amply demonstrated by a remarkable exchange between Martin Jay and Michael Taussig (notable as much for its frank vitriol as for its content). The exchange lines up as a conflict between the ‘exegete’ and the ‘poet’—on the one hand, the ‘exegete’ accused of plodding, pedantic, unimaginative academic gate-keeping but staking a claim to academic rigour, comprehensive research and intellectual superiority; on the other, the ‘poet’, accused of a lack of rigour, of nonsensical, whimsical writing that flits distractedly from point to point, but claiming insightful, imaginative

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125 Marks here cites Susan Buck-Morss, ‘Aesthetics’.
126 Whereas Marks’ account of this flash is consistent with the notion of rupture, I would see this as operating also as a slow simmer, an osmosis.
synthesis, ground-breaking paradigm shifts and the courage to explore—to enact in the writing itself the very mechanisms it engages intellectually. Taussig writes:

the exegete can’t tolerate or survive […] the creation of presence through the politics of style—and mimesis as approached by Benjamin and Adorno was always an issue of the politics of style […] where sensuousness and the physical quality of language was given a chance to flourish in all its historically conditioned nervousness. And that is fearful writing. One can choose to recognize this fear and work with its strain. Or one can cop-like turn against it in a fit of exegetical pique (‘Michael Taussig replies to Martin Jay’ 54).

It is this leap inherent in embracing the blurring of boundaries characteristic of mimetic experience that infuses the ‘poetic’ style of Taussig and that leaves Martin Jay so disaffected. It is this leap into the dark, a willingness to take the risk of crossing this boundary, taking the leap into the abyss, that writing on film must embrace if it is to resonate with the mimetic energies of film and film experience. The writing, in other words, must endeavour to engage the processes of mimetic innervation just as film does, and as the theoretical framework does.

Hansen writes that Benjamin’s project is one both of perception and of modes of writing (NOW 9). She points out Benjamin’s keen interest in the lessons that can be learnt from advertising:

While criticism used to be defined by a stable vantage point and “correct distancing” (just as art, as he says elsewhere, used to “begin two meters off the body”) advertising tears into the liberal space of contemplation and “all but hits us between the eyes with things” (11).\(^{128}\)

Her account suggests that the criteria for judging or responding to this new mode of writing cannot simply be the traditional Enlightenment standards of exegetical clarity and logic, as there is a different imperative here:

“the leap into the apparatus” [in Benjamin’s work] effected by the collapsing of “body- and image-space,” is itself an image […] and remains a metaphor […]. To a degree, therefore, innervation is necessarily based on miscognition […]. But from this miscognition arise creative and transformative energies […] in art as well as politics (NOW 7).

Hansen herself does not cross the abyss into affective writing on film, but her theoretical project takes the reader right to the edge of that gap, begging them to take the leap. This is the logical extension of her call to understand narrative not as a set of norms but as ‘a web that allows for a wide range of [sensory-affective] aesthetic effects and experiences’.
Days of Heaven.
**Affect and performance**

Whereas ‘Precarious Boundaries’ conceptualises embodied affect in terms of mise-en-scène, Lesley Stern refocuses this question by starting from a consideration of the performing body, returning to the question that animated the early enquiries of Linda Williams: what is the relationship between the body on the screen and the body of the spectator? Leaving aside the problematic of vision that dominated earlier interrogations of cinematic embodiment and embodied spectatorship, Stern shifts the focus to the question of the somatic, in a series of works that explore the nature of the connection between the performing body and the body of the spectator. Stern addresses this question with a different inflection to Williams—the question here is not one of a fantasmatic mediation between the body of the spectator and the body onscreen, but a corporeal, energetic one.

Stern’s work shares with the work of others the emphasis on the performing body on screen. To Peter Brooks this is a semiotic body, a site of signification deployed in the melodramatic modes derived from pantomime ‘to represent meanings’ that cannot be represented otherwise. To Deleuze, this body is not a body that represents, an ‘intermediary’ (189) for meanings generated elsewhere. It is a body of postures and attitudes that directly correlate with modes of thought and are deployed in different ways by different directors to reinvent the modern by ‘giving thought a body’. Deleuze cites Bazin’s claim that cinematographic presence is different to theatrical presence, and argues that the cinema brings about ‘the genesis of an “unknown body” which we have in the back of our heads, like the

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unthought in thought’ (201). Stern, on the other hand adopts the theatrical model of presence to explore the energetic connection set up between the body on screen and the spectator.

In the first of these works, Stern draws from the theorisation of theatrical performance an understanding of performance as a mode of ‘modelling’ or deploying energy through the body. From its outset this work departs from conventional ways of thinking about the actor within a representational framework—as a ‘semiotic body’—and opens onto questions of the kinesthetic. Stern leaves aside ‘psychological or mimetic principles’ to see performance as ‘a way of converting and transforming energy’ (*The Scorsese Connection*: 16-17). She talks also of the films of Jerry Lewis, within which ‘performativity is not about representation, about bringing some ideality into being and presence, but about a collision and concatenation of forces and objects, about a catastrophic circuit’ (‘Acting out of Character’ 289). This is in marked distinction to authors such as James Naremore, who defines cinema acting by the ‘closed boundary between audience and screen’, the ‘impenetrable barrier of the screen [which] favors representational playing styles’ rather than ‘presentational’ ones.

As this line of enquiry develops, Stern refines this model by emphasising the different quality of the ‘cinematic body’, that body produced in the encounter with the cinematic apparatus, arguing that ‘bodies in cinema are not referential, but primarily cinematic’ (‘Paths’ 5). This recognition of the otherness of the ‘cinematic body’, of what George Kouvaros calls ‘the figural capacity of the body in film’, is pivotal to the contemporary reframing of thinking about performance. As Adrian Martin writes:

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132 Deleuze writes: ‘[…] the object of cinema is not to reconstitute a presence of bodies, in perception and action, but to carry out a primordial genesis of bodies in terms of a white, or a black or a grey […]’ (*Cinema* 2 201). Deleuze here cites Jean-Louis Schéfer, *L’Homme Ordinaire du Cinéma*. Paris: Gallimard, 1980.


the energies of bodily performance, of gesture and utterance and movement, collide willy-nilly in ways not always foreseen or proscribed, with the dynamic, formal, figurative work of shooting, framing, cutting, sound recording (Rosenbaum and Martin 5-6).

In a discussion that lays out a field of enquiry for the study of cinematic performance, co-authors Stern and Kouvaros expand the question of performance to include reception: ‘performance [entails] reception and thus [incorporates] the audience’ (‘Descriptive Acts’ 25). They explore how the actor models his or her energy and how this transformation of energy that occurs at the moment of performance engenders an energetic connection with the spectator. They ask, ‘where are the models for understanding the ways in which human bodies are moved within the cinematic frame, the ways in which these bodily motions may move viewers?’ (9). The model of energy Stern proposes is ‘a “loopy system” of transference’ (25). Stern and Kouvaros’ enquiry links the question of presence with sensory experience: ‘we are suggesting that film has a particular way of conjuring up presence, of touching us in the dark theatre, of magnetising a range of senses’ (14). Unlike the work of Sobchack, that circles back to refer endlessly to the self, this work opens the way to maintain a focus on the film itself and its relationship with the spectator, as a living, mutable entity, endlessly made and remade in the moment of encounter.

Stern and Kouvaros’ focus on the performing body opens up the relatively untheorised question of cinematic performance. The understanding of acting as a modelling of energy allows for a more nuanced discussion of acting, deflecting the focus away from semiotic analyses onto questions of the body, and reframing the ways performance is thought about in cinema. At issue here is how we understand the performative. If this is understood in the sense of the performance or acting out of a pre-given text, the focus is deflected away from the present moment, and lacks what Martin describes as ‘the complex materiality of acting performance’ (‘John

Kouvaros also focuses on the body on the screen. He writes: ‘the body […] becomes the meeting point for a whole series of transferences—between actor, and character, film and nonfilm—and dramatic forces that shape the space of the film’ (170).

136 Martin here is writing of the work of Cassavetes’ cinema.
Cassavetes’ 7); it lacks an understanding of how ‘[characters] define themselves gesture by gesture and word by word’, as Comolli writes. Stern’s discussion of the ‘loopy transference’ of energy between the body of the performer and the bodies of spectators takes up this question of the materiality of performance.

This work extends the consideration of affect to performance and, by developing a more open concept of the performative itself, expands ways of thinking about affect and the energetic aspects of affect. To return to the presence of the performing body, and to see the bodily affect of the spectator as incorporated into a circulation of energy with the actor’s body, also gives a more overt, and more easily recognisable locus to explore bodily affect. However, in so far as the focus on the performing body ties the embodied affect of the spectator into a body on screen, it limits the understanding of affect. Unshackling the concept of the performative from the performing body puts the body of the actor in perspective—as one element that has the potential to arouse a mimetic connection with the spectator. Shifting the focus of embodied spectatorship away from this literal assumption of a body on screen loosens up the understanding of the energetic charge of a film and thereby unlocks the understanding of embodied affect.

In my framing of an aesthetics of embodiment, I have specifically shifted attention away from the body of the performer to a broader understanding of the mobilisation of energies in the contract with the spectator; hence the differentiation between my work and that of Linda Williams, or the gestural work of Peter Brooks. I have sought to discover the gesturality—the performative rhetoric—of the camera, editing and mise-en-scène—to take the discussion of these away from a static analysis, which would describe them as a framing or support for the actor or narrative, and to theorise the ways that these elements themselves engage the bodily affect of the spectator. The development of the concept of the performative is enabling here, as it crystallises the understanding that a film cannot be understood outside its performative moment: that it unfolds energetically in time, and the process of reception must be incorporated into the ways we theorise the film. Indeed, mise-en-scène can be very productively thought within this

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framework. Mise-en-scène performs, as does the script, the camera, the editing; they all work to engage the intensities of the spectator in the performative moment of the film as an event, a concentration and orchestration of experience.

To focus attention away from the presence of the body on screen is, in some respects, to delve deeper into the nature of spectatorship—the nature of engagement in the cinematic moment, the dynamics by which spectators are awakened, the ways in which bodily energy is aroused and woven into the fabric of experience of a film. By distancing the performing body, the essays return that body to its figural place within the cinematic system: they locate it as cinematic, not extra-cinematic. A certain erasure happens here, a certain occlusion of the mechanisms of character and story. There is an active disavowal of the centrality of these elements and thereby of the theoretical methodologies used to analyse them, a focus on the somatic and its relationship to affect in order to explore the phenomenological aspects of the image-spectator relationship.

In her more recent work Stern also moves away from the primary focus on the performing body to question the affectivity of cinematic ‘things’. She makes clear that ‘the nature of cinematic affect cannot be explained exhaustively by things, or, rather, via the capacity of things to move us’, but suggests that the ‘ways in which the material world is inflected might illuminate the affective dimension of the cinematic experience’ (‘Paths’ 17)—that affect derives both from emphasising, picking out the ‘thinginess’ or materiality of objects and simultaneously rendering them unstable. This idea clearly echoes Kracauer’s argument that ‘film brings the material world into play’. Stern, who also evokes Kracauer, relates this idea to both materiality and indeterminacy—the ability of cinema to foreground what she calls the ‘thinginess’ of objects, and at the same time to render them ‘ephemeral’, ‘mutable’ (17). She argues that:

affect derives its force not merely from the immediacy of touch but from the capacity of the object to elude the voracious grasp of the moment (and the

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138 ‘Paths that Wind Through the Thicket of Things’, op. cit.
narrative), to reverberate beyond the frame, to generate ideas within a
cultural landscape not circumscribed by the diegesis (17).

Stern posits a relationship between the temporality of the moving image and
affectivity: ‘the movement of the image invests the delineation of things with a
particular affectivity’ (2). While she does not reduce affect to sensory experience,
she talks of indeterminacy as ‘an opportunity to shift the emphasis from the
signifying potential of things to the sensuous, to the affect produced through
tactility’ (8). In terms that echo my own argument that ‘the ability to awaken
embodied experience is pivotal to the arousal of affect in film’, she says, ‘the
affect of the moment is the ability of the image to elicit from us a sensory
response’ (2).

The tenor of Stern’s work shares many characteristics with the interest in
materiality that underpins my own essays. Her discussion of temporality gives
credence to the present moment of the cinematic encounter, even as she allows for
a reverberation beyond that moment, and her understanding of affect, while
focusing on the ability to generate sensory experience, never equates it with shock.
By focusing on the performing body in her earlier work, Stern retains a dual focus
on both representation and the performative as components of affect. In her work
on things, she maintains this tension between signification and the sensory,
material aspects of cinematic experience. With this focus, she avoids some of the
pitfalls of other writers, whose sole focus on sensation divorces the understanding
of affect from any context.139 It also resonates with my work on documentary that
progressively tries to find models that acknowledge the ‘co-presence’ of
signification and affect.140

Stern posits a relationship between materiality, sensory experience and affect. She
talks about the tactility of ‘thinginess’, but her speculations about what she calls

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139 See, for example Barbara Kennedy. Deleuze and Cinema: The Aesthetics of Sensation.
Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000; particularly chapter 5: ‘Towards an Aesthetics of
Sensation.’

140 This point is elaborated in ‘Poetics of a Potato’, and is discussed later in this chapter.
the ‘enigmatic realm of affect’ (17) are rather inconclusive. To talk of affect as residing in tactility or in ‘thinginess’ is evocative, but limits its understanding. We can say that the duration of a shot opens up the haptic register, and that tactility opens us on to an experience of the materiality of the object, but this is not tactility or ‘thinginess’ in or for itself. ‘Thinginess’ implies that the intensity resides in the object itself, but the intensity here is not derived from objects per se. I would argue that the tactility of these moments stirs up the sensory registers in the viewer, heightening the bodily alertness in a way that draws us into an experience of contact with the image, a mimetic blurring of boundaries between self and image. The intensity comes from this experience of contact with ‘the flesh of the world’. Tactility is one aspect of the broader notion of mimetic experience and it is this concept that offers a much broader key into the understanding of affect. Tactility evokes a mimetic dimension in a way that a shock experience could never do: it has the capacity to enhance or arouse the mimetic faculty, the registering of a moment as an embodied sensory moment in all its dimensions. Affect lies in the stirring up of this embodied connection. The concept of mimetic innervation provides a more expansive framework for thinking about this materiality and its relationship to affect. This is a question of emphasis—where Stern stays with the object, and thereby maintains a link with its indexicality, I would emphasise the quality of experience that it opens up, the way it opens onto the body.

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One of the strengths of Stern’s discussions is that she keeps the semantic and somatic in an uneasy relationship, avoiding the simplistic either/or propositions of writers such as Kennedy, and sidestepping the assumptions of much avant-garde work that intensity comes from a rupture out of the dimension of sense or meaning into the realm of the senses. The attempt to articulate this uneasy co-existence recurs across a range of works that explore the dimensions of affect and the mimetic. This inseparability is at the core of Taussig’s exploration of the concept of mimesis and his articulation of the two layers of mimesis—copy and contact. In

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141 She uses the notion of tactility specifically for its slipperiness: she talks both of the experience of tactility and of the sense that objects lure the actor, the performing body into touch and therefore gesture.
a discussion that renders untenable the reduction of the tactile-sensuous aspect of mimesis simply to sensation, Taussig claims that the relationship between the two aspects of mimesis—copy and contact—and between ‘image and bodily involvement of the perceiver in the image’, is one of ‘sticky webs […] a complexity we too easily elide as nonmysterious’ (Mimesis 21). Gertrud Koch, quoting Helmuth Plesser, argues that:

In mimetic expression psychic content and physical form relate to one another as two inseparable poles of one unity and cannot be detached from one another and framed in a relationship of signifier and signified (of shell and core), without destroying their organic and immediate and spontaneous quality.  

Martin also comes back to this inseparability. In ‘Delirious Enchantment’, he writes:

I began work on this essay with the impulse to downplay things like acting, character, story, theme—usually assumed as the privileged vessels of emotion—and to look elsewhere, at purely formal non-representational elements of film style and language. Like most categorical, schematic distinctions, this one turned out to be false and misleading. Ultimately, it is a waste of time to set abstract against concrete, form against content, signifier against signified. In the films that move us, that take us somewhere in the truest sense, there is no distinction between these levels, only the deepest, inseparable fusion (9).

The essays included here start, like Martin, by downplaying elements of character and narrative. However, by critiquing the centrality of the notion of rupture to the understanding of affect, they leave the way open for the discussion, in the later essays on documentary, of a notion of ‘co-presence’ of affect and signification.

Hansen’s formulation of what she calls ‘vernacular modernism’ challenges the ‘bifurcation’ in the writing of film history that sets up a binary between avant-garde or modernist and ‘classical’ film. This binary thinking has often functioned to retain another binary, between meaning and sensory experience. The centrality of the concept of rupture—a momentary break out of the linear structures of meaning into a dimension of intensity—and its alignment with a focus on shock—has played a pivotal role in maintaining this opposition. Also essential to the maintenance of this dichotomy has been the concept of excess, which allows the idea of the classical to accommodate elements that clearly operate outside its parameters. Hansen’s recasting of the notion of classical narrative as a web or scaffold for the elaboration of sensory-affective experience has the potential to break down this binary between ‘sense and sensation’, somatic and semantic, signifier and signified, ‘shell and core’. It provides a framework to understand sensory-affective experience at the basis of all cinema. As, Kracauer says, film must keep ‘touching the earth’—it must loop its way through the sensorium of the viewer to reach anything at all. This is the basis of cinematic affect.
Days of Heaven.

Days of Heaven.
Laura Marks locates the consideration of embodied spectatorship within a much broader framework of epistemology, hierarchies of knowledge and questions of cultural difference and memory. Marks’ major work, *The Skin of the Film*, is the most ambitious exploration to date of the implications of embodiment and the experience of the senses for the consideration of film in its cultural, political and aesthetic ramifications. At the core of Marks’ work is an exploration of the processes of memory and its imbrication with embodiment. Marks focuses on what she calls ‘intercultural cinema’—film and video works produced by minority and diasporic filmmakers, those living between two cultures. She argues that the cultural knowledges of these filmmakers are missing from official histories, but survive in sense memory, grounded in the body: ‘intercultural cinema seeks to represent sensory experiences that encode cultural memory’ (229). Marks argues that these are ‘nonaudiovisual sense experiences’ (2) that often cannot be represented by the dominant narrative forms, or indeed in the visible, and she explores the ‘search for means to represent memory’ (13) that often mandates a recourse to techniques of experimental cinema. Her understanding of how these techniques evoke embodied memory draws extensively on Gilles Deleuze’s model of ‘time-image’ cinema.

Marks interrogates the hierarchies of knowledge developed in the West, which have devalued knowledges gained through the body. Enlightenment thinking, she argues, set up a hierarchy of the senses, according to which the ‘distance senses’, vision and hearing—those considered ‘furthest from the body, closest to the intellect’—were elevated (119), whereas the ‘proximate senses’—touch, taste and smell—were devalued. Marks turns this hierarchy on its head, drawing on an increased interest in embodiment in western art, literature and philosophy, a recognition of the sensory and mimetic aspects of knowledge, and the concomitant ‘attempt to understand how meaning is conveyed through physical presence as well as through intellectual signification’ (121). She traces the development of an

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143 She says: ‘intercultural cinema works at the edge of an unthought, slowly building a language in which to think it’ (29).
144 *Cinema 2*, op. cit.
alternative ‘tactile epistemology’ (138): ‘thinking with your skin’ (190).
Fundamental to this shift and its reconsideration of vision is the concept of
mimesis.

One of Marks’ major contributions comes from her discussion of ‘haptic
visuality’. Marks eschews the tendency of other studies to propose a singular,
unitary model of vision, such as the now classic equations of scopophilia with
mastery. She locates vision on ‘a [continuum] of the distant and the embodied’
(132)—between what she calls ‘optical visuality’, which coincides with the model
of distance, mastery and the ‘all-perceiving subject’ (162), and ‘haptic visuality’, a
close, yielding kind of vision which involves ‘making oneself vulnerable to the
image’ (185). This haptic visuality ‘involves the body more than is the case with
optical visuality’ (163)—it draws on elements of touch, kinesthesia and a ‘bodily
relationship between the viewer and image’ and is ‘more inclined to graze than to
gaze’ (162). Marks claims that, ‘in most processes of seeing, both are involved in a
dialectical movement from far to near’ (163). She cites Jacinto Lejeira, who
proposes a similar continuum between optical and haptic images, writing that the
image ‘seems to obey an instrument capable of bringing the spectator’s opticality
or hapticity to a vibratory pitch of greater or lesser intensity’ (171). Marks also
posits spectators on a continuum. Images may be haptic images, but the spectator
may or may not be disposed to experience images in this way, depending on
cultural, historical and personal variables.146

As a thesis on epistemology, this analysis is very productive for its challenge to
the hierarchies of knowledge and the devaluing of sensory experience that
characterise much of Western philosophy and science, and to further the
recognition of embodied experience. Where Marks considers questions of
embodied spectatorship, she contextualises them within this broad frame of
reference, which accords them enormous cultural, historical and aesthetic
resonance and impetus. She claims that ‘theories of embodied spectatorship

145Lejeira writes of the films of Atom Egoyan. Marks cites Jacinto Lejeira. ‘Scenario of the
146 Marks points out that ‘the sensorium varies culturally as well as individually [and …] it is
important to acknowledge that people’s individual sensoria overlap only unevenly with their
cultural sensoria’ (208).
counter at their root theories of representation grounded in the alienation of
visuality from the body’ (150).

However, while Marks’ theoretical project is compelling in its reach and insight,
and while she glosses the literature on embodied spectatorship—and clearly
theories of embodied visuality are pivotal to her thesis—when she comes to
discuss the films and videos that instigated her inquiry, the descriptions of this
work seem to fall short of the expectations raised by that exegesis. Spectatorship is
somewhat secondary in her account. Her core questions are essentially questions
of knowledge, memory and embodiment: where knowledge is; hierarchies of
knowledge; how knowledge is embodied in the senses and memory; how cinema
can activate sensory memory; how it is possible to represent a knowledge
embedded in sensory, bodily memory, for which there are no images. When she
explores the implications of these ideas in the films and videos, her account slides
continually to the question of representation, of ‘how and why cinema might
express the inexpressible’ (129), of ‘how cinema can express embodied
knowledge’ (156). In the process, although spectators do figure in her account, the
slant toward representation loses the question of cinematic experience.

This recursive move is perhaps most striking in the section of her text that Marks
devotes to mimesis. Her discussion of Mona Hatoum’s Measure of Distance
(1988) exemplifies this tendency (153 ff.). At every point the images are analysed
for the information they convey. To trace through the lexicon Marks deploys in
this account reveals this most definitively. She writes, for example, that:

the images are shown from a greater distance and revealed to be a naked
woman whose large, voluptuous body is still veiled in the image’s graininess
and the layer of text. Meanwhile, Hatoum’s mother’s letters, translated and
read in voice-over, convey her deep love and longing for “my dear Mona, the
apple of my eye” and let us infer that she and her husband, originally
Palestinian, are living in Lebanon during the civil war, while their children
are dispersed (154) [italics mine].
She continues in this vein: the letters ‘make us realize’ that the images are photographs; they ‘tell that Hatoum’s father was very jealous’. In a second tape, *Changing Parts* (1985), the home is ‘represented in the humblest things’, ‘expressed in tactile markings’; ‘the haptic image is suffused with sadness’ (154). Not a mere syntactical choice, this descriptive mode mirrors Marks’ focus on the ways in which cinema has the potential to *represent* sensory experience by ‘embodying it in the image’ (159).

In a way Marks’ argument twists back on itself. Although she lays out in great detail the embodied aspects of knowledge and perception that evade cognitive frameworks, and ‘the ways cinema can appeal to senses that it cannot technically represent’ (129), she returns again and again to the question of what can be represented. Indeed, all of her overarching statements about her project describe it as an enquiry into ‘how film and video can represent nonaudiovisual sense experiences’ (2) and ‘the political and cultural limits of what can be represented’ (12): how experimental cinema can extend the limits of what can be said or shown through an order of the *sensible*’ (31).147 This is the fundamental disappointment with Marks’ discussion of the films and videos and in fact illuminates the gaps in her own thinking. Fundamentally her work is a treatise on representation.148

This conclusion is confirmed by a closer look at how Marks discusses mimesis. Marks’ use of the term mimesis slides between understanding it as a type of experience and a type of representation. On one hand, she says that ‘a tactile epistemology involves a relationship to the world of mimesis’ (138) and cites the Frankfurt School understanding of the mimetic as ‘a form of yielding to one’s environment’ (140), ‘an immanent way of being in the world’ (141). She talks of ‘mimetic moments [in language] where the body of the speaker opens into the text’ (142). However, she slides from this understanding of mimesis as a type of perceptual experience to describe it as ‘*a form of representation* based on a particular, material contact at a particular moment’ (138) [italics mine]. She says ‘mimesis presumes a continuum between the actuality of the world and the

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147 Marks defines ‘the sensible’ as ‘what is accessible to sense perception at a given historical and cultural moment’ (31).
148 See pp. 1-13 for clarification of this approach.
production of signs about the world (139); ‘mimetic representation […] exists on a continuum with more symbolic forms of representation’ (139).

Hansen writes, ‘if the correspondences actualized by the mimetic faculty pertain to any aspect of signification, then it is to the realm of the indexical, which is the relationship of material contiguity’ (BCE 195). Marks describes mimesis in this way, in terms of indexicality: that indexicality is a relationship of contact, therefore a mimetic not a symbolic one. However, in Hansen, Taussig and their Frankfurt School sources, the mimetic faculty is a propensity for a type of perceptual experience; mimetic experience is ‘the correspondences actualized’ by certain types of representation—not the representation itself—and the experience of a relationship, of ‘patterns of similarity’ (BCE 196) between things. Marks’ conflation of the mimetic with a kind of representation allows her to elide this crucial question of experience in her discussion of a mimetic epistemology, to focus her discussion on significatory characteristics of the films and the objects they evoke.

In Marks’ account, this indexical relationship, that existed in the past—in another place and time—evokes memories of the senses and thereby brings into play the embodied spectator in the present moment of viewing. Marks argues, following Bergson, that there is no sense experience without memory. Embodiment here is accessed through memory. However, it does not follow that this relationship with a profilmic object will necessarily engender mimetic experience. The relationship with objects in the world cannot explain the way these objects function as cinematic entities. While they may resonate for the filmmakers as markers of memory—a memory of the senses—this in no way guarantees a mimetic relationship with the spectator. For this to happen, the objects must be mobilised, brought into play in the present, in their cinematic configuration—as cinematic objects, not just referential ones. They must arouse something in the sensory experience with the image and sound—through this encounter with the cinematic event—before they can stir up sensory memory.

Marks give a detailed reading of the surface of the videos—of the image—but it is essentially a hermeneutic project: the films are interpreted and the methodology
remains linked to methodologies that derive from textual analysis—an analysis of what is contained, represented in the text, albeit in embodied not symbolic forms. In essence Marks’ work retains the status of a commentary on what and how the films and videos mean, not an encounter with the films as experiential entities. In the way Marks writes about the actual films, spectatorship, although sensory and embodied, seems to function essentially as a process of interpreting, making sense of the meanings coded in the image and its objects.

However, to understand spectatorship it is not enough to describe the surface of the image or sound, then step back and lodge it in a wider hermeneutic frame. We need to add time in the present—the performative aspects of the image. We need to go through the image—not just to graze it. To go through the image, to live in it, to experience its presence, does not allow a distanced commentary. The implications of embodiment and mimetic perception for the processes of cinema spectatorship require a much closer attention to the question of experience—not just the question of how knowledge or memory is embodied in the image but a grappling with the immediate, material encounter of the spectator with the image.

The marginalisation of this question is clear in the way Marks elaborates the idea of the fetish or fossil. Drawing on concepts from Benjamin and Deleuze, Marks writes that:

> to think of the moving image as a fetish or fossil implies understanding it not as a representation, which is volatile only because of the projections brought to it, but as an emissary, which is volatile to the degree that the viewer/receiver has access to the materiality of the original scene (92).

When she elaborates this notion of an emissary, Marks writes of the way images ‘do not symbolically represent power, they physically embody it’ (92). In her account of the work of Shauna Beharry, for example, Marks writes that ‘images are auratic because of their contact with the histories […] the auratic character of things is their ability not simply to awaken memories in an individual, but to contain a social history in fragmentary form’ (120). The contact she discerns in this materiality is not the contact between the spectator and the image but the
contact between the image and the object represented—in other words its
indexicality—and between the spectator and the object. The spectator seems, in a
sense, to jump over the image to access ‘the materiality of the original scene’. The
volatility she evokes is couched in terms of the object, not the energetic charge the
image has in its contact with the spectator. This understanding of the auratic in the
object takes only one side of the concept of the auratic and glosses over the
other—the understanding of auratic experience.

As Marks says, an image may be a haptic image, but the spectator may or may not
engage with it haptically. On the one hand, we have haptic visuality, on the other,
haptic images—but what happens in the space between the two? Exactly what
kinds of experience (not meanings) do these images evoke? Hansen highlights
what she calls:

the double mediation involved in the cinematic process […] that] between the
film and the depicted world and that between the projected film and the
audience, that is, distinct yet mutually interdependent mediations both at the
level of film as a technology of inscription and at the level of cinema as the
social, collective, public space/time of reception (NOW 12).

While Marks’s detailed readings of the auratic in objects illuminate the first
mediation, the concept of mimetic innervation provides the link to integrate this
understanding with the second mediation. It provides a way to think about how
objects are mobilised in images and how images are mobilised in or for the
spectator—how images can arouse a capacity for a certain kind of affective
experience for the spectator. This is the critical theoretical productivity of the
concept of mimetic innervation. Mimetic innervation is the essential link to pass
from the idea of mimetic knowledge embodied in the image to an understanding of
mimetic spectatorship.

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This slippage in Marks’ work stems, at least in part, from her theoretical approach
to haptic visuality and haptic images. She starts from the physiological definitions
of haptic perception, as ‘the combination of tactile, kinesthetic, and proprioceptive functions, the way we experience touch both on the surface of and inside our bodies’ (162). ‘Haptic visuality’, she claims,

is distinguished from optical visuality, which sees things from enough distance to perceive them as distinct forms in deep space. […] Haptic looking tends to move over the surface of its object rather than to plunge into the illusionistic depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture (162).

So far, this definition of haptics accords with those of others, such as Gibson, in its focus on the embodied, mimetic nature of this kind of perception.

However, Marks claims that ‘haptic images are actually a subset of what Deleuze referred to as optical images: those images that are so “thin” and unclichéd that the viewer must bring his or her resources of memory and imagination to complete them’ (163). Marks draws on this idea of the “thin image” to propose a thesis on the sensory qualities of video. She argues that haptic visuality in video derives from ‘the constitution of the image from a signal, video’s low contrast ratio, the possibilities of electronic and digital imaging, and video decay’. She lists the pixel density and contrast ratio of video as factors which make it ‘insufficiently visual’ (175). These qualities, she argues, work together to elicit less mastery or control of the image: ‘when vision yields to the diminished capacity of video, it must give up some degree of mastery’ (176). This claim in itself is not contentious, but Marks argues, in a challenge to the many critics who describe video as ‘cool and distancing’, that ‘video’s tactile qualities make it a warm medium. It is the crisp resolution into optical visuality that makes an image cool and distant’ (176).

This ‘subtractive’ model of vision links in well with Marks’ deployment of the idea of ‘thin’ images, and the argument that the gaps elicit memory and provoke the viewer into sensory experience is an elegant one in the structure of Marks’ whole thesis. It also echoes a very familiar rhetoric about experimental cinema:
withhold the signified to open onto the dimension of the sensory.\textsuperscript{149} However, Marks’ argument about the hapticity of ‘thin’ video images does not match my own experience of the textural qualities of video.\textsuperscript{150} Whereas the ‘thin’ image may evoke a curiosity, a desire to fill in the gaps, this is not necessarily a haptic awakening. Where Marks posits a lack in the image as the catalyst for embodied spectatorship—for the spectator to gravitate on the continuum towards haptic visuality—I would posit the presence of the image, its material density, as the magnet that draws the spectator into ‘a particular type of experience’ that we could describe as a mimetic innervation. Whether this response is essentially a conservative one is a valid question, stemming as it does from a cinephilia imprinted in the engagement with celluloid, with the photochemical tactility of film—in all its gauges—as a haptic medium. Certainly, underpinning this cinephilia is a passion for the luminosity and palpable textures of celluloid, for the photographic sensibilities of Robby Müller, Tonino delli Colli, or Sven Nyqvist in their pushing of monochrome stocks to enhance a sensory, haptic density in high contrast, high fidelity cinematography, and the resonances that this enhanced tactility can evoke in the spectatorial body.\textsuperscript{151}

\textsuperscript{149}Marks writes: ‘The haptic image forces the viewer to contemplate the image itself instead of being pulled into the narrative’ (163). The idea that the withholding of a plenitude of information engenders a heightened sensory experience is a very familiar trope through the whole of avant-garde work, encapsulated by filmmakers such as Stan Brakhage, who writes, ‘Imagine . . . an eye which does not respond to the name of everything but which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure of perception. How many colors are there in a field of grass to the crawling baby unaware of “Green”’. (Stan Brakhage. ‘Metaphors on Vision.’ \textit{Film Theory And Criticism: Introductory Readings} 6th edition. New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004: 199). That Marks frames this response in terms of contemplation suggests a different inflection in her understanding.

\textsuperscript{150}Without access to the tapes Marks critiques, this response must be a generalisation, but certainly the critics Marks cites (Marshall McLuhan and others) confirm my own experience. Marshall McLuhan. \textit{The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man}. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962.

\textsuperscript{151}I am thinking of Müller’s cinematography on films such as \textit{Down By Law}. Dir. Jim Jarmusch. Prod. Otto Grokenberger, Cary Brokaw, Russell S. Schwartz, 1986; Nyqvist’s work on \textit{Persona}. Dir. Ingmar Bergman. Prod. Reel Images, 1978; and delli Colli’s work on \textit{The Gospel According to St Matthew (Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo)}. Dir. Pier Paolo Pasolini. Prod. Alfredo Bini and Arco Film, 1964. I would argue that the haptic qualities of this work are part of what generates a mimetic innervation for their spectator. While I accept that Marks’ account should be respected for its attempt to discover what might generate affect in electronic work, I think that it needs to go further in its explanations. Hansen herself asks whether the concern in Benjamin’s work with the kind of mimetic innervation that he is talking of is facing redundancy in the age of video and digital work and with the increasing marginalisation of the cinema as the primary space for reception of films: ‘Benjamin’s reflections on film and media culture may likewise have lost their actuality and may stand, as Bolz has recently proclaimed, as nothing more than “beautiful ruins in the philosophical landscape”’ (NOW 15). Hansen here cites Norbert Bolz, ‘Die Zukunft der Zeichen: Invasion des Digitalen in die Bilderwelt des Films.’ \textit{Im Spiegelkabinett der Illusionen}:
In the steps Marks takes to articulate the haptic within this framework, she ends up with a formulation that, in some measure, dematerialises the concept, takes it away from the body that was at the core of its initial definition. In her account, the haptic takes the viewer away from the image or sound (into memory), not into its materiality or the materiality of the body. In a potential challenge to Marks’ rather dematerialised reading of haptic visuality, Giuliana Bruno returns the body to the understanding of the haptic by emphasising spatiality:

As the Greek etymology tells us, haptic means “able to come into contact with”. As a function of the skin, then, the haptic—the sense of touch—constitutes the reciprocal contact between us and the environment […] But the haptic is also related to kinesthesia, the ability of our bodies to sense their own movement in space (6).

Linking the haptic experience of film with that of architecture, Bruno emphasises the spatiality of the haptic, and that the shift from optic to haptic understandings of vision, in leaving behind the gaze, moves to an understanding of ‘a spatial form of sensuous cognition […] film and architecture are haptic matters […] linked by] a spatial bond […] that is tactile’ (6). Linking her argument to Benjamin’s insights into the tactile appropriation of architecture, she describes film spectatorship as ‘a practice of space that is dwelt in, as in the built environment’ (62). The centrality of spatiality in this account gives it a potential to stay with the film and with the corporeality of spectatorship; it thus opens onto the possibility of an analysis of mise-en-scène.

Essentially, Marks’ approach lacks a theory of mise-en-scène, and this gap allows her to marginalise the question of space in her understanding of affect. Mise-en-scène, as I understand it, is a temporal notion. But the understanding of time itself is often abstracted from this pivotal awareness of space, of the filmic body in

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153 One could say that, in Marks, the focus on the object and its indexicality privileges the space of the profilmic, rather than the cinematic space of mise-en-scène.
Marks’ understanding of affect focuses on temporality, understood in terms of memory. She refers to Deleuze as a key source for understanding cinematic affect, drawing on his category of the ‘affection-image’ to define ‘images that arouse emotional or visceral response’ (28). In Deleuze, the affection-image is understood as an opening onto temporal experience. Marks writes of how ‘the body may be involved in the inauguration of time-image cinema’, that ‘emotion or feeling opens us to the experience of time’ (28). Marks’ understanding of temporality and affect in cinema is essentially a thesis on memory. In this framework, despite her focus on embodiment, the key movement of affect is something that takes the viewer up, out of the film, away from the body and the senses, into time, into the dimension of memory.

My study starts from a different position, in many ways the inverse. The core principle here is materiality, the way film ‘brings the material world into play’. This is where Kracauer’s topographical metaphor, describing the way film pushes downwards, into the “lower levels”, becomes pivotal to the development of the key frameworks in these essays. This project starts from an implicit assumption not that the body opens us onto time, but that time—duration—opens us onto the body, and that the movement of affect takes us into the material. Kracauer’s insistence on the materiality of film spectatorship, its corporeality, provides a fundamentally different metaphor from those which Marks derives from Deleuze.

The idea that certain aesthetic strategies open the film to an experience of time has the appeal of seeming to address the fluidity, the possibilities of transport available to the imagination, to the deterritorialized possibilities of thought. However, the specificity of film—and we must acknowledge this if we are to grasp anything about cinematic experience—is the way these flights of fantasy or memory are grounded in the materiality of the cinematic moment.

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154 This is particularly so in the currency in recent studies of a certain interpretation of Deleuze’s treatise on time.

The concept of time-image cinema maintains the dichotomy between avant-garde and mainstream cinema, and inherits its limitations. A corollary of Marks’ heritage in Deleuze is that she subscribes to the model of shock as the pre- eminent requirement for embodied spectatorship, which she links to memory: ‘It takes a shock to unroot a memory, to revive a flow of experience. Such a shock is what Deleuze looks for in time-image cinema’ (64). Marks links Benjamin’s concern with shock, and its role in evoking involuntary memory, to Deleuze’s claim that the optical image—what she calls the haptic image—assaults the immobilised viewer (64). That Marks overlooks Hansen as a key source on questions of cinematic embodiment and embodied spectatorship is telling here. Hansen’s emphasis on the ‘second trajectory’ in Benjamin’s work—about mimetic innervation—with its challenge to the primacy of the concept of shock, opens up a very different perspective than that available to Marks. While Hansen herself does not elaborate a theory of mise-en-scène, the concept of mimetic innervation opens the way for work that explores the central role of mise-en-scène in the generation of cinematic affect: how it is that film has the potential to awaken affective mimetic experience.

Marks acknowledges that Deleuze, who provides her dominant framework, does not offer a theory of spectatorship, and suggests that phenomenology can productively fill this gap (150). However, she argues that the present cannot be understood as the phenomenological present, as sense perception is always necessarily mediated through memory. She writes, following Bergson, that no sense perception can happen without the intervention of memory, which she describes as ‘thought processes’. Clearly sensory memory can be elicited by the gaps in a film/video work, into which the embodied memories of the spectator can flow. However, to reduce the question of cinematic experience to the resonances of past encounters that it evokes essentially loses the moment of encounter. Where does the ‘flash of embodied experience’ that Marks evokes take place, if not in the moment of present experience in which these registers of other temporalities are able to resonate? This is not to contend that sensory memory is not involved in the

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156 Marks lists ‘Benjamin, Cinema and Experience’ in her bibliography, but any influence is apparently only tangential.
cinematic encounter, but that the immediacy, the materiality of experience is primary in the processes of film spectatorship.  

This question of presence and of what kind of body the cinema produces is an ongoing question in recent debates about cinematic embodiment. These debates pivot around the status of phenomenology—and the role of the ‘lived body’ in cinema spectatorship. Shaviro prefigured this challenge to the validity of models of the ‘phenomenological lived body’ to explain cinematic perception. Marks reaffirms this challenge. It comes full circle with the work of Barbara Kennedy who, citing Deleuze as her support, discards the insights of all previous work into cinematic embodiment on the grounds of its allegiance to a phenomenological model of embodiment, rather than the genesis of a new body.

To develop a theory of cinematic time is outside the scope of this current project, though clearly connected. However, it is possible to suggest, albeit schematically, some directions that this could take that further highlight the gaps in Marks’ account of temporality and memory. Whereas Marks acknowledges the dynamic, shifting nature of the image along the continuum from haptic to optical visuality—thereby acknowledging its fluidity—her account of the temporality of film, with the emphasis on memory, skews it toward one pole: the temporality of the past mobilised by the image’s indexicality. In this construction, Marks elides the other pole of cinematic time—its amplification of the experience of the present moment of the cinematic encounter. Gilberto Perez gives an account of the temporality of cinema that releases the image from this theoretical constraint and allows a way to think about the much more dynamic play of the materiality of the filmic image in

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157 For Marks, memory mediates affect. By linking affect with mimetic innervation my argument suggests rather the primacy of affect.
158 Shaviro cites Benjamin, Dziga Vertov, Robert Bresson and Deleuze as supports for his argument that film ‘dislodges sensation’ from the natural perception at the basis of phenomenological understandings (31).
159 Kennedy writes: ‘new interventions in film theory have begun to discover the significance of the material, matter, the machinic and the embodied eye of vision. Jonathan Crary, Vivian Sobchack, Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, Miriam Hansen, Anne Friedberg, Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger and Camilla Griggers have prioritised post-linguistic accounts of cinematic desire, But they have not gone far enough to account for newly recognised structures of experience emanating from ‘becoming’ and the aesthetics of sensation, the movements and energies of the filmic experience. Subjectivity and the phenomenological ‘lived body’, rather than a more complex understanding of ‘body’ as processes of congealment, imbrication, consilience, assemblage, aesthetics and the molecular, are still prioritised in the work of these writers’ (52).
its oscillation from past to present, in its ability to occupy and negotiate the spaces between the object, the profilmic, the materiality of location, memory and the film that takes shape in the experience of the spectator at the moment of reception (and, no doubt, beyond). Pérez writes of the complex interplay between indexicality—the trace of the past—and its energetic mobilisation for the spectator in the present. He says, ‘the tense of the film image is dual, one might say: sometimes it acts like the present, sometimes like the past (37).

In a model of the spectatorial process that also offers a more flexible and productive understanding of the cinematic experience than Marks’ primary focus on memory allows, Hansen discerns in Kracauer’s concept of film spectatorship a dual process, one that can incorporate both the evocation of memory and the experience of the cinematic moment. On one hand, this is a centripetal process, ‘a form of mimetic identification that pulls the viewer into the film and dissociates the spectatorial self’ (TOF xxviii). On the other hand, it is a centrifugal one: ‘this state of self-abandonment and dissociation becomes the condition of a perceptual movement in the opposite direction, away from the film, when a material detail assumes a life of its own and triggers in the viewer associations, “memories of the senses and “cataracts of indistinct fantasies and inchoate thoughts” that return the “absentee dreamer” to forgotten layers of the self’ (xxviii). Unlike Marks’ account of temporality, which privileges the resonances of past encounters—to her, all sensory cinematic experience cycles through memory—Hansen’s account acknowledges the essential ambiguity of cinematic temporality. There is an acknowledgment here of a realm of sensory, visceral experience that cannot be assimilated to the processes of memory, even as it admits the concurrent evocation of memory. What Kracauer describes elsewhere as ‘the split-second meaninglessness’ (TOF xxi) pulls the film, in its ‘basic layer’ well and truly out of the ambit of representation and emphasises film’s ‘affinity with the pulsations of material life’ (WSH 451).

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160 It is telling here that, whereas Marks evokes Proust to bolster the importance of memory, Perez cites Bazin who, writing of the film work of Cesare Zavattini, describes him as ‘something like the Proust of the indicative present’ (35).
161 Hansen here cites Kracauer, Theory of Film 165-6.
Days of Heaven.
The second series of essays interrogates the theory and practice of documentary film in an enquiry that takes a different point of departure from, but progressively converges with, the concerns of the first half of the project. Whereas the first series develops fairly systematically as it explores the imbrication of embodiment, affect and spectatorship through an exploration of mise-en-scène, genre and sensory experience, the second part of the project develops more elliptically. Each new essay draws out a single strand of enquiry from the previous one so that the terrain shifts substantially in the move from one to the next. The investigation of documentary starts from a much more concrete, context-specific analysis of the politics of documentary but, as the question of the dynamics of spectatorship increasingly impinges on this enquiry, the focus moves progressively towards a study of embodied spectatorship in documentary and questions of mimetic innervation. This second strand culminates in the final piece that explores affect and mimetic visuality in documentary film.

The first essay of this series, ‘But What Does the Man in the Cowboy Hat Think? Intercultural Dialogue: Silence, Taboo and Masquerade’, was in fact the first essay written in the whole project. This essay raises a set of questions that the rest of the work goes on to address. It interrogates the conventional rhetoric of documentary film through a case study of the Australian historical documentary series, Frontier, made for television. The essay takes up the challenge posed by Marcia Langton, who writes of the need to develop critical, theoretical work exploring the representation of Aboriginal people in film. Engaging with Langton, who argues the necessity for an intercultural dialogue to produce an ‘ethical post-colonial critique’ in Australian film and television (26), the essay argues that, in order to establish this intercultural dialogue, it is essential to examine both documentary form and assumptions about spectatorship. It interrogates the universalist claims of conventional documentary form, raising questions about historiography, embodied knowledge and the affective elements of cultural specificity. The essay explores issues raised by documentary theorist Bill Nichols, who asks: ‘if knowledge arises,
in large part, from subjective, embodied experience, to what extent can it be represented by impersonal and disembodied language?\(^{163}\)

Framing this question within the specific historical context of the production and reception of *Frontier*, the essay extends the argument beyond the terrain of representation, claiming that to understand the implications of embodiment we must go further than the question of embodied language to the consideration of embodied spectatorship. The political ramifications of the series cannot be assessed, it argues, without also considering the embodied aspects of spectatorship. The essay makes a case for the need to radically rethink contemporary documentary forms to take account of the shifting dynamics of spectatorship, and signals an interest in new hybrid forms of documentary that negotiate this shifting terrain more successfully than do the conventional forms. This interest prefigures the focus of the subsequent essays.

Through this close interrogation of the politics of *Frontier*, the essay argues the importance of embodiment on two levels—on the level of form, and in the dynamics of spectatorship. Firstly, it argues that conventional documentary forms that claim a universalist neutrality, based on an allegiance to the scientific principles elaborated in Enlightenment thinking, are in fact culturally-specific—that they embed, within themselves, culturally-specific embodied forms of experience and knowledge. Secondly, it argues that, even in the most conventional, most austere of documentary films—even in those that hold most closely to claims for objectivity—the affective, embodied aspects of spectatorship persist, no matter how subtly, in the reception of the film. From this conclusion, the essay becomes the staging ground for a series of questions about the operation of spectatorship and affective experience in documentary film.

The second essay in this series, ‘Garin Nugroho: *didong*, cinema and the embodiment of politics in cultural form’, draws out the analysis of culturally and

historically-specific aesthetic forms from the first essay, linking this analysis to the
work of anthropologist John Bowen.\textsuperscript{164} Through a close study of the sung poetry
tradition known as *didong* among the Gayo people of Central Aceh, Bowen argues
that the western idea that history or politics can be understood as objects distinct
from cultural and aesthetic forms is inadequate to address the embodiment of
politics in cultural form. The essay discusses the Indonesian political docudrama,
*A Poet: Unconcealed Poetry (Puisi Tak Terkuburkan)*, directed by Garin Nugroho.
It argues that, although the disembodied voice of history exists in contemporary
Indonesia, Nugroho chooses to avoid the historical approach (*sejarah*). He works
instead with the emotional registers of ‘the verbal tradition’ structuring his film
around the performance tradition of *didong*\textsuperscript{165}

The essay explores embodiment in *A Poet* on two levels. Firstly, it explores the
way the film “embeds” the story in an embodied way in the experience of the
spectator through the ways the intensities of the film are built up through sound,
space, camera movement, rhythm and performance. It also claims that the sensory
forms of the performance tradition—of body and voice—as they are deployed in
the film, draw the spectator into a mimetic engagement with the film. Secondly,
the essay builds an argument about the affective inflections of regional cultural
forms, examining Nugroho’s attentiveness to the local, to the embodiment of the
forms of daily life in ‘local gesture, oral language and culture’\textsuperscript{166}. From this base,
the essay considers the question of heterogeneous audiences, arguing that Nugroho
deploys local, embodied cultural forms in his modes of address to a pluralist
audience.

Like *Frontier*, *A Poet* is a film about a massacre: *Frontier* recounts the massacres
of the early land wars in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the colonisation
of Australia; *A Poet* tells of the massacre in Indonesia, in 1965, of up to two
million people, in the Suharto regime’s anti-communist purges. However, the
discussion of *A Poet* takes on a film whose strategies are the antithesis of *Frontier*:

\textsuperscript{164} Bowen, John R. *Sumatran Politics and Poetics: Gayo History, 1900-1989*. New Haven and

\textsuperscript{165} *A Poet*. Press kit, Sydney Asia Pacific Film Festival 2001.

\textsuperscript{166} Nugroho, quoted in Tonny Trimarsanto and Taufik Rahzen. ‘Garin Nugroho’s contrasting
it is a film that challenges universalist assumptions at every level—in its understanding of history, of film form and language, and of audience. Specific, embodied, culturally-inflected knowledges, traditions and affective experience are the ground in which the film embeds its investigation of Indonesian history and traumatic memory. The essay argues that a corollary of this specificity, of the attention to the local, is an implicit challenge to the conventional documentary assumptions of a universalist, homogeneous audience. It thus links the formal strategies of the film to the politics of regionalism, pluralism and the challenges to the cultural homogenisation imposed for decades by the Indonesian state.

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‘The Poetics of a Potato: Documentary that Gets Under the Skin’ takes up the question of sensory experience explored in the previous essay in the surface of the film, its performative strategies, and stages this as a question of the experience of the spectator, within a theoretical discussion of the role of affect and mimetic experience in documentary. The article argues that the conventional rhetoric of documentary as a ‘discourse of sobriety’ has set up an opposition between affective experience and intellectual enquiry that goes way back to what Michael Renov describes as the Enlightenment split between truth and beauty.167 Concomitant with this split, it argues, is a fear of the open-endedness of both the image and the spectator’s experience. This supposed incommensurability of affect and interrogation has been a predominant feature of documentary theory over decades and leads to a dilemma if we accept that affect is crucial to understanding how the image works energetically with the spectator, how it engages ‘not so much with mind as with the embodied mind’ (Taussig, Mimesis 23). The essay asks, if we accept the importance of affect in cinema spectatorship, why are these considerations so marginalised in documentary theory? How can we develop an aesthetics of documentary that acknowledges the role of affect and embodied experience in cinema spectatorship?

The split Renov discerns between ‘truth and beauty’ rests on a hierarchy between word and image. Some of the most influential texts of documentary theory divide documentary up into categories that reaffirm these hierarchies. Nichols posits four modes of documentary—expository, observational, interactive and reflexive.\(^{168}\) In his 1994 revision of this schema, he adds a fifth category, ‘performative documentary’, which ‘yields to a variable mix of the expressive, poetic, and rhetorical aspects’.\(^{169}\) This performative mode, as he describes it, ‘[stresses] subjective aspects of a classically objective discourse [in ways that] may relegate such films to the avant-garde’ (95).

Renov revises these categories into four ‘rhetorical/aesthetic functions’:

1. to record, reveal or preserve
2. to persuade or promote
3. to analyze or interrogate
4. to express (21).

The fourth category, in his description, gives a place to ‘the aesthetic function that has consistently been undervalued within the nonfiction domain’ (32). Here, he says, ‘there need be no exclusionary relation between documentation and artfulness’ (34). In this category he places work whose focus is ‘the impression of the world on the artist’s sensorium and his or her interpretation of the datum’ (34).

In a similar rhetorical strategy to the way the positing of “excess” allowed for the maintenance of a normative model of narrative—as the concept of excess does not challenge the core model of order and linearity—this positing of a separate category of “poetic” documentary allows the core of documentary rhetoric, with its dualisms and hierarchies, to go unchallenged. It also insulates documentary theory from the insights into spectatorship developed through two decades of work in other areas of film theory, and sidelines affect and embodiment from the understanding of documentary reception.


Trinh T. Minh-ha has written of the unproductive boundaries of this kind of thinking:

at the core of such a rationale dwells, untouched, the Cartesian division between subject and object which perpetuates a dualistic inside-versus-outside, mind-against-matter view of the world. The emphasis is again laid on the power of film to capture reality “out there” for us “in here”. The moment of appropriation and of consumption is either simply ignored or carefully rendered invisible.\(^{170}\)

Trinh also challenges the division between fiction and non-fiction that underpins this approach, arguing that ‘a documentary aware of its own artifice is one that remains sensitive to the flow between fact and fiction’ (99).

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‘The Poetics of a Potato’ traces attempts, within recent documentary theory, to come to terms with the implications of embodiment. Nichols identifies the core of the traditional understanding of documentary as a model of disembodied language and focuses on the attempts to contest this universalist assumption in the ways documentary has increasingly turned to the local and the specific, the collapse of its pretensions to objectivity, and its increasing privileging of “subjective” knowledge (Renov 174). Taking up the challenge raised in the discussion of *Frontier*, this essay argues the need to go beyond this challenge to a disembodied language, to dismantle also the assumptions of a disembodied spectator. It examines the notion of “epistephilia” that has been posited as a model of documentary spectatorship, and contests its assumptions of ‘a rational, intact subject, wanting to know about a referent, a real, which is already complete, formed and unchanging’ (‘Poetics’ 128). The essay proposes, instead, ‘a mimetic

understanding of cinema—one in which the image brings the material world into play, brings it to life, in the moment of its reception’ (128). By positing affect and mimetic experience at the very core of documentary spectatorship, this current project challenges the core tenets of classical documentary theory.

The essay on *Frontier* discussed the impoverishment of affective engagement in what Nichols has called ‘expository’ documentary. In a reaction against this “dry” tradition, much contemporary documentary has turned to techniques of narrativisation as the pre-eminent method of engaging the spectator, based on the assumption that the affective engagement of spectators relies on the development of characterisation and narrative structure. ‘The Poetics of a Potato’ contests the assumptions of this work, arguing that this strategy comes from a very limited understanding of the implications of affective embodied spectatorship.

As a model for how it is possible to rethink this dualist opposition, and work with affect in documentary without conflating this with narrativisation, the essay examines the ways this is achieved in two films: *A Season Outside*, directed by Amar Kanwar, and *The Gleaners and I* (*Les Glâneuse et La Glâneur*), directed by Agnès Varda. The essay contends that both Kanwar and Varda work with the image and sound in ways that escape dualist oppositions and offer models for how a documentary film can hold together the affective and the interrogative, the image and the word, sense and sensation. Both Kanwar and Varda see the process of documentary-making as a process of encounter with the material world; both are exquisitely tuned to the sensory-affective properties of images—their potential to generate a mimetic encounter for the viewer. The essay argues that Kanwar ‘goes into the world with eyes to see’, that Varda has an awareness of form and gesture—‘she sees the stooping gesture, the rhythm of bending bodies’. Both directors work with the way film ‘brings the material world into play’. There is a sensitivity here, it argues, to the affective qualities of the image that opens up an attentiveness to these qualities in the spectator.

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171 Nichols writes: ‘expository texts take shape around commentary directed toward the viewer; images serve as illustration or counterpoint’ (*Representing Reality* 34 ff.).
This essay examines the strategies of these two films within a discussion of how to understand affect. It proceeds from an assumption that the conceptual frameworks that would link affect to moments of rupture or shock are very unproductive in the context of documentary—that if we think about affect in this way, it can only function in documentary at key privileged moments. It explores Brian Massumi’s proposition that we can consider the perception of affect in two ways. Massumi describes the first as a sudden eruption, often described as shock, when affect is clearly perceived. The second understanding is not sudden or ephemeral but continuous. He describes this as ‘the perception of one’s own vitality, one’s sense of aliveness’ (229). This second understanding has an affinity with the empowering, invigorating understanding of mimetic innervation.

Massumi distinguishes between what he calls affective intensity and emotion. He defines emotion as ‘the subjective content’ (221), when the intensity of affect is inserted into a conventional semantic coding. Affect, he argues is not necessarily connected to this content. He argues that the logic of intensity is very different to the logic that rules semantic content: affect is ‘beside that loop’ (219); it is ‘unassimilable’ (221). Where this work becomes very productive for thinking about documentary film is in the relationship Massumi posits between affect and semantic content, which, in his account, is not an either/or. He says that ‘language is not simply in opposition to intensity’: while linguistic expression can dampen or interfere with intensity (‘matter-of-factness dampens intensity’), it can also resonate with or amplify the affect of the image (219). He argues that there are ways of working with language or emotional content that actually enhance affect, and he describes this relationship as one of resonance.

‘Poetics of a Potato’ argues that this understanding of affect, as a kind of underlying vitality that can be dampened or amplified, is very suggestive for documentary and for our understanding of embodied spectatorship. Not tied to the binary logic of classical avant-garde/mainstream distinctions, it is outside the either/or terms of the shock/rupture model. The complex relationship that Massumi posits between affect and language/semantic content—as one of

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resonance—opens up ways to think about a kind of “co-presence” of affect and signification, a relationship that does not privilege one over the other, but suggests a more sophisticated way of working with the relationship between affect and language or meaning. This, the essay claims, is exactly what both Varda and Kanwar do, and they can provide models for how it is possible to escape these dualisms.

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Two research projects shadow this second series of essays—two interviews that shifted the terrain of the enquiry. Both are included here in the appendix. The first interview started from a concern about a claim in the Frontier essay. Speaking of one of the Aboriginal speakers on a television talk show, the essay argues that ‘there is no way that the speaking position which [the man in the cowboy hat] adopts can be received on its own terms, no way that his voice can be heard’, because of cultural assumptions of the discursive regime of the program format.

Progressively, I realised that—as much as I had critiqued the universalist assumptions of form, of documentary language—I had, in making this statement, unwittingly assumed a universal audience position, not allowing for the diverse, sometimes oppositional readings of a heterogeneous audience. How would an Aboriginal viewer read this segment—one who knew exactly what this old man was trying to say and had never heard it spoken before on national television—even in such an interrupted way? What if that viewer read his speaking position exactly, and felt simultaneously both an acknowledgment of, and identification with, his position, and a familiar silencing? What if, for this viewer, the inclusion of the old man’s speaking voice was experienced as an affirmation, a strategic challenge to the terms of the discourse, a powerful intervention in the face of attempts at silencing, constantly reiterated but never fully successful? Of course viewers would read and experience this segment according to their own knowledges—cultural and personal—their own histories. Where does

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documentary rhetoric acknowledge that even the most univocal textual strategy meets a radically heterogeneous audience and radically diverse reading strategies?

The first interview explores this question in a discussion with Aboriginal filmmaker Darlene Johnson about her documentary on the life and work of Aboriginal actor David Gulpilil, *Gulpilil: One Red Blood.*\(^{174}\) As an editing consultant in the fine-cut stage of this film, I had been in intensive discussions with the director about ways to negotiate and somehow keep in balance both the demands of a mainstream audience—and the funding bodies who targeted this audience—and the director’s obligations to Indigenous viewers, and indeed to the community filmed in the documentary.

This interview commences with the very question that closed the *Frontier* piece—Marcia Langton’s articulation of a desire in Indigenous cinema ‘to move onto matters of sensuality, intercultural discourses which enriched our humanity, and the love of landscape and place which might come about through such discourses’.\(^{175}\) Starting from a discussion of the cultural implications of documentary form, the interview moves beyond the narrow framework of form to explore other dimensions of cultural difference in documentary-making. It culminates in a discussion about audience—about the implicit, unexamined assumption of funding bodies that a film such as this one is made for a non-Aboriginal audience. It explores elements in the film that ‘speak specifically, directly to an Aboriginal audience’ and that other viewers (and many non-local Aboriginal viewers) probably will not understand. It talks of the growing clarification, for the director, during the process of making this film, of the need to explicitly understand and argue that ‘there is a multiplicity of audiences, and we shouldn’t be making films just for one particular audience’ (59: quotes Darlene Johnson).

While this understanding is commonplace in reception theory, it is far from given in the rhetoric of documentary theory, or in the pragmatic principles that rule

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funding bodies, production priorities, shooting protocols and editing decisions. As a critical part of the research process for this project—as an exploration of the legitimacy of the conclusions arrived at in the Frontier essay when explored in the field—this interview, and the involvement in this film that generated the interview, contributed greatly to shifting the terms of the theoretical project. It confirmed the realisation that the rethinking of spectatorship that has taken place over decades in film theory has been largely occluded in documentary theory, and the spectator largely erased from the equation. It contributed to a shift in focus of the theoretical work more conclusively towards questions of spectatorship and audience in documentary.

The second interview starts from this insight, exploring explicitly the understanding of the audience and spectatorship that informs the work of Amar Kanwar, the director of A Season Outside, one of the films discussed in ‘The Poetics of a Potato’. Its point of departure is an exploration of the way Kanwar works with sensory, mimetic experience to engage his spectator—of his desire to ‘create spaces in [his] films where multiple relationships could coexist within a specific sequence, operating on intellectual, emotional, rhythmic and other levels’ (118). It moves to questions of the self, the relationship between the self and the material world that informs the filmmaker—and necessarily the viewer. Kanwar says:

If you were to just look at your own self, you would find that there are many experiences, thoughts, definitions—fragments that span a very large amount of time in history that all constitute your own self. My own reality at this point in time is not uni-dimensional and when you see the scale of multiplicity that exists in your own reality you have to accept the fact that similar multiplicities exist everywhere. The moment you accept that, you have to realize that when you communicate you are not talking to any one single point. Even if you are speaking to one single person, that person is put together of so many different layers. Then you see the possibility of being able to communicate differently. It is possible for me to speak in a simple, straight, uni-dimensional way and I’m not saying you should not, but it’s far
more enriching, interesting and real to be able to communicate in multiplicities (118).

Kanwar further argues that ‘the conventional documentary world has to enrich itself by reworking its own understandings of reality, the meaning of communicating and relating to multiplicities’ (119).

It is worth quoting Kanwar at length here, as the implications of his work for the rethinking of documentary are both profound and far-reaching. He says:

Once you see and accept that there is a heterogeneous audience, that each member of the audience has a complex history of life experience and memory, it is a bit pathetic if you are going to start making unilateral messages for such a rich, complex audience. You will find no end of people telling you how this kind of audience or that kind of audience will react but actually I feel it doesn’t work like that. The power of ideas and images and ideas put together is far stronger than just saying this works and this doesn’t work. When you relate to multiplicity, when you allow yourself to relate to different dimensions and different ways of communication, it frees you, it allows you to start relating to the world around you in a far more complex way.

[… ] We are not firing arrows that have to hit a single target. We are trying also to create certain experiences. How can every communication work if it is uni-dimensional? It cannot. It can achieve certain things but communication is a much larger phenomenon. I sometimes find it useful to describe the film as a space for a set of experiences. In a situation highly charged with political debate where people are asking what is your message, what is the solution, how do you argue and so forth, I find it far more fruitful to say that I’m momentarily changing the way you perceive things, the way you relate to things. From the experiences that I create for you for that forty minutes there is a possibility that you may come back to where you were before, but if my content and my imagery has the capacity to relate to many aspects of your life then there is a very powerful possibility that you may not
be the same person after you’ve experienced this. That experience will not leave you or will stay with you for far longer, because it’s connected with you at many levels rather than just connected with you at a single rational or intellectual level (122-3).

‘The Poetics of a Potato’ began with an examination of the way Kanwar works with image and sound to generate an affective, mimetic encounter for the spectator. This interview clinches this understanding but adds another dimension to it: a very concrete interrogation of the links between this way of working and an understanding of the cultural specificity of audiences—of the idea of ‘layering in’ multiple potential experiences for diverse spectators, of working explicitly with affective experience as a strategy to maximise the engagement of this heterogeneous audience. As such, it set the scene for the shift in focus in the final essay to frame documentary within the question of experience, and to understand this as the experience of both the filmmakers and the spectator.

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The final essay, ‘Buddhas made of ice and butter’: mimetic visuality, transience and the documentary image’, brings the question of affect and mimetic visuality into centre-stage in the conceptualisation of the documentary image. Evoking the reconfiguring of spectatorship in contemporary film theory, it examines aspects of aural experience in the process of documentary filming and reception, and argues the centrality of mimetic innervation to documentary. The essay weaves together an in-depth interview with Indian documentarists, Anjali Monteiro and K.P. Jayasankar, and an analysis of their film, Saacha (The Loom), a documentary about the transformation of Mumbai and its culture of the Left with the closure of the cotton mills in the 1980s. It argues that Saacha is a politically-committed investigation of the cultural and intellectual history of Mumbai, a rich, layered exploration of a milieu that generates a sense of intimacy, of being inside the cultural life of the city, but never loses sight of the cinematic encounter. Monteiro and Jayasankar avoid the dualist oppositions familiar from documentary rhetoric between affect and interrogation, truth and beauty. The essay explores the way
Saacha works with the sensory, haptic qualities of sound and image—with the auratic power of objects—qualities often marginalised in documentary film—in ways that evoke a heightened mimetic visuality for the spectator.

Drawing the idea of a mimetic encounter into the discussion of documentary, the essay explores the way the filmmakers themselves describe the affective encounter they experience through the viewfinder. It explores the affective, mimetic encounter of the filmmakers and the translation of this into an affective encounter of the spectators with the image. Evoking the earlier examination of the ways that Angelopoulos works with location shooting, and its articulation of the filmmaking process as an affective encounter with the material world, this final essay brings this understanding to bear on a similar encounter in the making of documentary, and in ways of thinking about the camera—as a tool for seeing (not just recording)—and about the image. The importance of mimetic experience has been increasingly explored in discussions on cinema spectatorship. But what of the embodied, mimetic eye that inscribes itself in the image as it is constructed—framed, shot and assembled—the eye of the director, the cinematographer and the editor and the conceptual and sensory frameworks they draw on in the ways they construct that image—the spatial, temporal, rhythmic, sensory, emotional and intellectual templates they work from?

To think about documentary in this way as an encounter between filmmaker, cinematographer, or editor, and the image or sound, is to open up the question of experience in the production process—the experience of the filmmaker. This essay asks, what happens in the bristle, the thrill, the immersion of that encounter, what does one make of it? How does the filmmaker re-stage or translate this encounter for the viewer?

Whereas the post-structuralist debates about authorship have systematically marginalised this concern from the centre-stage of film theory, if we are to think in any sustained way about mimetic experience and its awakening, that interrogation must be extended to the processes involved in producing the image. Alexander Kluge has said that ‘[a] documentary film is shot with three cameras: 1) the camera in the technical sense; 2) the filmmaker’s mind; and 3) the generic
patterns of the documentary film, which are founded on the expectations of the audience that patronizes it.\textsuperscript{176} To think about this ‘second camera’ in more contemporary terms, we could expand the cognitive implications of ‘mind’ to encompass ‘embodied mind’—the filmmaker’s experiential repertoire as it is embedded in the sensorium—and explore this within questions of culture and the discourses that nourish ways of thinking about and experiencing the image.

‘Buddhas made of ice and butter’ discusses the underpinning of conventional documentary film by unexplored ideas about the self and the relation between the self and the material world. Monteiro and Jayasankar, it argues, challenge the stability of self, the “sovereign subject”, in relation to the world, and bring this challenge into the very ways they work with the documentary image. In a fundamental reconfiguring of the central terms of conventional documentary theory, which has major ramifications for the rethinking of realism, the essay cites the directors’ approach to the filmmaking process, which centres on what they describe as their own ‘vulnerability to the image’. This evokes, in precisely the same language as Marks uses, the prevalence of a sense of mimetic visuality in the ways they think about the image—of a porousness between self and image and between self and world.\textsuperscript{177}

Monteiro and Jayasankar articulate their understanding of the implication of the self in the material world in terms that come from a different framework but resonate strongly with Kracauer’s understanding of realism, as ‘bound up with the problematic of the subject’ (TOF xvi). In the way these two filmmakers articulate this ‘vulnerability to the image’, it is intimately related to a challenge to indexicality, which they see as central to their filmmaking practice. They talk of not being able to control or contain the image—that it has many layers of meaning—and, in its transience, ‘[points to] one’s own finitude’. They liken their images to the ‘icons of ice and butter’ that the icon-makers keep making, even though they know they will melt away. They talk of finding a ‘third way’ in their relationship to the image, evoking a similar concept in Buddhist ethics, of ‘not

\textsuperscript{177} This essay draws on Marks’ argument about mimetic visuality, but does not address the focus on ‘mimetic representation’ in her work.
renouncing the image but not grabbing the image either’. They say that, in this third way, which requires ‘a non-predatory relationship with the camera’, ‘somehow the image is allowed to speak’. Through a filmmaking practice that opens themselves to the auratic power of images, and an understanding of how to reproduce this experience for the viewer, they thus bring mimetic visuality into the core understanding of documentary film. *Saacha* produces what could best be described as a mimetic innervation.

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Miriam Hansen’s reconsideration of the work of Siegfried Kracauer, with its argument that Kracauer is no naive realist but understands realism ‘from the problematic of the subject’, forms part of a widespread contemporary rethinking of the whole question of realism. Ivone Margulies has confirmed the way the historical studies of writers such as Tom Gunning and Hansen, among others, ‘have allowed a number of important questions to frame anew the issue of realism’.¹⁷⁸ In particular, Margulies singles out the shift away from questions of verisimilitude toward a focus on cinematic materiality, with the resuscitation of interest in and the recent re-readings of André Bazin and Kracauer. She writes that this recent work ‘resists the segregation between avant-garde/modernist and realist films characteristic of the 1970s modernist agenda’ (9), emphasising instead the ‘inherent heterogeneity of cinematic images—their awkward amalgams of literal materiality and reference’ (17). She locates the body as central to the consideration of what she calls the ‘layered materiality of an impure corporeal cinema’ (18).

Jane Gaines, writing about political documentary, has argued that ‘radical filmmaking […] has not adequately considered the politicization of the spectator by visceral means’, suggesting that ‘we look at the effects of the political documentary on the body’.¹⁷⁹ Gaines addresses this question with the concept of ‘political mimesis’ (90). Evoking Linda Williams, she explores the idea that the body on the screen engenders a mimicry, it makes the body of the viewer do

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things. Linking her argument to Eisenstein’s montage of attractions, she discusses the role of affect as an agitational tool that generates ‘almost involuntary effects’ (90) in the bodies of spectators. She says, ‘what I am calling political mimicry has to do with the production of affect in and through the conventionalized imagery of struggle’ (92).

By situating the consideration of embodied spectatorship as central to documentary, these essays address the challenge posed by Gaines but, by moving away from the centrality of the body on screen, they also propose a more expansive, more flexible way to understand affect in documentary. ‘Buddhas made of ice and butter’ locates documentary within the rethinking of realism in recent film theory, outside the conventional divisions between fiction and non-fiction, mainstream and avant-garde. It brings together two strands of film theory often considered quite separate, divergent, founded on different principles. This final essay thus comes full circle in drawing together the two strands of enquiry, bringing affective mimetic experience into the core of the challenges facing contemporary documentary theory and practice.

180 In raising questions of affect and intensity in documentary, this work has an affinity with the recent work of critics such as Fernão Pessoa Ramos. At the Visible Evidence conference in Brisbane, in 2001, Ramos presented a paper titled ‘Nonfiction Spectatorship and Intensity of Presence in the Take’, which had resonances with my work in this area. The work of Malin Wahlberg on temporality and affect in documentary, also presented at this conference, also suggests productive new directions. Wahlberg, Malin. ‘Time in Experimental Cityscapes: Documentary and the Double Articulation of Temporality.’
Conclusion

This project traces, across a number of key sites, the groundwork for a major paradigm shift in film studies. When approached from the perspective of affective mimetic innervation, it seems clear that the whole landscape of concepts and analytical frameworks that have dominated film theory since the 1970s needs major revision. The groundbreaking archaeological work of Miriam Hansen, in opening up conceptual frameworks that have lain dormant in many contemporary interpretations of Benjamin and Kracauer, is pivotal here. This project takes many liberties with Hansen’s conceptual excavations, at times taking her insights like found objects into a new terrain, even against her own premonitory warnings.

Gertrud Koch cites Rudolf Arnheim’s account of Balász’ *The Spirit of Film*. Arnheim writes, of Balász:

> An abundance of inspirations, questions and perspectives wet [sic] the reader’s appetite without satisfying it. Balász offers an encyclopedic wealth of material for a unique aesthetic theory of film. The book which he failed to write is excellent.\(^{181}\)

In an interesting synchronicity, Koch’s essay in which this quote appears is translated by Hansen. While one could hardly talk, in any sense, of ‘failure’ in the incredibly rich and suggestive scholarly work of Hansen, there is a sense in which, underlying her own project is another one awaiting realisation. The other book that glimmers in the interstices of Hansen’s work is also an excellent one.

This project has followed several threads of enquiry. The first, beginning from an interrogation of the politics of *Frontier*, argued that any political assessment must consider questions of embodied spectatorship. The study of embodied spectatorship evolved into an enquiry into cinematic affect, exploring mise-en-

scene and the role of sensory experience in the generation of this affect. As the project developed, Kracauer’s concept of the material dimension and Benjamin’s related concept of mimetic innervation, as articulated by Hansen, crystallised an understanding of the central role of mimetic experience in cinematic affect. Discarding the long-held distinctions between fiction and non-fiction work, this project brings the understanding of affective mimetic innervation, developed in the context of fiction film, back into the theorisation of documentary spectatorship.

The idea of mimetic innervation provides the conceptual framework for the second thread, that follows through understandings of energy or intensity in film. Metaphors of energy figure strongly in this work, but which way does the energy go? To Rick Altman, it smoulders under the text. To Tom Gunning, it cycles between screen and spectator: in narrative, from the spectator inwards, into the diegesis; in the cinema of attractions, outward from the screen to assault the spectator. To Steven Shaviro, it stays trapped and thereby intensifies. For Siegfried Kracauer, it pushes downward, into the material dimension. For Laura Marks, following Deleuze, it seems to go up, away from materiality and into time. Lesley Stern sees it as a ‘loopy transference’ between performing and spectatorial bodies. For Adrian Martin, at least in the films of Raul Ruiz, it is a current, a charge, a psychic intensity condensed and displaced through the materiality of the film.

Energy, intensity—these terms bring us in to the core question that the essays address: what is cinematic affect? This project lays out a terrain for this enquiry, defined, initially, by a clarification of what affect is not. These essays contend that affect is not reducible to, or co-terminous with, emotion; it is not something that only breaks out in moments of rupture, induced by shock; it is not excess, the exception to a linear, ordered norm; it is not the prerogative of the avant-garde; it is not the experience of time, in itself, although temporality contributes to its intensification; it is not pure sensation, though sensory experience is a key to its operation; it is not exclusive to the realm of fiction; it does not exclude a resonance with the significatory dimension of a film.
While the analyses included here have pushed aside questions of signification in order to focus on embodied affect and materiality, to explore the ways it cycles through the sensorium, the relationships between the two inevitably resurface as a key question. Michael Taussig’s description of the relationship between the ‘copy’ and ‘contact’ aspects of mimetic experience as a mysterious ‘sticky web’ perhaps provides the best metaphor to understand this complex dynamic. Like a möbius strip, any linear analysis ends up turning around itself in endless cycles.

The conclusions of this enquiry don’t necessarily emerge as a clear-cut set of theoretical postulates about cinematic affect—if they did, there would be no need for the writing in the first place. It is in the encounter with the experience of the films, from the inside, that an understanding of cinematic affect emerges. Miriam Hansen’s model of narrative as a scaffold or web for the experience of aesthetic experience provides a key entrée here into an understanding of affect, and her argument that the exploration of this dimension requires promiscuous and open-ended forms of enquiry are pivotal to its understanding.

One aspect of this open-ended enquiry that this project explores is to attempt, not to provide a distanced exegesis of a film, but to go into the sticky webs. Not a fly on the wall here, I run the risk of being the fly in the web. I risk encountering an arachnid reader, who may accuse me of a “prelapsarian” longing’, as Martin Jay accuses Michael Taussig. But as much as this is a project of writing, as well as a conceptual one, it mandates an engagement with the murky realm of cinematic experience. The project is written for a reader attuned to the pleasures and mysteries of this affective mimetic experience, and with the challenges of the ekphrastic endeavour—for a reader who has also been in the web. Perhaps we are a different kind of spider that, like Jayasankar’s makers of icons of ice and butter, keeps spinning new webs in the breeze, as transient and fragile as they are.
Days of Heaven.

Days of Heaven.
Published Essay: Part One

<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/03/25/embodied_affect.html>

This essay was presented as a conference paper at *Cinema and the Senses* conference, University of New South Wales, 1998, and was accepted for an anthology of refereed conference papers: ‘*Cinema and the Senses: Visual Culture and Spectatorship*. Eds George Kouvaros & Jodi Brooks. Sydney: Power Institute: Centre for Visual Art & Culture. Expected publication date was in 2000. After three years, the anthology folded. The essay was then published in *Senses of Cinema 25* (2003).
Cinema and Embodied Affect

by Anne Rutherford

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I

Some time ago, suffering an excruciating pressure through my jaw and cranium, I came to believe that the source of the problem lay in the root of my tongue and the way in which the musculature of my tongue was sitting within its cavity in the pharynx. I thought that if I was able to visualise the structure of the muscles around the epiglottis I could find some way to release them, and to this end I went to the classic anatomy text, *Gray's Anatomy*. Here I was instructed to first draw the tongue forward and attach it by a stitch to the nose to establish the optimal stretch for examination, and that then, in order to better demonstrate the fibres of the tongue, the organ should be subjected to prolonged boiling (Gray, 324-325).

At this moment, as I registered in a flash the image of the cadaver superimposed over my own sentient flesh, I felt a sense of alienation, of dismemberment, familiar not only from other encounters with medical discourse, but also reminiscent of reading philosophical and cultural works which putatively offer knowledge of the body but which find no resonance in my own sense of corporeality, of the lived body. Not least among these discourses which seem to evoke dismemberment rather than living bodies are film theory and critical writings on cinema.

The Pasolini scholar, Maurizio Viano, once declared his conviction that "the wish for a scientific film theory was an unfortunate episode in the history of film criticism" (Viano, ix) (1). Nowhere is this debilitating heritage more pertinent than in the grounding of film theory in understandings of the body which derive their principles from anatomy. The insistence on scientific models of the body derived from biomedical discourse and the concomitant occlusion of phenomenological concepts of embodiment, have persistently thwarted the articulation of an aesthetics of embodiment which recognises the full resonance of embodied affect in the experience of cinema spectatorship.

In her early attempts to revive a phenomenological film theory, Vivien Sobchack wrote, in the 1980s, of the reluctance of decades of film theory to deal with experience as a complex affective and embodied process, claiming there had been a
collective horror of the concept of experience, which, she argued, had been seen as "a soft, mushy term, a hangover from a sloppy liberal humanism" (Sobchack, xiv). Indeed, it is precisely here, in examining more closely the concept of affective experience, that the historical interlocking of film theory with the foundational metaphors of anatomy is revealed as a shackle to an impoverished and unproductive "scientific" model of embodiment.

Anatomy, which Foucault calls the "techniques of the corpse", took as its foundation the study of the static structures perceivable on the dissection table, the human body robbed of life, severed from its connection to the lived experience of that body. While the focus on the corpse shifted from centre-stage with the development of physiology, with its study of the body as living and moving systems, the cold shudder of the morgue lingers in the measurement and observation of the living physical body conceived as a separate entity to the subjectivity which inhabits it. Physiology developed alongside anatomy, rather than displacing it, and the foundational principles established through the development of anatomy, with its assumptions of a structural, empirically measurable body, can be read across the subsequent disciplines of physiology and clinical practice.

The core concept of the body which persists from anatomy through to physiology is what the Germans call Körper. Körper refers to "the structural aspects of the body, the objectified body and also the dead body or corpse". This term, Thomas Ots claims, "views the body as a vessel or container to be filled with the spirit or soul" (Ots, 117). As writers in both phenomenology and medical anthropology have pointed out, in German there is a clear demarcation between this term and another word, Leib, explained by Ots as the "living body, my body with feelings, sensations, perceptions and emotions" (Ots, 116). These two bodies of course are indistinct in the English language. In film theory the erasure of the distinction between these two concepts has masked the implications of the concept of Leib, the experiential potential of Leib as embodied affect, for a cinematic aesthetics of embodiment.

II

The foundational metaphor of the disembodied eye in decades of so-called gaze theory has been the historical site of the imbrication of film theory with an empiricist psychology of perception and optics. The dismantling of this metaphor has of course been well-rehearsed in cinema studies and debates around visual cultures in the last decade. In these attempts to integrate the body into the conceptual models for understanding vision, however, there is commonly a slide, an elision between the physical body, the subject, and embodiment, in a way that once again erases the distinction between these terms.

At the forefront of this re-thinking of vision has been Jonathan Crary, and it is instructive to examine more closely the understanding of embodied vision which he explores. In his treatise on the techniques of the observer, Crary traces the ways in which 18th century models of vision draw on the model of the camera obscura with its basis in the lifeless structures of anatomy. As a pivotal moment in this co-evolution of the two disciplines of anatomy and optics, Crary cites the instruction of Descartes to his readers to "[take] the dead
eye of a newly dead person", to scrape back the outer membranes, and insert it as a lens into the camera obscura (Crary, 45). For Descartes, this eye severed from the subjective interference of the human senses provides the model for understanding optics, and thereby vision.

Crary recounts the shift from this model of optics to a model which derives its principles and claim to authority from physiology. He argues that, by shifting the paradigm of vision from the static anatomy-based model to the physiological model grounded in the observation and measurement of the living body, the groundedness of vision in the body comes to occupy an increasingly central role in 19th century theory and practice of optics. In Crary's account, the subjective understanding of vision comes to displace sense-receptor-based theories of vision which assume that the eye simply registers information from the external world. He calls this new integration of the subjective ground of vision a "corporeal" concept of vision. However, when Crary describes the integration of the body into the conceptual models for understanding vision, the body he refers to here is Körper—an entity conceived of as physiological.

The paradigm shift which Crary outlines is tied to the epistemological question of where vision occurs—whether the sensations which we perceive as visual derive from external, so-called objective realities, or whether they derive internally, from the subject. He argues that 19th century optics recognised that the product of vision and the process of vision itself can be severed from any external referent—for example, a visual sensation can be produced by electrical stimulation of the retina. This recognition of the "non-objective", non-referential outcome of vision, its grounding in the subjective processing of information, he argues, redefined the concept of visual perception, with the acknowledgment that vision is grounded in the physiological structures of the body.

In this account, the impact of the physical body on the processes of vision is positional or structural. This is the "thickness of the body", the carnal density which Crary ascribes to the new understanding of vision. The subjectivity that he evokes here refers to the sense of cognitive inner realities and we need to clearly demarcate the difference between this concept of subjectivity and embodiment. Subjectivity is not coterminous with embodied experience—it is only one component, one narrowly-defined layer of experience, which does not approximate the heterogeneous and conflicting multidimensionality of the lived body. The corporeality of vision which Crary discusses in this way cannot encompass the full register of Leib—the body of feeling, sensation, perception and emotion—and does not open up an exploration of the affective embodied experience of the visual world.

In so far as Crary focuses on vision and the understanding of vision as an artefact of discourse, in so far that is as he derives his analytical model from Foucault—and you could call his study an archaeology of vision—he inherits from Foucault a focus on the body and vision as the product of discursive construction. With this heritage comes both a strength—the illumination of the social/historical grounding of vision and its conceptualisation in particular historical moments—and also the blind spots.
of this method—the erasure or occlusion of the question of experience. The sociologists Lyon and Barbalet point out this limitation in Foucault's *Birth of the Clinic* when they claim that he focuses on the "outcome of social processes" and the body as an artefact of these forces with little attention to the experience of the lived bodies subject to the impact of those forces, or their potential as "an active source of social processes", not just their object (Lyon, and Barbalet, 49, 54). This critique is taken much further in the context of medical anthropology by Terence Turner who argues that "Foucault's body has no flesh": it is "a featureless tabula rasa", an "inert, subjectless physical object waiting to be animated by discourse with no sensuous potential on its own terms" (Turner, 35-37, 43) (2). It is precisely this "sensuous potential", and its affective power, that is lacking from Crary's understanding of the corporeality of vision. And it is a recognition of this sensuous potential that the concept of *Leib* brings to the "body" of film theory, and to an aesthetics of embodiment.

Just as "medicine's conquest of the body" as an object of knowledge "required the gradual foreclosure of subjective experience", as John Wiltshire writes (Wiltshire, 40-41), when we examine the transposition of the physiological understanding of the body and of vision into contemporary film theory, it is the same foreclosure of the full resonance of embodied experience that characterises this disciplinary field, and the physiological metaphor emerges as a regulatory force in its own right within film theory.

While Crary touches only briefly on the impact of physiological optics on cinema and its theorisation, Lisa Cartwright has examined the thorough imbrication of physiological optics and cinema in her study of the physiological cinema. Cartwright explores the introduction of the cinematic apparatus into the laboratories of physiologists such as Étienne-Jules Marey, particularly as an instrument for the recording and study of human motion. She argues particularly that the erasure of subjectivity, which forms a core defining principle of the laboratory techniques under which the cinematographe was integrated into the physiological study of the body, works its way back into the popular cinema in genres which develop the fascination with surveillant looking (3). My own concern here develops at a tangent to Cartwright's field of study. I am concerned with how the persistence of the physiological concept of the body as *Körper*, and the resistance to exploring the full implications of *Leib*, has hindered the development of an aesthetics of embodiment which can address the centrality of embodied affect to understanding cinema spectatorship.

An aesthetics of embodiment can be understood in various ways: Peter Brooks has used this term to describe the theatrical use of the body as site of signification, the recourse to gesture or bodiliness to carry a part of the burden of meaning. While this performing body can contribute to the aesthetics of embodiment which I propose, my focus is not on this body on the screen, but the relationship between the embodied spectator and the screen. Linda Williams has opened up the discussion of this dynamic with her analysis of "body genres", such as porn and horror, and the potential effects on the spectator of the viewing of bodily excess on the screen. While she does propose a dimension to this experience that goes beyond a simple mimicry of those viewed bodies, her analysis relies for its discussion of embodiment on the presence of the human body on the screen (4). The aesthetics of embodiment which I am proposing, as a primary dimension of spectatorship, does not assume a body on the screen.

As a paradigmatic instance, I'll take a scene in Mizoguchi's film, *The Story of The*
*Last Chrysanthemums* (Mizoguchi Kenji, 1939). This scene shows a number of people sitting at a river carnival waving fans. Narratively, the scene prefigures a turning point in the film—as an aristocratic mother recognises with a jolt the possibility of her son's furtive romantic interest in the maid—and yet this narrative moment in no way explains the agitation that the scene can produce. The scene follows a long, slow tracking shot, a shot that lasts almost ten minutes in a mesmeric gliding down a street. The film cuts momentarily to black, and then this moment is punctured first by a loud explosion, and then the light of fireworks breaking out in the night sky. As the scene cuts to a group of spectators, the camera remains almost still on the spectators framed within an architectural space composed in depth, of wall panels in muted greys and soft, low contrast lighting. Set against the containment of the shot, the controlled visual stasis of the camera and composition, the chaos of the fireworks is carried over into raucous conversation and ribald laughter. The undercurrent of explosive energy is transmuted visually into the agitation of the fans, multiple points of fluctuating light reflections in the frame as each fan catches the light at a different angle and rhythm. This is an image with no centre, no focal point, as if Mizoguchi had conceived of the surface of the shot on a hundred different planes. Just as the rhythmic juxtapositions can lure and contort the body, the tensions and dynamism of the surface of the image can effect a bodily agitation. Almost invariably when I see this one shot I am thrown suddenly onto another dimension, my viewing body fragmented, dispersed, disoriented. I experience the shot in my stomach, as if my stomach turns over. It's this other, visceral dimension that, to me, an aesthetics of embodiment has to explain.

III

The relationship between vision and the body, the role of movement and tactility in that relationship, and the connection of this complex to affective experience must be central terms in the articulation of an aesthetics of embodiment. The understanding of this relationship stems from how the body or embodiment is conceptualised as the existential ground of perception. Two terms—kinetic vision and visual kinaesthesia—form the pivotal points of two vastly different paradigms of visual perception which underpin understandings of cinema based on divergent concepts of embodiment.

Both based on an understanding of ambulatory vision, or the visual experience of a person walking or moving through a space, the respective understandings of each of these models differ greatly in the place or the importance which they accord to the body in the process of visual perception. The theory of kinetic vision, or vision-in-motion, developed by 19th century sculptor, Adolf Hildebrand, stems directly from the laboratory of the physiologists and their affiliation with the motion studies of Marey, Muybridge and others. Hildebrand's model derives from an analysis of the biological mechanics of stereoscopic vision in the perception of an observer moving towards an object. In its application to cinema, the eyes of a beholder or observer moving through space provide the prototype of a perception of motion which is supposedly duplicated by the mobile camera's ability to simulate or represent perceptual cues of depth and movement.

*Marsyas* (sculpture by Adolf Hildebrand)
This analogy is extended with the assumption that, just as the camera is equated with the eye of the beholder moving through a physical space, so the spectator in cinema identifies his or her subject position totally with the point of view of the camera (5). As Mary Ann Doane claims, (in another context but very apt in this one), "[t]here is a certain metonymic slippage between vision, the image, the eye and the 'I' of subjectivity", and this slippage has formed the shaky foundation of one of the dominant paradigms of film theory (Doane, 61) (6).

The empiricist fallacy of this model is referred to by the perceptual psychologist, James Gibson as "eyeball optics", and you can almost hear the chuckle in his writing as he talks about the way movie commentators have read this physiological optics, actually believed it, and applied it to their understanding of cinema (Gibson, 297 ff). The eye, says Gibson, is just an anatomical structure, only one component of the process of vision, and he replaces the model of perception derived from physiological optics with what he terms an ecological approach to perception, one which emphasises the process of visual kinaesthesia. As Gibson puts it, "vision is kinaesthetic in that it registers movements of the body just as much as does the muscle-joint-skin system and the inner-ear system" (Gibson, 183). Vision, he claims, picks up movements of the body or part of the body relative to the ground. (He includes stasis of the body as one form of movement). This information he calls proprioception. "The [inherited] doctrine that vision is exteroceptive, in other words that it obtains 'external' information only, is simply false", he argues: "[v]ision obtains information about both the environment and the self" (Gibson, 183). Theories of motion perspective, he claims, are only "an abstract way of describing the information at a moving point of observation" (Gibson, 183).

By the recognition that visual perception involves both the processes of exteroception and proprioception, Gibson discards the subjective-objective dichotomy in traditional models of perception, and in doing so radically rethinks the notion of the senses. This is the core of his ecological approach to perception: that perception is an environmental process. By this he means that the perceiver constantly locates him or herself in the environment, that what we perceive is not data about the environment out there, but "the significance of surfaces in relation to our body" (7).

Perception here is neither a cognitive process, nor a biological process, as this distinction becomes non-sensical. It involves the positing of oneself as an embodied entity in a meaningful way in relation to the environment and what the environment offers. The philosopher, Sue Cataldi, describes this as the perceiver actually "'inhabiting' a spectacle" (Cataldi, 96) (8). My own metaphorical understanding of this ecological perception is that it is more akin to a millipede than to a camera or camera obscura—a thousand tentacles feeling their way through a space rather than a single lens taking it in view.

So, what use to us in cinema studies is a doctrine of natural perception? So much of film theory has been either constrained by the mechanical application of such doctrines, or has laboured to emphasise the distinction between natural perception and the viewing of cinema. In so far as traditional models of sense perception have been empirically-based, and have understood visual perception as pre-cultural, this distinction has been mandatory, and the focus on the mediatory role of the apparatus has simply continued this demarcation. And yet, if we focus on the spectator, and what the spectator brings to the cinematic moment, this is not a spectator who leaves behind the embodied ground of their experience (or perception)—embodiment is one of the important culturally or historically-inscribed dispositions that the spectator
Gibson's theory of ecological perception, with its discussion of haptic vision, provides the missing link between the theorisation of vision and of embodiment. As such, he provides a crucial springboard to examine an understanding of emotion as embodied affect (9). While Gibson is not concerned with the question of emotion, Cataldi's reading extends his argument from the "perception of one's body in relation to the ground", to include a discussion of what one's body is doing or feeling in relation to that ground (10). She takes this model of situation of self in relation to the environment onto the level of emotion, arguing that we are simultaneously placed emotionally in relation to that environment. It is worth quoting Cataldi here at length, as it is this re-working of the understanding of the affective axis of perception that provides the crucial link for our understanding of embodied vision. Cataldi here cites Gibson's example of cliffs:

[a]t the site/sight of a cliff, we are thought to directly perceive it as a 'falling off' place, because 'one's body in relation to the ground is what's getting attention'. But Gibson does not pay sufficient attention to what one's body may be feeling in relation to that 'ground'. Gibson's example tends to ignore the fact that at the site/sight of a cliff, we are simultaneously placed thereby (there bi-placed) evocatively 'in' danger and emotionally 'in' fear. It is not simply that we passionlessly see cliffs as 'falling off places'; it is also the case that we sense that cliffs are dangerous and that we are afraid of falling off them . . .

Thus I 'join' the spectacle of a cliff 'in a kind of blind recognition which precedes the intellectual working-out and clarification of the meaning': 'falling-off place' (Cataldi, 96-7).

Cataldi emphasises the non-dichotomous aspect of this model of perception—that a subject-object dichotomy becomes inoperable here—and links this perceptual model with the non-dichotomous implications of Merleau-Ponty's flesh ontology for a theorisation of the emotions. Cataldi calls on Merleau-Ponty's concepts of "carnal ideality" or "sensible ideas" to elaborate on the felt bodily depth to the living of emotional meanings: she argues that emotions are "neither 'purely' mental nor 'purely' physical phenomena", they "cannot be purely 'subjective experiences', [seen as] purely 'inner realities' as they are felt in the depth of the flesh" (Cataldi, 90 & 114). She argues that "there are at least two 'sides' to every affective experience and neither . . . is intelligible apart from the other" (Cataldi, 111) (11). Cataldi claims that a "subjectivist account of emotions . . . which centres these experiences in some closed-off and privately experienced space of subjectivity is false"—emotional experience involves what she calls "communicatively intertwining the bodily flesh that we live with the flesh of the world" (Cataldi, 119).

Cataldi points out that Merleau-Ponty himself did not make the connection between "his view of emotionally 'blind' apprehension [and] tactile perception or emotional feeling" (Cataldi, 109). It is this bridge that Cataldi provides between the "haptic vision" of Gibson, the "carnal ideality" of Merleau-Ponty, and a theorisation of the emotions, that offers the most productive nexus for an understanding of affective experience and its relationship to the embodied vision of cinema spectatorship.

Gibson's perceptual model of inhabiting of a spectacle provides for Cataldi an analogous model for the movement which she sees at the core of emotion—a displacement, a moving away, or moving out from the self, a "radical displacement of oneself". She describes emotion as, by definition, a crossing and remaking of boundaries between oneself and the world. "The deeper the emotional experience", brings to the cinema.
she claims, "the more blurred and de-bordered the world-body border becomes, the more we experience ourselves as belonging to or caught up in the Flesh of the world" (Cataldi, 115).

One of the key sources which Cataldi evokes here is Glen Mazis's work, *Emotion and Embodiment* (12). Mazis defines emotion here in similar terms: he talks of e-motion—the motion away, moving out from, also an openness to a "moving-out of the world". In Mazis, emotion is defined by embodiment, by tactility, and movement. He writes:

> E-motion is taken up within the body, the body as the affective space . . . and the term feeling points [to this], the etymology in its root in the Icelandic falma means to grope. Through feeling in its emotional sense the body moves forward gropingly into the world, not as self-sufficient . . . but rather as touching things in order to be touched back. The hand in groping is an openness, a gaping waiting for a reciprocal touch from the world . . . (Mazis, 29-30)

In both Cataldi and Mazis, emotional intensity is understood by comparison with tactility—the permeability of contact and boundaries between the embodied self and world (13).

IV

How can we relate this tactile movement out of oneself to the discussion of cinema spectatorship? The movement of the spectator out of the here and into a somewhere else appears again and again as a motif in the attempt to understand the coalescence of perception and emotion in the embodied intensities which make up spectatorship. Eisenstein in his later work develops the central concept of ecstasy, referring to its etymology in the Greek, *ek-stasis*, a "movement lifting one out of oneself" (Quoted in Aumont, 59) (14). This ecstasy as he explains it is "an awakening, which puts the spectator's emotional and intellectual activity into operation to the maximum degree" (Aumont, 59). He seems to struggle towards a non-dichotomous framework for thinking this movement, constrained of course by the conceptual rigours and political demands of dialectical materialism. As Jacques Aumont describes the concept of ecstasy in Eisenstein, there is no contradiction between transcendence and materialism, the spectator is lifted in a frenzy into a union with a transcendental object, in a process which is also material. The pleasure which this engenders is described as a movement to a type of "ecstatic vibration" (Aumont, 60), and again as "a move beyond the rudiments of consciousness to enter the purely passionate sphere of pure feeling, sensation, being" (Aumont, 61). A crucial part of his aesthetic endeavour, as Aumont points out, is the search for ways of using a work of art "capable of producing or mimicking that ecstasy" (Aumont, 50). So what is this transcendence that is also material, this sensation that is also being, this nervous excitation? It seems clearly to be an attempt to conceptualise a sensuous, embodied affect and the potential of cinema to arouse this heightened experience.

Eisenstein moves from his initial concept of attraction, based on shock and grounded in the desire to produce a predictable effect in the spectator, through a toying with the idea of pathos, conceived in terms of emotion as
sentiment, and then onto his later concepts of ecstasy and organicism. Each of these terms contains within it the kernel of a theory of embodiment, and how to engage the spectator in an embodied manner. There is a congruence between the early term, attraction, and a mechanical concept of sensation; there's a congruence also between pathos and emotion understood as emotional identification; and between his term, ecstasy, and embodied affect. In the later concept, which he calls organicism, we have a formulation of this embodied affect as a non-dichotomous concept of sensory thought, "a carnal idea" (15).

It is precisely this move that film theory needs to make from the concern with sensation or with emotion understood as sentiment organised along the axis of narrative identification, or with desire, to an understanding of embodied affect, in the theorisation of spectatorship. To redress, in other words, what Cataldi has referred to as "an excessively rationalized—maybe even a somatophobic—approach to the emotions" (Cataldi, 127). And in so doing, to address the challenge of reconceptualising embodied vision as an inherently tactile, and thereby simultaneously affective process.

So how do we understand in cinema this movement or displacement of the self which links Merleau-Ponty's flesh ontology, through Cataldi's and Mazis' theories of embodied emotion, to Eisenstein? This movement is not conceived as a physical movement across a physical space: no empirical measurement can discern it, nor can an optical model define it. This is a movement interior to both the gritty materiality of the body's location in space, and simultaneously to the carnality of an idea or experience. It is a movement of the entire embodied being towards a corporeal appropriation of or immersion in a space, an experience, a moment. It is a movement away from the self, yes, but away from the self conceived as the subject, in so far as this concept is a cognitive or disembodied one—a movement out of the constraints of the definable, knowable—a groping towards a connection, a link-up with the carnality of the idea, the affect of the body, the sensible resonances of experience. It is a movement towards—a movement of the world towards our grasp, or of our beings towards potency. It is an erotics of the image, a dilation of the senses, a nervous excitation—an eye-opening sure—but more than that an opening of the pores, a quickening of the pulse.

It is essential to turn here to Benjamin's use of the term, aesthetics, (aisthitikos) which Susan Buck-Morss glosses as "the sensory experience of perception", developed initially as "a discourse of the body" (Buck-Morss, 6) (16). The field of aesthetics, in its original use in the Greek, she says, is "corporeal material nature". How do we understand this field in cinema? Surely it means that the field of cinema, the field which it engages and which it aims to mobilise, is the corporeality, the embodied responsiveness of the spectator. Cinema is not only about telling a story; it's about creating an affect, an event, a moment which lodges itself under the skin of

![Battleship Potemkin](image)  
*Sergei Eisenstein, 1925*
the spectator.

Skin is indeed a pivotal concept here. If we take the metaphor of the epidermis as our model for spectatorship, how do we understand it? Is it a container, keeping in the subject and keeping the object out, on the other side? Is the spectator thick-skinned, impervious to the vibrations set up on the screen on all but the most blatant level, or is the skin permeable, a membrane that mediates a contact with the world, a tactile being in the world, that can respond to the flux of textures, of temperatures, can glow, can bristle and tremble, can even relinquish its boundaries in an osmosis of feeling and sensation? (17)

The "palpable sensuous connection between the very body of the perceiver and the perceived": this is Michael Taussig's definition of one side of the concept of mimesis, and here we have a mirroring of Gibson's ecological model of perception (Taussig, 21). Mimesis here is the critical link between this ecological perception, its affective dimension, and its resonance for an understanding of cinema spectatorship. As Taussig elaborates the concept of mimesis, it has two parts: the first, the idea of imitation or copy, as in the capacity to mimic, and the second, the idea of contact, this much more complex visceral experience of a relation, a porousness between one's self, one's own body and the objects or images of the world. It is this second aspect of mimesis that I am most interested in. Nitty-gritty is the best way to define this concept: in a film like Microcosmos you may be down there in the mud with the copulating lady-birds—it doesn't mean that this is identification, an imaginary mimicry. It may be red-and-black-spottedness, or jiggleness that attracts you, just as in watching an aquarium you may not have an anthropomorphic identification with a fish, but a recognition of floatingness or bubbleness. It may contact some place in your self that knows weightless suspension and set up a sympathetic vibration with it. Similarly you may find rollingness in the image of giant wave, spinningness with a windmill, or bristliness with the spiny protuberances on a prickly pear. Shape, colour, texture, protrusions and flourishes all reach out and draw us to them in an affective resonance.

As Taussig writes, this is "not the mind's eye" that reaches out to grasp or grope the image or space before me—it is my embodied self locating, placing myself in the world which I am viewing (Taussig, 25). "Sentience takes us out of ourselves", he writes, in explanation of the "visceral bond which connects the perceiver to the perceived in this mimetic process" (Taussig, 38) (18).

It is the heightening of this sentience that gives rise to embodied knowledge. It's not every dancer that can evoke in a spectator the feeling of the limbs unleashed from their sutures to the spine, of the spine unshackling itself from its bony frame to become molten liquid. The dancer themselves must envisage the body in space, articulate that space, realise its extension, and engage in dialogue with that space. Dancers know the precise mutability of the space around the body. They know the rigorous discipline and precision choreography needed to release the intervertebral spaces, to fill the spinal core with the downward force of gravity or the upward flow of a lift. Vertical, horizontal are not merely directions, dimensions, but energetic impulses which resonate through a space and whose vibrations must be grasped by the body of the spectator.

How does one experience space in this manner? Is it an identification with the psyche of the dancer? An imagined mimicry of their moves? A convergence with presumed notions of aesthetic form or tradition? Or is this corporeal engagement a register of a different order, a kinaesthetic arousal, a mimetic connection with the
spatialness of the choreography?

Do we surrender this kinaesthetic pleasure as soon as our experience is mediated by the camera? Surely the reading of a tactile, palpable cinematic image is inscribed with traces of the forces that play around the body in space—a corporeal intensity, an "affective space" (19).

In so far as the mobile camera is implicated in this movement, it is not just constructing a space traversed, drawing the spectator across a space in a mimicry of physical movement or a simulation of motion perspective, but rather a transport, the possibility of the spectator's dissolution, or loss in the movement. The mobile camera is a tool of choreography, not just of representation or perception.

To come back to Mizoguchi and his flickering fans. From the very first moment of *The Story of The Last Chrysanthemums*, he jolts, cajoles, and lures the spectator into waking up the full sensory capacity of the mimetic register. He draws us in, schools us in how we should watch this film, draws us into the space of the film, attunes us to its rhythms, its palpable sensuous textures. This film is often discussed in terms of *mise en scène*, and Mizoguchi is most often described in terms of mood. He's often called a director of mood, or a director of the long-take, with the focus on fluidity of the mobile camera. Mizoguchi is definitely a director of *mise en scène*, but how do we understand *mise en scène*?

Literally, what is put into the scene. Yes—but what is put into the scene? It is so often understood in the most mechanical dogged sense of the objects placed before the camera: décor and costume; in a static understanding of the expressive use of light to shape and sculpt the space of the screen; or in its slightly more animated sense in the use of the mobile camera. But the question remains what is put into the scene here? For it is not just what is put into the frame, but what is put into the moment of experience: how the spectator is drawn into the scene. This must be understood as the evocation of a sympathetic excitation or resonance in the spectator as embodied—how the embodied affect of the spectator is aroused, activated, enhanced, brought into play (20).

This film is commonly written about in terms of a Brechtian distanciation. Mizoguchi in interviews discusses his dislike for what he calls the "tired old psychology of the close-up", and frames this within his attempt to generate the maximum possible hypnotic intensity through the long take. Affect without relying on sentiment, in other words. David Bordwell has seized on the avoidance of climactic moments to argue for a splitting between melodramatic narrative and detached staging, and thus to incorporate the film within a structure of distanciation. Yet to back off from pathos does not mean detachment—the pathetic or the cognitive are not the only options. The film may move away from one dynamic, but it moves towards another—an intensity, a dramatic charge which is carried not by emotion as sentiment, but by drawing the spectator in on another level, a mimetic one. The rhetoric of distanciation, in so far as it involves a "movement out of oneself", envisages this movement as a movement into cognition—out of the "embodied self" conceived as passive or habitual and into an analytic reflection on...
that embodiment—a self-reflexive viewing.

This is the blind spot of this application of Brechtian theory. In Mizoguchi, the movement is one of awakening, yes, but an awakening of the mimetic, an incorporation of a more active process of the senses, one which this film has instigated and enhanced from its first moment. This is the import of mise en scène—an awareness that was there in the critics of the French New Wave, but got waylaid into the question of authorship. It's there in the mise en scène criticism of Elsaesser's discussion of colour and excess in melodrama, but takes a detour into the psychoanalytic obsession with desire.

It's there also in the poetics of Pasolini, with its emphasis on the passionate body, in the visceral panoramas of Glauber Rocha, the gut-wrenching editing of Thelma Schoonmaker in Raging Bull, and Tracey Moffatt's searing image scapes in Night Cries.

It's the underside, the suppressed underbelly of film theory, lost for decades in detours about the formal, the signifier, the subject, desire: this is the basis of the pleasures of cinephilia and it is the core of that soft, mushy concept of experience most despised and denigrated by "scientific film theory".

Mazis writes: "emotions do not lead to rest, to closure, but rather are natural allies of an understanding that never knows where it's going" (Mazis, 20). Not only should a theory of emotions embrace this open-ended, multi-dimensional aspect of emotion, but as Mazis argues, "a philosophy of emotions must itself be moving, use images and concrete situations to reach the embodied fluid life of its readers" (Mazis, xiii). To translate his argument to cinema, so also should a writing on cinema be enabling, should it embrace and evoke the open-ended affective embodied experience of spectatorship.

You can't teach someone a mimetic capacity, surely, but just as surely you can teach them to deny, ignore, or devalue it. As long as our thinking on cinema marginalises and delegitimises this capacity for embodied affect, it will be irrelevant to the productive generative process of filmmaking, or worse still, with the increasing academicisation of film training, will work to actively impoverish our film culture.

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Endnotes:

1. Viano refers here particularly to semiotic film theory.

2. It is instructive here to juxtapose this discursive model of embodiment with that offered by Susan Buck-Morss in her reading of Benjamin: she argues,
following Benjamin, that of course the senses can be acculturated, but that “they can also provide a core of resistance” to what she calls domestication.


6. For a pivotal example of this paradigm, see David Bordwell, 'Camera Movement and Cinematic Space,' *Cinetracts* 3, Winter, 1980, pp. 19-25


8. I am indebted here to Cataldi's exemplary, in-depth discussion of Gibson.

9. Lyon & Barbalet also suggest the corrective which Gibson's work offers to Foucault's concept of the body as social artefact: “[Gibson's] work on haptic touch is useful in developing a sense of the agency of the body in both individual and social existence, and may thus contribute to the elaboration of the model of embodied feeling . . .” Lyon & Barbalet, p. 61

10. Gibson refers to this relationship as an 'affordance'. See Gibson, p. 36 & 127 ff. for discussion of this term.

11. For a discussion of Merleau-Ponty and 'carnal ideas', see Cataldi, pp. 95 ff., esp. pp. 100 ff.: 'Emotion as a carnal idea'.


13. Cataldi writes: “[T]he space of affectivity resembles the space of tactility much more than it does the space of visibility or the space of instrumentality.”

15. For a more detailed discussion of these concepts, which has informed my own, see Aumont, ch. 2, 'Eisensteinian Concepts,' especially Pt. II: 'Attraction/Stimulus/Influence & Pt. IV: 'Pathos/Ecstasy/ Organicism'.


17. Cataldi writes of the skin: "[o]ur skin is an organ of perception; and the experienced ambiguities, doublings and reversibilities of touch confuse the sharp distinctions philosophers try to draw between what is 'internal' and what is 'external'”, p. 126


19. This term is Cataldi's, which she gives a slightly different inflection: 'Let us call the space through which we emotionally apprehend or grasp how we are feeling, affective space', p. 130


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Ulysses' Gaze (To Vleema Tou Odyssea).
4

PRECARIOUS BOUNDARIES

Affect, mise-en-scène, and the senses

Anne Rutherford

I sat in a / small / developing lab /
endless nights / listening to the golden fluids /
there are times / that the golden fluids /
sound like a song / you see /
like a song / you know /
It / it / sounds like a song / like / like a song

Breathless, panting with exertion, film archivist Ivo Levy gasps this story into life haltingly, beat-by-beat, as he runs, bent down with the weight of heavy water canisters, across a Sarajevo bridge. Alert, hounded by the omnipresent snipers and shells, Levy recounts this experience to the Greek filmmaker, A, with an urgency that mirrors the desperate encounters that run all the way through Theo Angelopoulos’s Ulysses’ Gaze – fleeting connections driven more by need than by desire, more by pressure than by choice. A, played by Harvey Keitel, has traveled across seven countries and into the war-zone in search of the film reels in Levy’s lab: three undeveloped reels, perhaps the first film of Greek cinema. While the narrative of A’s quest enacts the repeated rituals of borders and divisions across the rugged terrain of southeastern Europe, it is crossings and connections that drive it forward – the bridge rather than the boundary is its pertinent motif.

“Yugoslavia is full of rivers,” says the journalist who directs A to Sarajevo. Rivers are the conduit that bring A to Levy and the “golden fluids” in his lab, and fluids mark the affective poles of the film: frozen in ice, driven in rain and snow, suspended in mist, swirling in the river currents, and singing in the developing lab. It is also an economy of fluids that defines Angelopoulos’s shooting style: frozen moments, fluid mobile camera, and the porousness of sensation as sound bleeds across image and image melts away into the fog (Figure 4.1).

How then can we understand how this film has been described in the rhetoric of barriers, distance, disconnection? Individual elements in the film may be seen in this way, if viewed in isolation, clinically: camera distance, for example – the preponderance of long shots; or the slight disjunction between character and performance – Keitel does not so much speak his lines, as they speak through him.
Figure 4.1 Theo Angelopoulos, *Ulysses' Gaze*, 1995. Having spoken of three undeveloped reels that comprise the first Greek film ever made, filmmaker Yannakis Manakis collapses and dies as a blue ship sets sail in Salonika harbor and a journey begins. Still courtesy of the film's producers, the Greek Film Center.
The film, however, orchestrates these elements, mobilizes their energies, toward a riveting affective engagement with history, desire, identity, love, and their entwine-ment together. Ulysses’ Gaze produces an affective agitation that can be understood only by examining Angelopoulos’s work with his spectator, and it is a sense of fluidity that pervades this work also – a sense that the subjectivity of the spectator is not a boundary, but a permeable membrane – that the images, soundscapes, and sequences of the film can permeate the “skin” of the spectator.

**Affect and the senses/materiality and corporeality/a particular type of experience**

The “connectedness” of this affective engagement is central to Angelopoulos’s own description of his process of filming, which he characterizes above all as a process of bringing into play the full sensory registers of his own experience, in order that he can evoke this awakening in his audience. The narrative of the film traces the journey of A, in his search for three lost film reels of the Manakis brothers, the first Greek filmmakers, who filmed “all the ambiguities, the contrasts, the conflicts in this area of the world” (as A says). A’s journey brings him face-to-face with the traumatic contemporary conflicts reshaping the post-communist Balkans, culminating in besieged Sarajevo. Although Angelopoulos repeatedly requested permission to film on location in Sarajevo itself, while the Bosnian war was still raging, refusal led him to shoot in the rubble of Mostar, Vukovar, and the Krijena area. In discussing his preference for shooting on location, Angelopoulos has said:

> I believe something special happens on location, in the real place, and I do not mean just the ability to photograph the decor, the landscape. But it is more that when I am in the place I have set the film, all five of my senses are working. I become more completely aware. I therefore feel I am living the experiences I want to film.

While many critics have attempted to explain how it is that Angelopoulos can draw his audience into an intense, visceral engagement with the unfolding crisis of the Balkans, citing his constant blurring of the boundaries between history and fiction, or history and myth, this one quote, perhaps more than any other, can assist to unravel both the principles which inform his filmmaking, and the extraordinary affect which his films can produce. Indeed, in this statement, Angelopoulos reveals the particular quality of the cinematic intelligence, which finds its way onto his screen. This could be encapsulated as an understanding of the sensory intensification of experience as the vehicle by which an affective charge is translated from filmmaker to audience, and of the role of the material elements of the film as the means to produce this. Angelopoulos clearly understands these material elements – landscape, decor, etc. – as energetic units, as potential units or sparks of experiential energy.

This relationship between the objects or elements of the material world and their capacity to generate a sensory awakening – so pivotal to understanding the affective
work of Angelopoulos’s film – is often overlooked in the critical literature. Indeed, the theoretical frameworks which could address this sensory/material aesthetic derive from “the roads not taken” in the development of film theory as a discipline and are now being reinscribed into contemporary debates, with the consideration of the embodied aspects of cinema spectatorship. Central to these contemporary debates has been the work of scholars such as Miriam Hansen, whose detailed excavation of the writings of Siegfried Kracauer has given the question of cinematic materiality a historical framework. Hansen highlights Kracauer’s focus on the “physical, tactile dimension of film spectatorship” (WS, 458), which, she claims, offers “a theory of a particular type of film experience.” To Kracauer, she argues, “film addresses its viewer as a corporeal, material being . . . it stimulates the material layers of the human being . . . it seizes the human body with skin and hair” (WS, 458).

While Kracauer’s theoretical work has repeatedly been dismissed by film theorists as “naïve realism,” Hansen argues that his early work opens up a “notion of the material dimension [which] is far more comprehensive than the term ‘physical reality,’” and “[his] concept of realism . . . is bound up with the problematic of the subject (rather than simply film’s referential relation to the material world)” (TOF, xvii). Cinematic reception is crucial to this understanding. Hansen discerns what she calls a “centrifugal tendency” in Kracauer’s film theory – the physiological impact of the film induces “a movement away from the filmic text and into cinema – [into] . . . the social, public space of reception” (TOF, xxxiii); on the level of reception the “material dimension assumes a life of its own and triggers in the viewer associations, memories of the senses” (TOF, xxviii). Whereas conventional notions of realism focus on questions of authenticity or verisimilitude, Kracauer writes of the experiential potential of the close-up, for example, to “blast the prison of conventional reality”: a familiar pair of hands in close-up “will change into unknown organisms quivering with a life of their own.”

The sensory/material focus in Angelopoulos’s work situates his project as pivotal to these attempts to reinscribe the question of cinematic materiality at the center of contemporary theories of cinema, and to rethink notions of cinematic realism. While working with the actual locations of present and historical events, Angelopoulos does not envisage these “material realities” as outside the experience of them: location is privileged not for verisimilitude, but for the sensory associations and memories it can evoke. Angelopoulos’s description of location shooting mirrors Kracauer’s “seizure” almost word for word: “When I begin a new film and I begin to travel around looking for locations with Giorgos Arvanitis, my friend and cinematographer, I often start to feel a tingling in my skin, the hairs of my arm standing up” (my italics).

Angelopoulos’s vigilance to the senses, his search for the production contexts and locations that will arouse this vigilance, are intrinsically linked to both the corporeal, material focus of what Kracauer calls “psychophysical correspondences,” and to Walter Benjamin’s related concept of “mimetic innervation.” The mimetic here is “a mode of cognition involving sensuous, somatic, and tactile forms of perception [which] transcends the traditional subject–object dichotomy” (NOW, 5): the concept emphasizes the “palpable sensuous connection between the very body of
the perceiver and the perceived.\textsuperscript{11} Innervation is understood as a mode of perception that "reconnects with the discarded powers . . . of mimetic practices that involve the body" (NOW, 6), as a "mimetic reception of the external world . . . that is empowering."\textsuperscript{12} As Hansen reads this focus in Benjamin on the corporeal, material aspects of this mimetic innervation, it is a two-way process, encompassing both a movement away from the sensorium into the world and an "ingestion or incorporation" of the world.\textsuperscript{13} As such, the concept envisages "the precarious boundary or rind of the bodily ego [as] a bit less of a carapace or armor and a bit more of a matrix or medium – a porous interface between the organism and the world that would allow for a greater mobility and circulation of psychic energies" (NOW, 5). This concept of mimetic innervation is the crucial term to understanding the central role the senses play in the way Angelopoulos draws his spectator into the complex and traumatic history of the Balkans.

**Mise-en-scène**

Through his description of the elements of a location as not just objects to be photographed, but as catalysts to a sensory awakening, by "redeeming" the material elements – landscape and decor – from an "object" status, Angelopoulos extends this sensory understanding of "corporeal material nature" explicitly to what has traditionally been defined as mise-en-scène: the "elements" of mise-en-scène become experiential entities, potential sites for mimetic innervation. By envisaging mise-en-scène within the terms of this "porous interface" between spectator and the material, the materialities of cinematic experience are understood as intrinsically linked with the affective power of cinema. The focus on reception applies pressure to the notion of the "material world," challenging the empiricist thinking about mise-en-scène which has underpinned conventional notions of cinematic realism.

Mise-en-scène is the critical link in the relationship between the material dimensions of cinema and its affect. The chrysalis of this understanding, kept in hibernation for so long through the decades of ideology-based and psychoanalytic film theory, begins to mature and reveal its potential with the re-emergence of interest in the material and the corporeal aspects of spectatorship, particularly with the more rigorous studies of Benjamin and Kracauer and the paradigm shift this work has effected. The relevance of this latter work to the understanding of mise-en-scène, however, has been almost suffocated by the critical entropy imposed on the term in contemporary Anglo-American film studies: it has evolved in its most common, contemporary usage as one of the most sterile of analytical terms, degenerated in film teaching and theory into an empirical term used to describe the elements of the proilmic (that which existed in front of the camera at the time of shooting). One need not look very far to find endless inventories of the so-called elements of mise-en-scène, divorced from their context in the energetic work of the film. Again and again, English-language texts start doggedly from a literal translation of the French: "mise-en-scène means literally 'what is put onto the stage,'" and proceed to apply this mechanically from stage to screen: "costume, décor,
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lighting, camera movement, setting and the behavior of figures” are enumerated as if this technical scrutiny of each term, divorced from its synthesis in the film, or from the reception of the ensemble for an audience, provides productive analytical tools.¹⁴

Mise-en-scène has been described as the “grand undefined term” of film theory.¹⁵ Adapted from the stage, its understanding has been persistently shackled by this heritage in the stasis of the proscenium arch. While objects can be “put onto the stage” in theater and be expected to maintain their integrity as solid objects, no such assumption can be made in cinema. How can the common theatrical understanding of mise-en-scène make sense in cinema? An object does not maintain its status as an object once it is in the frame: color or a set are not merely background – they are by definition part of the ensemble of experience of the spectator, constituted in and through the temporal experience of a scene/a shot. As Kracauer writes, cinema does not just reproduce the material world, but “brings the whole material world into play” (WS, 447).

There is of course no such thing as “put onto the stage” in cinema, only what is put into the scene. This is not just what has been “put” into the frame (in the past tense: by definition the result of an action already completed, rather than a present moment in play), but what is put into the moment of experience, how the spectator is drawn into the scene at the moment of its unfolding.¹⁶ This double-edged materiality is what a theory of mise-en-scène must address: how are the elements of the material world both material and energetic at the same time? And what is the relationship between sensory experience and affective experience? Once we understand the concept of mimetic innervation, this mimetic appropriation of the material world that, in the moment of contact, generates an “affectively charged, excentric perception,” as Hansen describes it (NOW, 10), how then do we rethink the materiality of mise-en-scène within this relationship?

Our understanding of mise-en-scène is, of course, constituted in the definition of the term, and only a definition in process, that is, of the operation of mise-en-scène in situ, can provide a productive understanding. The early writings of the critics and filmmakers of Cahiers du cinéma in the 1950s and 1960s avoid a literal transposition of the concept from stage to screen, and provide the beginnings of a dynamic understanding of mise-en-scène. In Fereydoun Hoveyda, it is inseparable from the process of its conceptualization, part of “the intellectual operation which has set to work an initial emotion and a general idea.”¹⁷ In Alexandre Astruc, mise-en-scène is also understood as a conceptual process, as “interrogation and dialogue,” and, when he explains this on a more material level, “mise-en-scène [is] a certain way of extending states of mind into movements of the body. It is a song, a rhythm, a dance.”¹⁸ Despite being limited by the auteurist emphasis on mise-en-scène as an expressive tool for the genius of the director, these writings contain the germ of an understanding of mise-en-scène as energetic process, rather than empirical object or technique. Astruc in particular, in his later work, formulates mise-en-scène as an energetic engagement with the spectator: “What pleases me [in a film] is the mise-en-scène: to make the spectator feel the moment of disequilibrium where everything suddenly

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Ulysses’ Gaze (To Vlemma Tou Odyssea).

Ulysses’ Gaze (To Vlemma Tou Odyssea).
falls apart,"\textsuperscript{19} and "[the] mise-en-scène is a look which forces people to act, which has a power over what it looks at."	extsuperscript{20}

In his writing on melodrama in the 1970s, Thomas Elsaesser extends this understanding of mise-en-scène as energetic, through his exploration of the emotional effects of what he calls "melos."	extsuperscript{21} The "dynamic use of spatial and musical categories" characterizes what he describes as a "subtle and yet precise formal language" brought into play in the "orchestration of emotional effects" (287). Constrained by the structuralist model of language which saturated film theory in the 1970s, Elsaesser does, nevertheless, insist on melos as a material, affective counterpoint to the linear meaning-producing structures of language, and thereby keeps alive the understanding of mise-en-scène as an energetic field.\textsuperscript{22}

Despite the recognition in the early formulations that mise-en-scène comes into being in the interface with the spectator, we still find, omnipresent in film theory, the clinical disemboring of the so-called elements of mise-en-scène which renders the use of the concept as an analytical term defunct. Angelopoulos leaves this sterile empirical understanding for dead when he describes and works with the appropriation of location, landscape, and decor by the filmmaker in the terms of sensory intensities. These corporeal, material intensities which cycle between filmmaker, film, and audience could perhaps best be described in murky, indistinct terms like sympathetic vibration, as redolent as they are with indefinables like intuition, feeling, resonance, or intensity. From Angelopoulos's description of the central role of his own sensory experience, we have an understanding that what is paramount here is that he produce an image which, for him, generates a sensory awakening, an innervation. The implication is that an experience which resonates so provocatively for him will also resonate for the spectator. Angelopoulos himself has signaled the importance to his work of this "vibration" with the spectator: "I need to see the eyes of the others. Only in the regard of the viewer do I recognize what I have made."\textsuperscript{23}

This idea of sympathetic vibration or resonance is the core of the mimetic capacity – "the capacity to relate to the external world through patterns of simulacrum, affinity, reciprocity and interplay" (NOW, 5). This affinity is not the meeting of one identity with another, in a recognition of the referent. Recognition and memory are freed from the exclusive logic of the literal, and reactivated in the logic of the visceral. It is a "sympathetic vibration" that puts me into action as a spectator, that "puts me into the scene." It is a staging of my full mimetic potential that evokes the connection Circumscribed of course by cultural memory and tradition, and assuming that this resonance will be layered – some layers more universally recognized than others – this mimetic capacity holds the key to understanding the role of the corporeal, the material in the affective work of images.\textsuperscript{24}

\textbf{The modernist grid}

It is precisely the lack of an adequate understanding of the relationship between affect and mise-en-scène that hampers some of the critical work on Angelopoulos, particularly that which locates his work within a modernist canon. David Bordwell,
for example, argues that detachment and distanciation provide the key underpinnings of a form of “de-dramatization” which assimilates Angelopoulos to a modernist aesthetic. He claims that techniques used to “drain away drama from charged situations” characterize Angelopoulos’s films, and dissects the visual techniques of Angelopoulos to establish stylistic similarities with modernist directors such as Michelangelo Antonioni. Founding his analysis on the principles of visual composition in Angelopoulos’s films, Bordwell finds “empty spaces” (17), “dead intervals” (22), the “suspension of dramatic progression . . . detached contemplation and dry, understated emotion” (18). However, it is only through an understanding of mise-en-scène which severs visual technique from the performative unfolding of a film across time, that Bordwell’s study of the techniques of Angelopoulos’s cinematography could yield nothing but an inventory of devices of visual style, conceived as akin to static pictorial design. The only way Angelopoulos’s/Arvanitis’s shots could be seen as dead or inert, is to rob them of this temporal amplification which is at the core of Angelopoulos’s cinematography – all of the elements he deploys are fused together, pressured, transformed by time.

Even on the level of shot construction, Angelopoulos’s image and sound are conceived in terms of dynamic energies which escalate with the pressure of time: tensions between static, monolithic city structures and the movement of figures that run in diagonals across them; between vault-like interior spaces or vast desolate landscapes, the groups and individuals dwarfed by them and the relentless, exuberant movement of the camera; between vision withheld and the knowledge that breaks through the shot with the sound.

At the border with Albania, A’s taxi picks up a frail old lady left stranded in the snow, traveling to meet the sister she has not seen for forty-seven years, since the civil war. In the center of Korytsa, they leave her in the icy town square, and as the car drives off into the silent snow, she is dumped by the narrative, incidental to A’s journey. As the camera pulls back, abandoning her, a vast empty expanse of gray road and white sky engulfs her tiny lost figure. Even as she becomes just another incidental casualty of Balkans dislocation, the desolation of the square lingers in an overwhelming sense of vulnerability, bewilderment, and disorientation. As A returns to “snow and silence,” her memory echoes across the subsequent shots.

As A crosses the border into Albania, the camera tracks across vast fields of static human figures, mute, immobile against the icy landscape, waiting or watching: Albanian illegals, “rifugati” as the taxi driver calls them. The shot slides in one long take from closely framed naturalistic dialogue and action of A and the taxi to the epic panoramas of ritualized stasis and motion. As the spectator is transported across these physical divides, Eleni Karaindrou’s haunting music, a monotone, accompanies the choreography of the camera in a hypnotic harmonic register. Static, mute figures give way to the movement of people trekking through the snow and then the constant motion of nameless figures walking the streets cloaked in ice and snow. Icy hillside, sky, streetscape, and figures blend into one palpable rhythm of moving figures, the sensuous caress of the fluid camera and the hypnotic music.
The solidity of human figures and buildings have only a tenuous claim on the shot, as the coordinates of the space become indistinct, the horizon suspended somewhere between the hazy white sky and the white, snow-covered hillside. Time becomes indeterminate, as the camera tracks through the streets in slow motion while figures walk briskly by. As eerie as this sequence is, to talk of it simply as mood, understood in a cognitive sense, would miss the intense corporeality of its affective charge. Even as the viewer is left to puzzle over the significance of the figures in the snow, this is not an absence, an empty space – as the camera glides in long shot past the silent figures dwarfed against the desolate landscape, the spectator absorbs the epic dimensions of this historical moment mimetically – a whole history of displacement and dislocation inscribed in one shot as a visual, temporal, and aural rhythm.

Bordwell marginalizes this affective engagement with an image: effects not affects are his focus. It is only by detaching, in the analytical moment, the frame, the light, and the mobility of camera from their inscription across the bodies of the spectator, that these techniques can be seen as formalist devices, universalized across genres and cultures, working toward a universal goal of distanciation. To focus on these stylistic similarities is to miss their differences, for modernism is not just a set of techniques, but their deployment in a particular context toward particular ends. As Fredric Jameson writes, "style' can so often look like a relatively simple recipe: . . . when we enumerate a certain number of the classic features of Angelopoulos's style, we risk . . . reducing the unique pleasures of his work among an enlightened public to a formula."

While the paradigm of modernism may shed light on Angelopoulos's earlier films, in the case of Ulisses' Gaze, even though the film does draw on some elements of a modernist idiom, this analytical grid obscures at least as much as it reveals. While a grid suggests that the stylistic elements of a film can be mapped according to fixed coordinates, and with mathematical precision, it is imprecision which marks the rhetorical tropes of Ulisses' Gaze, and the indeterminate, shifting dynamics of spectatorship which must be explored to arrive at any productive understanding of the film. Ulisses' Gaze is full of scenes which are open-ended, whose meaning cannot be pinned down.

The chaotic, unpredictable flux of history in the Balkans throws up moments which resonate according to the memory, the experience, the chance location of the viewer upon that flux. Angelopoulos works these indeterminate moments to draw his spectator into an engagement with the uncertainty and ambivalence of this history – nowhere is this more profound than in the camera's extended eulogy to Lenin. As the demolished statue of Lenin is transported down the river in fragments, his finger still pointing the way forward from his severed arm, throngs of watching people drop to their knees, making the sign of the cross. While the figures on the bank running to keep up with the barge are mute, numbers in a crowd, the statue of Lenin, his face in close-up, becomes articulate. His face maintains a composure, heroically moving forward to dominate the frame; his slightly furrowed brow looks clear over the horizon. Even the concrete ear of Lenin is granted the right to take over center frame in close-up, holding the viewer in its sway.
Ulysses’ Gaze (To Vlema Tou Odyssea).

Ulysses’ Gaze (To Vlema Tou Odyssea).
Even as Lenin’s statue evokes awe, nostalgia or fascination, other lines, traces, cross each other, sometimes as distant echoes, shock waves reverberating from the same source across different terrains. Lenin’s grandiose passage is in stark contrast to the ravages of history unfolding in its wake; his concrete cerebrum maintains a solidity against its scaffold that is not permitted the concrete rubble of Sarajevo. This Lenin only barely masks the many others that shadow his passing, those dismembered, brought down in triumph, smashed with sledge-hammers across the breadth of former communist Europe. His trajectory is layered, saturated, steeped in monumental significance and ambiguity; condensed into the resonances of a few long takes is the momentous history of the aspirations and allegiances, the demise and contradictions of the whole of communist Europe, gliding by in a solemn obituary.

Without doubt there are sequences, particularly in the first half of Ulysses’ Gaze, which work to disable a more conventional “psychological” viewing. However, relinquishing the modernist grid reveals a much more complex set of strategies for engaging the full affective potential of the viewer. There is dislocation in Ulysses’ Gaze, to be sure—the awkwardness between Keitel and the lines which “recite him,” as mentioned previously. A woman who has lost her husband/lover to the shelling is driven to Keitel’s body. Her embrace, however, is not with Keitel, but with the lover whose name she calls repeatedly, inscribing it over the substitute flesh of Keitel—“Vania, Vania, Vania.” This fissure between actor and character, the mismatch between body and identity, between need and realization are not the estrangement of modernist distanciation. These interactions are not suspended in a field of abstract disjunction, but driven to forge new links across the gaps, links that resonate with stifled cries, inarticulate sobbing, or the wailing wrenched not from Keitel’s throat but from somewhere in his entrails. How can we think of this visceral unleashing as a modernist distanciation?

Angelopoulos has said that he “hopes to create a new kind of audience, ‘not just a consumer who uses only his emotions, but a person who uses his mind.’” To reduce this to simply an “alienation effect” is to ignore the affective part of the equation. This is not an either/or that Angelopoulos offers, but a more complete affective and intellectual synthesis. As Andrew Horton claims, “the mixing of theatricality and reality in his films often leads us into a deeper, fuller, emotional bond with the film” (CC, 14–15).

Hansen has pointed out the ways in which the “tradition of narrative film conflicts with a materialist aesthetics of film because it imposes the closed structure of ‘a finite, ordered cosmos’ upon the heterogeneous, heteronomous, open-ended flow of life” (TOF, xxxii). Applied to Ulysses’ Gaze, the modernist grid simply posits a binary opposition to classical narrative, one in which any gaps in the narrative flow are seen as either a lack or a radical disjunction: both models impose the primacy of the cognitive interpretation of a film over a materialist aesthetics. Kracauer’s attention to the material experience of reception offers a much more productive understanding of Angelopoulos: his understanding sidelines this rigid opposition, in favor of “loosely composed, ‘porous,’ ‘permeable,’ open-ended narratives . . .
that leave ‘gaps into which environmental life may stream’” (TOF, xxxiii). Just as Kracauer’s analysis moves “away from the filmic text and into the cinema... the space of reception” (TOF, xxviii), the analysis of *Ulysses’ Gaze* must acknowledge “the gaps and fissures in the filmic text that allow for moments of contingency and indeterminacy” (TOF, xxxiii), that lead “into the slippery realm of experience, the heterogeneity of social space, the unpredictable dynamics of public life” (TOF, xxxiv).

**Diffraction of the drama**

Angelopoulos clearly conceives of his film in terms of drama: in response to a suggestion that *Ulysses’ Gaze* ends on a depressing note, he evokes Aristotle: “I would say simply what Aristotle said about tragedy, that a drama or, in this case, a film should evoke pity and fear in an audience, and then create a catharsis by which these emotions are released” (LM, 105). It is not necessarily a “draining away of drama” that Angelopoulos achieves in *Ulysses’ Gaze*, but a diffraction of the drama through several means. If one were to draw a flow chart, a score of *Ulysses’ Gaze*, the melodies, the rhythms that run through it would emerge as dramatically counterpointed one to the other – sound, color, landscape, figures, and narrative are orchestrated through time in elaborate relationships, patterns, divergences. It is here that Sergei Eisenstein’s conception of the elements of a film as a score really comes into its own – it is the polyphony, the complex orchestration of these divergent instruments that Angelopoulos is working with in his search for the sensory amplification of experience.

While it is vision that propels the narrative of the film – Keitel’s desperation to “see that gaze,” the gaze revealed in the Manakis brothers’ undeveloped film reels, propels his journey across the Balkans – vision, the gaze itself, is constantly undercut, prefigured, or superseded by sound. At times, the emotional registers of the film are largely carried by the aural density – a cacophony of industrial noise, engine hum, mechanical whines, and fog horns that accompanies the installment of Lenin’s head scrupulously into place in its collar-bone on the barge; a ritualized confrontation between shuffling feet and running boots as the police run between demonstrating religious fanatics and umbrella-wielding movie-spectators in a dark street; the amplified interrogations of border guards reverberating through the dark night across the restless, rootless space of the frontier.

It is vision that collapses finally in Sarajevo. At the moment in the film that appears to be its culmination – Levy has discovered the formula to develop the three film reels, to recover the “lost gaze” that has been the object of A’s quest – footsteps and the music of the youth orchestra signal the welcome relief of the fog that descends on Sarajevo, shielding its citizens from the omnipresent threat of snipers. As Levy, A, and Levy’s family walk through the city in a joyous respite, vision yields to the sounds in the fog – the nursery rhymes of children wailing through the mist, a motor that warns of a soldier’s approach; a mother’s desperate pleading; shots, one after another, dull, final; and the aching wailing of Keitel. It is as if the
whole film has led, inexorably, to the collapse of vision and its substitution with this visceral cry.

The narrative of *Ulysses' Gaze* is a quest, a journey: reflecting the Ur-story of *Ulysses*, A is propelled toward his goal which momentarily finds resolution before its success disintegrates, fragments with the brutal killing in the fog. Set against this striving to reach a goal is another trajectory which moves inexorably downwards, toward decline, devastation. Just as A’s Greek taxi driver talks of Greek civilization as a 3000-year fall from glory, the film itself is like a relentless collapse in slow-motion: as A travels across Europe toward Bosnia, solid buildings give way to rubble, window panes to blackened holes, the remnants of civil society to barbarism, hope to anguish, faith to despair.

Just as the landscapes follow a trajectory of their own, the journey is enacted as a tightly controlled progression through the cold, retracting end of the color spectrum. Angelopoulos and his cinematographer, Giorgos Arvanitis, work in a palette of muted browns, blues, and grays. Fawn and slate, with an occasional tinge of a dark, muddy purple-brown, give almost the only respite from black, white, and gray. Only in Sarajevo does a hot orange-red emerge with the fires in the deserted streets, and the red of the developing lamp in the lab, only to be blanketed, smothered in the relentless white spread of the fog.

It is this structure of “images which resonate, reverberate and ricochet off each other [in a] honeycomb of meaning” that epitomizes Gerald O’Grady’s description of Angelopoulos’s layering or mosaic-like “tessellations” of “significance,” the structuring of material elements into the “making and merging of multiple metaphors.” O’Grady lays the understanding of temporality into this spatial structure of tessellation, claiming that “Angelopoulos’s many angles of incidence reflect more and more light at each successive moment of his films, and even more enlightenment when one reflects on them” (56). The echoes, the layering of metaphors and memory traces, circle back as each new scene harvests the resonances of the layers set down before.

It is this “enlightenment” that leads Andrew Horton to nominate Angelopoulos’s films as a “cinema of contemplation” (LM, 1). And yet, a “cinema of contemplation” or “meditation,” as Horton refers to it elsewhere, cannot do justice to this multilayered experience which *inorporates* – makes corporeal or material – our experience, both intellectual and emotional, of the histories and stories which unfold. Contemplation here is a disembodied term. That one is left contemplating a film like *Ulysses’ Gaze* is not in question, but one is also left with inarticulate sensation, traces of sounds, spaces, fragments, that permeate and linger in the corporeal memory. It is, above all, a cinema of embodied affect.

How do we understand the “tessellation” of images – and sounds, rhythms, and colors – that ricochet off each other? What is the mechanism of their collisions? Kracauer refers to a similar dynamic when he claims that film “brings the material world into play,” arguing that cinema has an “affinity with the pulsations of material life” (WS, 431). Kracauer gives this pulsation a topographical metaphor when he claims that film “comes into its own when it grasps the material dimension”
he writes that film “pushes downwards,” into the “lower levels” (WS, 447). If one were to apply the same topographical metaphor to the model of contemplation that informs Horton’s and Bordwell’s readings of Angelopoulos, film would be seen to strive upward, toward the “higher” levels of intellect. This is the blind spot in much of the critical writing on Angelopoulos: it is a reluctance to conceptualize spectatorship as material, spectators as embodied, and affect as simultaneously intellectual, emotional, and corporeal, that mandates this recourse to contemplation as the defining motif to explain Angelopoulos’s films.

The implications of this characterization of Angelopoulos’s work as a contemplative cinema extend into the consideration of history, and the assumed strategies for staging historical questions for the spectator. Bordwell, for example, argues that the techniques of “dedramatization,” by which he characterizes the “minimalist,” modernist shooting style in Angelopoulos’s films, “block empathy.” This leads, in his reading of the films, to a critical detachment which in turn leads us “to consider the larger historical forces at work.” The rhetorical moves which underpin this argument are standard in the critical literature on modernist film: empathy is withheld by refusing the psychological techniques of close-up, character identification, etc.; attention is deflected away from absorption in emotional pathos, and onto detached intellectual contemplation; the familiar is “made strange” and the lethargic viewer is jolted into critical awareness.

None of these rhetorical moves can be adequately applied to Ulysses’ Gaze. The affective power of the film is neither equivalent to, nor dependent on, empathy. Affective intensity is not deflected onto intellectual contemplation, but diffracted, dispersed across all of the available sensory registers; it is not detachment that ensues, but a more embodied engagement. Angelopoulos refuses to remove history from its material, lived experience: his spectator does not need a break or rupture from the senses to grasp this history: not simply an object of cognitive or contemplative awareness, it is enacted on the sensorium.

In Kracauer, as Hansen argues, the concept of embodied spectatorship is inseparable from an understanding that, by its assault on the senses, film “dissociates rather than integrates the spectatorial self” (TOF, xxvii). Both Kracauer and Benjamin draw on the concept of distraction to argue that film “still contains the possibility of losing oneself, albeit intermittently, of abandoning one’s waking self to the dreamlike, discontinuous sequence of sense impressions.” Any account of Angelopoulos’s historical project must acknowledge this potential “dissolution” of the contemplative subject: in its affiliation with Benjamin’s “mimetic innervation,” Angelopoulos’s work with the affective potential of the embodied sensory/material experiences of cinema is, as Hansen writes of Benjamin’s concept, “anything but the critically distanced, testing look of the Brechtian observer.”

**Temporality**

The emphasis on the work of the senses, on a sensory awakening, links Angelopoulos’s project to a broad body of work which questions the role of the
senses in modernity and attempts to grasp the experience of the sensory moment. Leo Charney has outlined the concern of philosophers of modernity with the ephemerality of the moment as a characteristic of modernity, its contradictory status as both present, “immediate [and] tangible sensation” and simultaneously “fleeting, tentative and unstable.” Through this category of the moment, Charney has charted the links between the concern of early filmmaker and theorist, Jean Epstein, with the “fleeting fragments of [sensual] experience that the viewer cannot describe verbally or rationalise cognitively” (285), and the “category of the sensual moment” which informed the Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky’s understanding of defamiliarization: both explore the “possibility of experiencing a moment . . . feeling the presence of the moment, fully inhabiting it” (279) as a means “to seize fleeting moments of sensation” from their evanescence (293).

While Angelopoulos’s work with the senses, in Ulysses’ Gaze, is inseparable from his work with the material experience of temporality, this is informed by an entirely different understanding of the relationship between temporality and sensory experience. The spectator is not jolted into fleeting moments of awareness and sensation, and time here is not the passing of this intense, fleeting experience of the ephemeral moment, not its undoing, but the intensification of the experience through duration. The passing of time does not carry us away from sensation but into it; time does not disperse the awareness but deepens it. Rather than punctuation or interruption to “passages of [otherwise] lost time” (IM), in Ulysses’ Gaze, sensory experience is a dilation of time, like a slow-release time-bomb. In Ulysses’ Gaze, Angelopoulos’s shots set up a resonance which bit by bit infiltrates through layer after layer: osmosis not rupture. By stealth the shots shift registers for the viewer; like sound, the image sets up a rhythm, a vibration which spreads across the film. The amazement that these shots can awaken is not a piercing of the alienated sensorium, the epiphany of a single moment breaking through the flow, but the amplification of the experience of that flow itself. In Charney’s account, “Epstein conceived of film as a chain of moments, a collage of fragments” (285). In Angelopoulos, time is an accumulation, a layering: more like laying tracks one over the other, than a collage of disparate moments.

To come back to Sarajevo, Ivo Levy and the bridge: there is no moment in this shot that could encapsulate it: it is only on the maturation of the shot, its denouement, that one can say, “that was the shot.” There is no single moment of visual pyrotechnics which propels the shot into sensory awareness: the movement of the figures and the “song” of the fluids, as Levy recites it, give the shot a rhythm, a pace, breathe it into life. The bridge itself is like a suspension bridge, a scaffold on which the song is suspended, unfolding into significance with the passage of time. The action is played against the base line of the bridge like a foundation: the running figures cut a diagonal arc across its monolith, the two articulated against the flat white sky which leads nowhere, more like a screen than a space. The bridge does not stay still. It quivers, pulsates, amplifies, as Levy’s recitation is inscribed across its span with the beat of his gasping breath. The dynamic energies and tensions of the shot shift as it unfolds, its momentum generating the “centrifugal force” that
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projects the viewer onto the screen of history, of memory: the incongruity of this gasp of life struggling to preserve itself in the face of despair and futility is inscribed across the viewer’s sensorium.

Shock, physiology, corporeality/embodiment and reception

Kracauer’s discussion of the corporeality of cinematic reception, while cryptic, is framed within what he calls the physiological dimension: “such kinesthetic responses as muscular reflexes, motor impulses, or the like” (TOF, 158). Within this model, shock plays a central role in accessing this material dimension. Kracauer posits corporeality within the terms available from physiology, and incorporates his understanding of “psychophysical correspondences” into this physiological model. However, the phenomenological tradition makes a clear demarcation between the physiological concept of the body, or Körper, and a separate understanding of the lived body, or Leib. While the physiological model delimits physiological stimulus, such as movement or shock, as the “trigger” of a corporeal response, the concept of the lived body does not prescribe the understanding of corporeality in this way: it is more amenable to understandings of affect, and the relationship between sensory and affective experience, and also more compatible with understandings of memory as embodied. This model also allows for a different understanding of the means to access the material, corporeal aspects of cinematic experience. Not necessarily tied to the physiological concept of shock, an understanding of corporeality as Leib distances this question from traditional distinctions between montage, aligned to shock, and mise-en-scène, aligned to duration. While Angelopoulos’s work with temporality relies extensively on the materiality of duration and the unity of space that come with the long take, other techniques, working with a comparable grasp of embodied spectatorship, could also engage the viewer in a similarly sensory-affective register.

Ulysses’ Gaze’s corporeal address does not rely on shock, with its foundation in sensational effects to elicit a “physiological” response. The root impulse of the film, its source, is not journalism, as it is for other films that attempt to show the realities of war: Welcome to Sarajevo, for example, that sprays its opening credits across the screen like a volley of rapid bullet fire and confronts the spectator with the horrors of severed limbs and bleeding flesh. The cringe, the retraction from the shock of these images of devastation, the withdrawal into the defensive “stimulus shield” that characterizes Benjamin’s understanding of this shock experience, is the antithesis of the experience for the spectator of the shooting in the fog in Ulysses’ Gaze. While vision is snuffed out, occluded by the fog, the spectator strains to grasp more of the shot, is actively transported into the shot, scanning the white screen for clues with all the senses awakened. The terrible knowledge that reaches the spectator with the sound, as Levy and his entire family are shot, does not reach a hardened, toughened shell, but an anxious, alert sensory web, open, searching for significance. It is not just the immediacy of the present moment that Angelopoulos targets with this
sensory heightening, but the potential of an experience to go beyond that moment, to connect with other layers of embodied experience and memory, and thereby, through this embodied experience, to access the significance of history.

In Benjamin, the “antidote – and counterconcept – to technologically multiplied shock and its anaesthetizing economy” (NOW, 5) is the capacity for mimetic innervation, the “possibility of undoing the alienation of the senses” (NOW, 2). Benjamin’s understanding of experience (Erfahrung), of the “fullness of experience,” rather than being tied to the “present” moment, is intrinsically linked to the question of memory, “the faculty that connects sense perceptions of the present with those of the past” (NOW, 2). It is memory, the mémoire involontaire, or involuntary remembrance, which brings a “painful shock of rejuvenation . . . when the past is reflected in the dewy fresh ‘instant.’”37 The past evoked by this involuntary memory, as Benjamin sees it, is “somewhere beyond the reach of the intellect, and unmistakably present in some material object (or in the sensation which such an object arouses in us).”38 The sensory evocation of this involuntary memory is the key to understanding the affective power of Angelopoulos’s exploration of Balkans history.

**History, memory and the sensorium**

Horton has written that “few filmmakers anywhere have been so concerned and involved with history from such a variety of angles” as Angelopoulos, and cites Nikos Kolovos who writes that “[Angelopoulos’s] films are meditations on history, not historical films per se” (CC, 56).39 The quest which drives the journey of A across the Balkans is itself a dialog with the entire history of cinema: A searches for a “vanished gaze,” a “gaze struggling to emerge from the dark – a kind of birth,” “a captive gaze from the early days of the century set free at last at the close of the century.”40 (This lost gaze is given a mnemonic presence by the mesmeric repetition of a few shots from the earliest known Greek film, the Manakis brothers’ The Weavers of 1905.) Just as the narrative enacts the search for a lost historical moment, the film takes place across a transthetic field. Its scope is a century of Balkan conflicts, and beyond. Just as the Manakis brothers filmed “all the ambiguities, the contrasts, the conflicts in this area of the world,” the polemical complexities of Balkan history are inscribed across Ulysses’ Gaze. These conflicts themselves are cast into a broader frame: when two journalists in Belgrade argue over whether the Serbs or the Albanians arrived first, “the conclusion is it’s Hegel’s fault for influencing Marx.” Sarajevo, in Angelopoulos’s own words, is “a symbol for all of Yugoslavia” (LM, 103), and as the birthplace of World War I, a symbol for all of Europe.

Fredric Jameson credits Angelopoulos with the reinvention of a historical cinema, at a time when “such approaches to cinema were becoming ever scarcer,” and with a redrafting of the terms of realism.41 Jameson speculates “that it is the commitment to matter in his cinema which successfully neutralizes or at least suspends the fictive, while it is the commitment to perception and its temporalities which neutralizes or suspends the documentary” (88). Jameson links the impact of Angelopoulos’s historical cinema to his work with temporality: “perhaps it is this
distended temporality itself which allows for this realism of the interstices, between
the scripted sequence of narrative events” (82).

Jameson claims that these elements in Ulysses’ Gaze “demand us to invent a new
kind of reception or reading . . . an enlargement of our perception of narrative time”
(84). And yet, while posing the question of what this new form of reception might
entail, Jameson deflected the answer onto the content and narrative structure of the
film. The core of Angelopoulos’s achievement in reclaiming a space for a historical
cinema, as he sees it, is a spatiality that clearly demarcates it from modernist work.22
Jameson’s argument seeks to establish an affinity between new narrative structures
and transformed social and political realities. Recurrent scenes in Ulysses’ Gaze at
frontiers, border posts, transit stops, etc., lay the groundwork for what he calls a
“transnational spatiality,” and a new form of “narrative spatiality,” which he defines
as a “regional epic” (91ff).43 However, Jameson’s argument leaps almost entirely
over the question of how reception is refigured in Angelopoulos’s historical cinema.
Some of the answers to this question can be drawn from Angelopoulos’s transfor-
mations of narrative form, but narrative structure itself must be understood within
the framework of its reception if it is to provide any insight into the historical impact
of Ulysses’ Gaze, or the new formal situations that it explores.

Angelopoulos’s work with history does indeed draw on a reinvention of narrat-
ive form, but this transformation cannot be defined solely by the transnational
locations of its action. The narrative of Ulysses’ Gaze takes place across many layers.
The contemporary narrative of A and his journey across the Balkans is framed
at the beginning and end of the film with lines, recitations that bear only tangential
relevance to the contemporary journey, but cast it within the frame of the ancient
epics, of Angelopoulos’s earlier films, of the Greek poets, of other myths and other
stories: “the three reels, the journey,” “how many borders must we cross to reach
home?,”44 “between one embrace and the next, between lovers’ calls, I will
tell you about the journey, all the night long and in all the nights to come . . . the
whole human adventure, the story that never ends.” Echoes of The Odyssey recur
throughout the film: “The sun dipped into the sea as if abandoning the scene. I felt
I was sinking into darkness;” “let’s drink to the sea, the inexhaustible sea, the
beginning and the end.” The script unfolds within this expanded narrative field,
slides almost effortlessly between the turmoils of the contemporary narrative, the
ebb and flows of the epic frame and the resonances of the other narrative layers.45
Traditional cause-and-effect logic gives way repeatedly: A is at times almost som-
nambulistic, as if an action can be motivated by one layer or the other of this expanded
narrative field: “my footsteps, somehow they led me here.” The voice-over slips
as effortlessly from past to present in the contemporary narrative, as one scene is
haunted by the traces of another: as A crosses the border into Albania, the scene
shifts registers, is washed by the oneiric mood, the memory, of another scene: “We
entered Albania with snow and silence. Your image, still damp, unchanged since
the day I left it, emerges once again from the night. Am I leaving?”

Read with one eye on the epic frame and the other layers, these moments of
slippage emerge not as devices of distanciation but as devices of connection – the
affinity that is evoked here is not necessarily on the level of form, between narrative structures and global realities, but on the level of reception: a mimetic affinity, a resonance between the quotidian narrative of the film and memory traces of other stories or histories, echoes of other journeys, other quests, other traumas.

It is in this way that O’Grady’s “tessellations of significance” weave their way through the recurrent icons and motifs of the film into the corporeal memory. But how does the viewer navigate from one level to another, what is the mechanism that allows the viewer to slide across the layers as if narrative and mythic time and space, past and present are permeable membranes of a single field? Benjamin’s concept of “mimetic innervation,” with its emphasis on the role of involuntary memory, is the closest we can come to encapsulating this process. Angelopoulos’s exploration of Balkans history is inseparable from this evocation of involuntary memory: more than simply a blurring of history and fiction or history and myth, it is his blurring of history and memory, his interweaving of one temporality with the other, that gives the historical frame of *Ulysses’ Gaze* a profound affective charge. It is his ability to draw, from the materiality of the mise-en-scène, a spark, a trigger – to generate a sensory experience that evokes a mimetic affinity with other embodied experience, an affective resonance. At the core of this fusion between history and memory, between memory and the senses, and between sensory experience and affect is a profound understanding of cinematic experience as simultaneously corporeal and affective and of mise-en-scène as the material core of embodied cinematic experience.

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**Notes**

1. *Ulysses’ Gaze (To Vlema Tou Odysseia)*, 1995, Color, 180 minutes. Directed by Theo Angelopoulos; screenplay by Theo Angelopoulos with Tonino Guerra and Petros Markaris; cinematography by Giorgos Arvanitis and Andreas Sinanos; art direction by Giorgos Ptasas and Miodrak Mile Nicolic; editing by Yannis Tistsopoulos; music by Eleni Karaindrou; produced by Theo Angelopoulos, the Greek Film Center, Mega Channel, Paradis Films, La Générale d’Images, La Sept Cinéma, with the participation of Canal+, Basicinematografica, Istituto Luce, RAI, Channel 4. Cast: Harvey Keitel, Erland Josephson, Maia Morgenstern, Thanassis Vengos, Giorgos Michalakopoulos, Dora Volanaki, Mania Papadimitriou, Angel Iavanof, Ljuba Tadic, Gert Llana.

2. This rhetoric is particularly pervasive in the work which frames *Ulysses’ Gaze* as a modernist text; see, for example, David Bordwell, “Modernism, Minimalism, and Melancholy: Angelopoulos and Visual Style,” in *The Last Modernist: The Films of Theo Angelopoulos*, ed. Andrew Horton (Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 1997), 106 (henceforth LM).

3. The war in Bosnia erupted with the break-up of former Yugoslavia in the wake of the collapse of communist governments across eastern Europe at the end of the 1980s.
Following the declaration of independent republics by Slovenia and Croatia, support for independence by Muslims and Croats in multiethnic Bosnia-Herzegovina was rejected by Bosnian Serbs, who laid siege to the Bosnian capital, Sarajevo. As negotiations between Serbs, Muslims, and Croats failed to agree on the terms of a future republic, and NATO, the United Nations, and the European Union failed to broker a settlement, war also broke out between Muslims and Croats. The war raged for several years, characterized by “ethnic cleansing,” reports of atrocities against civilians and a refugee crisis with vast numbers of displaced people from the former Yugoslavia. Greece was also entangled in the regional instability, with its opposition to the declaration of an independent Macedonian republic.


Hansen has highlighted the long-standing critical misunderstanding of Kracauer’s concept of the “redemption of physical reality” (TOF, ix). Tracing the complexity of Kracauer’s proposition of a materialist film theory from its development in his Marseilles notebooks in the 1940s, Hansen points out that Kracauer’s early “notion of the material dimension is far more comprehensive than the term ‘physical reality’” which predominates in Kracauer’s 1950s published work, *Theory of Film* (TOF, xvi). Through his focus on the ways that the photographic (and cinematic) image is grasped as a material entity which is engaged directly by the material, corporeal capacities of the spectator, Kracauer argues for the “redemption of physical reality” – the redemption of our understanding of the image from its supposed referent to the real, and its conceptualization in relation to the subject. Hansen points out that Kracauer’s material world is “not merely an object of representation, but crucially includes the subject and the subject’s relation to the Other” (452).


Horton, “‘What do our souls seek?’: An Interview with Theo Angelopoulos,” in *LM*, 106.

Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 21. As Taussig elaborates the concept of mimesis, it has two parts: the first, the idea of imitation or copy, as in the capacity to mimic, and the second, the idea of contact, this much more complex visceral experience of a relation, a porosity between one’s self, one’s own body and the objects or images of the world. It is this second aspect of mimesis that is most useful to this discussion. This understanding of mimesis has an affinity with the contemporary rethinking of perception by perceptual psychologist, James Gibson, whose model of “ecological perception” describes the ways in which the beholder “inhabits the spectacle,” as Sue Cataldi describes it. See Cataldi, *Emotion, Depth, and Flesh: A Study of Sensitive Space: Reflections on Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Embodiment* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993). Cataldi relates Gibson’s understanding of perception to Merleau-Ponty’s “flesh ontology” to develop a theory of affective experience and its relation to perception. For an extended discussion of these arguments as they relate to film theory, see Anne Rutherford, “Cinema and Embodied
Affect,” in the forthcoming anthology of conference papers, Cinema and the Senses (Sydney: Power Institute, Centre for Art and Visual Culture).

Hansen explains innervation as “broadly, a neurophysiological process that mediates between internal and external, psychic and motoric, human and mechanical registers” (4). Crucially, in Benjamin this is understood as a two-way process, i.e. “not only a conversion of mental, affective energy into somatic, motoric form” (5), but also the possibility of the reverse. The concept of innervation is linked here to his concept of the “optical unconscious” as the condition of possibility for this innervation to be brought into play. Miriam Bratu Hansen, “Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street,” Critical Inquiry, 25 (1999): 10 (henceforth NOW). Hansen points out the associations between Benjamin’s “innervation” and the mimetic “psychophysical correspondences” which Krakauer explores (TOF, xxvii). See also Hansen’s discussion of the relationship between Benjamin’s understanding of innervation and Eisenstein’s revision of William James’s “axiom that ‘emotion follows upon the bodily expression’” (NOW, 5).

It encompasses both “a centering and extension of the human sensorium beyond the limits of the individual body/subject into the world . . . and an introjection, ingestion or incorporation of the object or device” (NOW, 10).

See, for example, David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, Film Art: An Introduction (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997), 119.


This argument is developed more fully in “Cinema and Embodied Affect,” my paper presented at Cinema and the Senses, University of New South Wales, November 1998.


In his discussion of the theories of mobile mise-en-scène, Lutz Bacher makes a distinction between “long-take theories” and “mise-en-scène theories.” The former, which derive largely from André Bazin’s ideas of ontological realism, focus on the long-take as a means to preserve the unity of time and space, whereas the latter emphasize the expressive possibilities of mise-en-scène. However, regardless of the motivations which determine the découpage, the breakdown of shots in production, this distinction blurs when the focus shifts to reception. Even in Roberto Rossellini, on whose practice, with Jean Renoir’s, “Bazin’s theories were primarily founded,” as Bacher writes, the long-take sequences are experienced as a sensory amplification across time (Bacher, Mobile Mise en Scene, 197). As Jacques Rivette has written: “Think of any Rossellini film: each scene, each episode will recur in your memory not as a succession of shots and compositions . . . but as a vast melodic phrase, a continuous arabesque, a single implacable line which leads
people ineluctably towards the as yet unknown, embracing in its trajectory a palpitant and definitive universe" (Jacques Rivette, "Letter on Rossellini," in Hillier, *Cahiers du Cinéma: The 1950s*, 194. First published in *Cahiers du Cinéma* 46 (April 1955)).


24 Horton writes, for example, that “there is much in each of his Angelopoulos’s ten features made since 1970 that is quite ‘Greek’, and thus only partially grasped by a non-Hellenic audience” (LM, 2).

25 David Bordwell, “Modernism, Minimalism and Melancholy,” in LM.

26 It is no coincidence that Bordwell’s analysis focuses on the principles of visual composition which he argues determine the “perceptual dynamics of the shot” (LM, 19). The core of Bordwell’s argument resides here in the dissection of ways in which the planes, perspectives, and spatial transformations in the shot work to cue viewer expectations. The experience of the viewer is here reduced to an “act of apprehension” (LM, 23), the mechanism by which the attention of the eyes is shifted to a particular point in the shot (more accurately, in the frame). This is precisely the slippage between two divergent concepts of “physical reality” that Hansen points out, in the critical rejection of Kracauer— one which relies on an empiricist understanding of physical reality as an “out-there” object, observed by the intact gaze of the observer; and fails to grasp the centrality of the corporeal, the material to the moment of perception.

27 Fredric Jameson, “Theo Angelopoulos: The Past as History, the Future as Form” (LM, 81), (henceforth PH).


29 Hansen quotes Kracauer (TOF, 255–256).

30 Gerald O’Grady, “Tessellations and Honeycombs,” in LM. In O’Grady’s elegant and evocative essay, the metaphors of the bee-hive and the compound eyes of insects encapsulate this composite and complementary structuring of material elements into the “making and merging of multiple metaphors.” While O’Grady writes of meaning and metaphor, he layers this understanding itself, folds it into the material experience of the film. Where he describes the complex “com mingling” of metaphors in the openingscene of *The Beekeeper*, it is the matteriality of the shot that he sees inscribed into the memory of the spectator: “it is the long take of the image, the long white table, almost co-extensive with the white rectangle of the frame, which enters our own memories” (LM, 52).

31 “It does not aim upward, toward intention, but pushes toward the bottom” (WS, 447).

32 Bordwell (LM, 23). Bordwell here discusses the earlier films, but characterizes Ulysses’ Gaze and the more recent films as merely an updating of these techniques.


34 NOW, 10. While elsewhere Hansen acknowledges some allegance in Benjamin’s writings to a Brechtian idea of estrangement, she traces an ambivalence, arguing that Benjamin’s understanding of shock goes beyond “formal discontinuity and distortion” (BCE, 185).


36 For an elaboration of this distinction, see Thomas Ots, “The Silenced Body – the Expressive Leib: On the Dialectic of Mind and Life in Chinese Cathartic Healing,” in
Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self, ed. Thomas S. Carnival (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990). For an extended discussion of the limitations of the physiological model, see my “Cinema and Embodied Affect,” 2ff. I argue here that a psychology derives its core concept of the physical body from anatomy, and outline the distinction between this concept of Körper and the concept of Leib, intrinsically a concept of aetic embodiment, “the living body, my body with feelings, sensations, perceptions and emotions.”

37 Walter Benjamin, “The Image of Proust,” in Illuminations (New York: Schocken, 1969, 213. Involuntary memory or remembrance “is incompatible with conscious remembering (Erinnerung) which tends to historicize, to fixate the image of memory in an already interpreted narrative event” (Hansen, BCE, 200). As a Hansen traces the intersection between the concept of involuntary memory and Benjamin’s idea of the “optical unconscious”, “like the images of involuntary memory . . . the optical unconscious does not just actualize a lost prior vision: rather it makes us see ‘images that we have never seen before we remember them’” (NOW, 15, citing Benjamin’s “Little History of Photography”).


39 In Horton’s account, it is the construction of temporality that engenders a historical reading in the viewer: “Angelopoulos’s combination of long shots with nonchronological time forces the viewer to be actively engaged in the process of ‘reading’ the images that flow before him or her, both for their narrative significance and for their historical significance” (CC, 58). He is writing here of The Travelling Players, but would no doubt apply a similar argument to similarly structured sequences in Bucharest in Ulisses’ Gaze.

40 This cinematic quest mirrors in many ways the film historical project that has informed the work of scholars such as Hansen in the detailed historical excavations of the work of Benjamin and Krausser.

41 Jameson (PH, 88).

42 Rather than framing Ulisses’ Gaze as modernist, Jameson sees it as a hybrid work, comprising scenes which “recall older moments of a late modernism from which something new is seeking convulsive emergence” (PH, 92). He discerns in the film elements which “leap ahead to a new formal situation utterly unforeseen in the earlier period, and anticipatory of realities not yet adequately confronted anywhere in the art beginning to emerge in our New World Order” (89).

43 He points out that the Greek focus of the earlier films, which “stubbornly [c]leave to questions of national culture and history, opens out in Ulisses’ Gaze onto a pan-Balkan contemporary stage. As appealing as this supposed affinity may be, I would argue that Jameson’s adoption of the “new world market” as the overarching model for contemporary cultural production assumes too great an isomorphism between global or regional political realities and narrative forms.

44 Quoted from Angelopoulos’s previous film, The Suspended Step of the Stork.

45 Angelopoulos makes clear in an interview with Horton that Odysseus, The Odyssey, and other ancient myths are “reference point[s],” “figurative match[es]” rather than direct models for his film (LM, 99). Angelopoulos describes another layer in the film as drawing on the poems of Greek poet Scleris: “we Greeks are a dying race” (LM, 97). Horton confirms that Angelopoulos’s method “shares such a broad canvas with his ancient predecessors. Like these early historians, he makes use of stories, myths, known events, and figures, and presents them so as to force us to go beyond the events themselves to ask ourselves about their importance and meaning” (CC, 60).

An earlier version of this essay was published as ‘Arrested Motion: Leaps and Bounds in the Korean Detective Film.’ Senses Of Cinema 7 (2000). <www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/00/7/arrested.html>.

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After long delays with Indiana University Press, the manuscript was transferred to SUNY Press, with a new title: Seoul Searching: Culture and Identity in Contemporary Korean Cinema. A publication contract was signed in 2004, and the anticipated publication release date was February 2005. This anthology is still in press.
Nowhere to Hide (Injongsajong Kot Optta).
Nowhere To Hide: The Tumultuous Materialism of Lee Myung-Se

‘There is . . . great violence and humor as a tumultuous materialism is ushered into modernity’s epistemological fold . . . the new form of vision, of tactile knowing is like the surgeon’s hand cutting into and entering the body of reality to palpate the palpitating masses therein’. 

Michael Taussig

When Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin attempted to write the foundations of a materialist theory of cinema spectatorship, they looked to the potential of cinema to restore the mimetic faculty: ‘a mode of cognition involving sensuous, somatic and tactile forms of perception’. In its vigorous awakening of the corporeal aspects of cinema spectatorship, Nowhere To Hide, directed by Lee Myung-Se, charts the sensuous and somatic potential in cinema like a relentless mimetic machine.

Nowhere To Hide is a virtuoso rollick through a detective’s 72-day pursuit of a ruthless gangland assassin. By the time the opening titles assault the viewer with a hard-edged metallic clunk, Nowhere To Hide has already set itself up as a hard-boiled gangster/detective film that is slick, fast and furious. From the moment the film rips open with a rapid iris out, it’s all about surface: a stark bleached-out black and white industrial wasteland; a lumbering, thug-like pair of shoulders in horizontal stripes lurching across a vacant lot to the driving beat of a synthesiser; a tough, streetwise character confronting a gang of extortionists whose faces glide into frame and into focus one-by-one like choreographed physiognomies of criminality. Bodies

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1 An earlier version of this essay was published as ‘Arrested Motion: Leaps and Bounds in the Korean Detective Film’, in the online film journal Senses Of Cinema 7 (June 2000): <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/>
4 Nowhere To Hide, 1999: Director, Screenwriter & Production Designer, Lee Myung-Se; Producer, Chung Tae-Won; Principal cast, Park Joong-Hoon, Ahn Sung-Ki, Jang Dong-Kun & Choi Ji-Woo.
and body parts freeze in mid-flight in a high-velocity fight scene set up as a study in movement, rhythm and stasis: cryptic poses, the energy of a moment or a movement are condensed in a single frame like living figures captured in the disjointed sequences of a cartoon, and then released back into motion. Action is segmented into its component parts, transitions between the parts excised and camera speed shifted to leave a blur of rapid, disjointed movements. Slick, smooth, tough. Already the film has stretched and reinvented the principles of how to break up a scene and how to hold it together, how to inject lines of force that shatter the harmony, and lines of cohesion that hold the disintegration in check. From here the tone is set, bullets fired, and the camera zooms in through one of the bullet holes onto the titles. ‘Corporeal understanding’, as Michael Taussig writes’, ‘you don’t so much see as be hit’.  

After the titles, the rhythm shifts with a series of short fluid fragments, one after the other like liquid blips—a motorbike rides into frame and halts, a man walks a pace and freezes, a car window lowers halfway and pauses, the camera pans across a windscreen and stops, a man looks forward and freezes . . . movements interrupted but not truncated as the rhythm is carried on by the next fragment. Clued in by the high-voltage energies of the pre-title fight scenes, the viewer waits for the gangster film to kick in as the fragments pick up pace, and the uneasiness intensifies with the sense of anticipation, watching, waiting. Who is the man in the car, the two on the motorbike, the man on the step? There’s a sense of disorientation, fragments in a puzzle with no hierarchy to organise them. As we wait for the pieces to fall into place, the camera moves away and we’re lured into a scene of extraordinary sensory pleasure: leaves blow in slow motion in the wind—the intense, almost edible golden yellow of autumn leaves—and a melody picks up a wistful, melancholy lilt, the sweet dreaminess of The Bee Gees. As the viewer is lulled by the music, the camera shifts to a set of steps washed in a hazy blue light—the Forty Steps. A little girl jumps down the steps in slow motion, one-by-one, like a wind-up doll, it starts to rain, people run through the hazy rain and the music carries the viewer into a sense of eerie unreality. There’s a sense that we are simply witness to the passing of time, the passing events of a day.

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5 Taussig, p. 30.
Nowhere to Hide (Injongsajong Kot Optta).
Across this scene of almost unprecedented sensory richness and saturation, we watch the face of the victim as he stares into the eyes of the man who has just (will have just) killed him. A sword slices through his umbrella and pauses in a freeze-frame, his hand raises and halts. As blood streams in rivulets down his face, he watches expressionless, his eyes barely flicker and then he tumbles in slow motion down the stairs, grasping after his open umbrella. Pared back, dispassionate, a most business-like assassination. A frantic chase erupts up the stairs in a chaos of running figures and slashing swords. It’s five minutes before a word is spoken in this first sequence after the opening titles. After the murder, the melody carries on as if nothing has happened, and the day goes back to its impartial witness. Cars drive off through the autumn leaves. The viewer is left speechless.

The violence is not so much in the action—the slicing sword, the hand drenched in blood that turns the whole frame red—but in the way the scene splits the viewer in two. One part drifts with the melody into a dreamy, lyrical nostalgia, a sense of suspended animation, while the other is carried by the fragmented editing, glimpses of a building tension with no clues, no explanation, into an unnerving uncertainty, suspense.

**Montage and the sensory**

In the Forty Steps sequence, as you watch the umbrella tumble in slomo down the steps, the sequence evokes echoes of another scene, in *Battleship Potemkin*. The strong horizontal lines of the steps recall the Odessa steps, the victim’s slow motion tumble down the stairs after his umbrella evokes the baby’s pram as it bumps down the steps, the diagonal lines of force of the gangsters running chaotically up the stairs echo the Cossack’s pursuit—each element reinvents the dynamic energies of conflict in direction, movement and rhythm that animate Eisenstein’s shot construction, but reinterpret those principles within an utterly contemporary idiom.

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6 The Bee Gees’ *Holiday*.
7 *Battleship Potemkin*, 1925, dir. Sergei Eisenstein. While other viewers have also made this association, Lee emphasises that this similarity is coincidental, rather than an intentional quotation.
The resonance of Eisenstein is felt not only in the quotation, but also in the way Lee animates the energy of montage, the juxtaposition of discordant associations, rhythms, moods. It is the way Lee mobilises the sensory qualities of sound and image, to slide the viewer across untenable links, that echoes Eisenstein’s understanding of the nature of the montage fragment. Eisenstein writes of the ‘sensual nuances’, the ‘collateral vibrations’ of a fragment that render viable the ‘perfectly impossible montage joinings in [his film] Old and New’. He envisages the physiological qualities of each montage fragment as vertical layers, like the various instruments in a symphony, and links fragments together based on what he describes as these ‘visual and aural overtones’. Eisenstein’s method of ‘overtonal montage’ draws on these sensory, physiological qualities of the sound and image fragment to motivate montage linkages. These palpable qualities themselves form bridges that release the sequence construction from the stranglehold of the horizontal chain of meaning, and free it to proceed along mimetic lines. It is this kind of disruptive sequence that Lee puts to the service of generic play, or to the exploration of the cinematic, of movement, of light in Nowhere To Hide.

Taussig has linked Eisenstein’s theorisation of the ‘totally physiological sensation[s]’ of the fragment explicitly with Benjamin’s understanding of the visceral quality of mimetic perception, its ability to evoke a ‘palpable sensuous connection between the very body of the perceiver and the perceived’. Kracauer has also written of the ways that film ‘addresses its viewer as a corporeal, material being’, arguing that film ‘stimulates the material layers of the human being . . . it brings the material world into play . . . the material dimension assumes a life of its

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9 Eisenstein, FFD, p. 70. Eisenstein describes these overtones, on which he bases his method of ‘overtonal montage’ as a ‘filmic fourth dimension’ (p. 69).
10 For an extended discussion of Eisenstein’s ‘vertical montage’, see Jacques Aumont, Montage Eisenstein, translated by Lee Hildreth, Constance Penley & Andrew Ross (London: BFI & Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987). Aumont has highlighted the challenge of this ‘vertical montage’ to the conventional understanding of montage along the ‘filmic chain’, which he describes as ‘horizontal’ (pp. 31-2).
11 Taussig, p. 21. Taussig describes this overtonal montage as an understanding of ‘the interdependence of montage with physiognomic aspects of visual worlds’ (p.
own and triggers in the viewer associations, memories of the senses . . .”

This sensory, material aspect of spectatorship holds the key to understanding the impact of *Nowhere To Hide*. In its work with the potential of images to ‘engage not so much with the mind as with the embodied mind’, and its exploration of the energy erupting from the ‘physical, tactile dimensions of film spectatorship’, *Nowhere To Hide* could be seen as a mimetic machine par excellence.13

**Genre and mimesis**

It is the ability to bring together apparently incongruous elements and to play them for the energies that erupt from the juxtaposition that marks many of the elements of Lee Myung-Se’s film—the capacity to turn the edges, where disparate fragments meet, into edginess. The play with these incongruities has led Darcy Paquet to describe this film as ‘genre-bending’.14 *Nowhere To Hide* is a detective/gangster film which slides at times into a romantic, almost saccharine subplot—the hero, Woo (Park Joong-Hoon), is a ruthless, brutal and streetwise detective who breaks out into a cheeky, childlike playfulness as easily as he gives way to a melancholy loneliness, hankering after the assassin’s girlfriend; it’s a comedy with a violent edge—fight scenes break into farce as Woo leaps up and down with bells ringing, and as he wrestles with a suspect after a series of brutal punches, the music breaks into a tango and the embrace of combat becomes a dance; it’s an unabashedly popular, fast-paced music video with an arthouse sensibility; it’s a cartoon with live actors . . .

Lee points out that *Nowhere To Hide* is the first time he has used the action genre, and the film has been hailed as one ‘that twists its genre in new and interesting

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28). The ‘physiognomic aspects of visual worlds’ is the term which Benjamin uses to describe mimesis (Taussig, p. 24).
13 Taussig, p. 23.
ways. Paquet discusses the ways the film shifts the expectations of a detective film, with the depiction of the ‘menial aspects of a detective’s life’. The core of his discussion of this ‘genre-bending’ is the ‘displacement of narrative and action itself to ‘focus [viewers’] attention on the more cinematic aspects of the work’. However, as pivotal as this level of genre twisting is, the broad brushstrokes of a genre criticism that addresses these challenges to narrative convention, character type or film category cannot fully address the innovativeness of Lee’s play with genre. Lee puts genre into play not only on this macro level, but also on the micro level of the sensory experience of each moment. It is in the ways that he works with the experience of viewers moment by moment—in the timbre of a sound, the shape of a shadow, the hue of a light or the rhythm of a movement—that the core of Lee’s work with genre must be understood.

Lee works with genre like a paintbox—colour, rhythm, light, shadow, movement, music, sound effects and cinematic reference all become tools in a tool-kit of experiential moments. Lee has said that he ‘likes to get close to [his] audience’ and it is often through the ability to evoke a generic trace in the sensory nuances of a sound or image that he achieves this. Genre is enacted mimetically: the recognition that triggers generic associations or expectations in the film is a mimetic recognition. The generic play between the familiar and the unfamiliar is enacted on the visceral level of the sensuous qualities of sound and image.

The impact of Lee’s paintbox approach is in the transitions, as the familiar qualities of a sound or image are used as a pivot to vault the spectator into unfamiliar territory. The humour and the pleasure often lies in the unexpected—the surprise that the viewer has been seamlessly transported by an aural or visual link across the boundary between action and musical, between narrative causality and carnivalesque extravaganza. A certain tinniness in a ringing bell catapults a fight scene from realism into farce; a bilious tinge to the green of a street light flips a chase scene over from drama towards a cartoon; the floating, soft rustling of autumn leaves slides the

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15 ibid.
16 ibid, p. 13.
Nowhere to Hide (Injongsajong Kot Optta).
spectator from action to suspension. The affiliation has been registered, experienced and accepted on a corporeal level before the viewer has caught on to being duped. Much more than the transformation or renewal of character type or narrative lines, this is play with genre in the fullest sense, and redefines what generic play can be, and how far it can go.

Genre theorists such as Steve Neale and Marcia Landy have argued the need to abandon an understanding of genre as a classificatory system, and to think of genre as a process, as ‘a contract between the audience and the film’.\(^1\) Neale has emphasised the centrality of the spectator to this understanding of genre, arguing that ‘genres do not consist only of films: they consist also, and equally, of specific systems of expectation and hypothesis which spectators bring with them to the cinema, and which interact with films themselves during the course of the viewing process’.\(^2\) However, in *Nowhere To Hide*, the ways in which genre is played out in this interaction between film and audience cannot be grasped if these ‘expectations or hypotheses’ are understood as an intellectual template, as ‘ideas about the film’. Genre is experienced viscerally: it is not located somewhere prior to or floating above the performative unfolding of a film across time and the materiality of the spectator’s experience of the film. The generic expectations of the spectator—their establishment, renewal, repudiation or transformation—are experienced as they unfold in the material resonances of a film.

The capacity to fling together disparate elements in unpredictable ways gives *Nowhere To Hide* a wit and a raucous playfulness. Just as in the Forty Steps sequence we are given glimpses, fragments, actions that seem peripheral but then fly together in unexpected ways, the surface of the film also becomes a fragment to be put into play, to be flung into action. It might be a pool of coloured light that takes off onto a bravura progression through garish washes of colour—a chase scene through the industrial port-side lit as a progression through hot orange-red, a cold hazy blue and a lurid green. As Woo’s combat/dance with the boxer-suspect spreads

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out across a cluttered rooftop, the clutter itself takes over—the scene becomes black and white, shot in silhouette, as turrets, chimneys, aerials and gas cylinders take over the shadow play of slogging combatants.

*Nowhere To Hide*'s cryptic, energetic sequences, which Lee explains in terms of a search for a universal language—clearly assimilate principles of construction from outside a more conventional film language. Lee has spoken of his voracious consumption of comic books during his childhood and youth, and the inspiration he has found in comics for his filmmaking methodology and theory:

I started to think that the comic strip had the capability of going where film couldn’t go, and so I started to pull at the art of comics because I saw that the use of the cartoon image is a method whereby film language can be expanded . . . I asked myself questions about the method of expression that the comic uses, such as why is the expression so exaggerated? And what would happen with film if we applied the rules of omission that are used in comics? So I came to experiment with all of these ideas and images.20

If you think of a film as a set of problems about energy—how to create it, amplify it, sustain it, what shape it might take, how to push it to the limit—the solutions *Nowhere To Hide* invents, and the astonishment they evoke draw strongly on this unpredictability. Any moment, any stylistic element, any generic clue or hook can become a point of departure for the film to take off into exuberant flights of fantasy and play, leapfrogging more conventional narrative transitions and picking up a wild momentum that can leave the viewer gobsmacked at the daring, laughing aloud at

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19 Neale, p. 46.
20 Interview with Lee Myung-Se, Anne Rutherford, 20.5.01. Lee emphasises that his use of comic book techniques in filmmaking is part of his search for ‘the enlightened road to universal language’. In order to explain this, he draws an analogy with Picasso and Rimbaud: ‘Something that may help to explain what I do is to look at Picasso and African art. Picasso used simple forms from African art in his striving to find a universal language. Comics are a definitive means of finding a universal language. Rimbaud discusses the concept of a universal language in his writings on poetics. In 1850 he shouted out that it was the advent of the age of universal language, declaring that universal language can be found in the melody of a current pop song, on the cover of an old magazine, and inside of a comic book. And for me as well, I selected the comic book as my [mode] of universal language.’
the unrestrained, almost slapstick humour, or in awe of the technical virtuosity of the editing.\textsuperscript{21}

\textit{Visual style and corporeality}

A similar sense of a palette or paintbox underpins the visual style of \textit{Nowhere To Hide}. Colour itself is used in this way—applied in whichever way it has most impact on the audience. In the initial conflict with the gangsters, as a body is sliced the whole screen bleeds red in a wash of colour that sums up the scene in a cartoon-like epigrammatic moment. Lee talks of the noir characteristics of Inchon, the port city locations he uses in \textit{Nowhere To Hide}\textsuperscript{22}—it’s this noir aesthetic that he reinvents as a study in colour cinematography with the stylised sculptural use of coloured lighting and shadow. Surfaces take prominence as much of the film is shot through moving barriers—car windows, windscreen wipers, slats, bicycle wheels—that continually reshape the frame, make it malleable, fluid, dynamic. The surface of the image itself is complex, textured—candy-coloured neon lights ripple across car windows; perspective is confounded as the hero chases the assassin through Escheresque neighbourhoods of undulating reflecting glass, laneways and staircases that seem to lead only in circles. It’s noir reinvented in Korean neon.

The sophistication of this ‘surface dazzle’ of Lee’s work has enthralled critics and reviewers of \textit{Nowhere To Hide}, who have talked of its ‘explosive visual style’, and the sense that his work had ‘no obvious precedent anywhere in world cinema’.\textsuperscript{23} Lee has been acclaimed as a ‘production design genius’, as ‘Korea’s ‘premier stylist’ and its ‘most innovative director’.

\textsuperscript{21} It comes as no surprise that Lee cites Chaplin and Keaton as filmmakers with whom he shares an affinity (Im Hyun-Ock: private correspondence).
\textsuperscript{22} Im Hyun-Ock, ‘An interview with Lee Myung-Se’, Taewon Entertainment press kit, cited in Sydney Asia Pacific Film Festival 2000 publicity material.
\textsuperscript{24} ibid. \textit{Nowhere To Hide} has been described as ‘a completely new kind of movie’, Geoffrey Gilmore, 2000 Sundance Film Festival review, cited on <http://www.cinekorea.com/Recent_Film/Nowhere.html> The film has also been described in reviews as ‘exhilarating’, ‘artistic and commercial perfection’. See reviews by Darcy Paquet, <http://myhome.shinbiro.com/~darcypaq/koreafilm.html> and
critical benchmarks for cinematography (as well as for editing, performance, humour and for sheer conceptual energy). However, any discussion of ‘visual style’ as surface, as the ‘look’ of the film, is inadequate to explain the corporeality of the experience of the film, the way the film is imprinted across the sensorium of the viewer.

One of the primary elements of the visual style of the film is the dynamic, fluid work with the frame. The frame is in no sense a ‘quadrilateral cage’: there is no stability for the viewer as the restless, malleable frame is on the move through the entire film, is itself a shape-shifter, just like the villain of the narrative, continually masked, blurred, obscured, divided. Freeways squeeze the frame from above, moving windscreens contort it, rippling lines of light disrupt its surface. Across this elastic field of vision, space is compartmentalised, broken into endless panels, boxes, building blocks of urban conglomerate made up of laneways, staircases, tenements and alleys. There’s a sense of urban space infinitely more dense, cluttered, fractured than the widescreen would normally allow.

There is a profound understanding here of the nature of the frame and its impact on the embodied viewing of the spectator. The frame itself is a conceptual entity, embedded with cultural significance: the ‘look’ of Nowhere To Hide is no more

<http://koreanfilm.org/> and by Kwak Kyung-Hee, <http://korea.insights.co.kr/webzine/cinetaste/web/index.html> Im Hyun-Ock has pointed out that the original three directors of the so-called ‘New Korean’ cinema (late 1980s to early 1990s), Lee Myung-Se, Park Kwang-Su and Jang Sung-Woo, ‘broke down many barriers politically and aesthetically with their early films which went on to pave the way for younger directors to work with the political and aesthetic freedom they now have’ (private correspondence). Lee has spoken of the ways his films were originally seen by critics as ‘individualistic’, separate from the social realist work of the other New Wave Korean directors. Im highlights the fact that ‘the stylistic breakthrough that Lee Myung-Se has made to film style in Korean cinema is only recently being recognized’, and argues that the early disinterest was due to the reluctance or inability of critics to ‘approach cinema on stylistic and formal grounds and to discuss cinematic language . . . Lee Myung-Se’s films were not transparently social or political and were thus disregarded as not being serious’ (private correspondence). Lee claims that ‘some people look at film primarily in socio-political terms, or with the standards of literature or other arts. I jumped into cinema itself and questioned cinema on its own terms. You can say that I answer the basic question ‘what is film’ in each of my films, film after film’ (Interview with Anne Rutherford).
Nowhere to Hide (Injongsajong Kot Optta).

Nowhere to Hide (Injongsajong Kot Optta).
received by a disembodied eye than is the expansive visionary freedom of cinemascope in the American western: This compartmentalising of the frame, the composition in panels, is familiar in a more classical form in Japanese cinema in the work of Mizoguchi. In contemporary Hong Kong cinema, Wong Kar-Wai has fractured the frame in discordant planes in a similar way to Lee, in *Fallen Angels*. With *Nowhere To Hide*, perhaps we are seeing the fullest expression yet of the assault of the urban sensibilities of the tiger economies on the conventional spatiality of the rectangular frame.

**Mood, affect and materiality**

The mood of *Nowhere To Hide* does not derive only from colour and the frame—rain and snow at times so dominate the image that it’s as though we’re watching the film through a texture of moving, beating rice paper thatch. Rain carries the burden of mood more often delegated to music—whole segments of the film are just wet, saturated, the pounding downpours of rain more articulate than a melody as they alternately mute and mask the action, smother it in melancholy or add a kind of

25 See for example *The Story of Last Chrysanthemums* (*Zangiku Monogatari*), 1939.
26 *Fallen Angels*, dir. Wong Kar-Wai, 1995. A similar compact density in the compartmentalisation of the frame has been discussed by Christopher Doyle, cinematographer of Wong Kar-Wai’s *In the Mood for Love* (2001), as a solution to shooting in cramped locations, as well as being a metaphor for the ‘confined nature of the characters’ existence’, cited in ‘Infidelity in the Far East’, Rachael K. Bosley, *American Cinematographer*, February 2001, p. 26. In *Fallen Angels*, the claustrophobia and fragmentation are largely constructed through the relentlessly moving camera, with the addition of rippling textured light across the frame. In *Nowhere To Hide*, Lee draws on a broader range of techniques and a more complex relationship between the mobile camera and the set design to establish the dynamism of the frame itself.
27 Kim Kyung Hyun has written of the long-standing lack of interest in the west in Korean films which explore this urban sensibility: ‘the genres that use the backdrops of the city are normally considered “too popular” and unsuitable to the taste of the art film community in the west’, Kim Kyung Hyun, *The New Korean Cinema: Framing the Shifting Boundaries of History, Class, and Gender* (UM, 1998), <http://eee.uci.edu/99s/20655/metropolis.html> The enthusiastic responses to screenings at Sydney Asia Pacific Film Festival, Sundance Film Festival, Museum of Modern Art and others clearly signal the crossover success of Lee’s film and its
Nowhere to Hide (Injongsajong Kot Op'ta).
desperate edge to the pursuit of the murderer. The final showdown takes up the silent structure of the Forty Steps sequence—ten minutes of pursuit, cornering and the final punch-up with not a word spoken, no voice, just the relentless drumming of the rain pummelling the actors and drenching the scene in a feeling that’s almost epic, almost akin to awe. (The assassin himself has no voice, only a formidable presence—he has not spoken a word onscreen through the entire film.)

How can an action film do this? How can it take a fight scene and spin it off into this haunting mesmerism? In a film like Raging Bull we have seen a structure built around a series of fights that punctuate the film, where each one of the fight scenes takes off as a new experiment in choreography and cinematography. However, whereas Raging Bull works through the affectively/libidinally-charged fight scenes to plumb spiritual, catholic depths, Nowhere To Hide plays the surface to transport the viewer into the kind of feeling that, while not necessarily as emotionally profound, is no less intense—an overwhelming mood that washes over us, sweeps us up and carries us along. Indeed, feeling is at the centre of Lee’s description of his own filmmaking practice: ‘my working style is only to go forward with one’s feeling’. What kind of deep feeling are you having when you’re not having a deep feeling? This is one of the paradoxes of Nowhere To Hide—that it somehow manages to access an intensity that you don’t expect to be there. Hooked into the expectations of potential to draw audiences outside Korea into a closer exploration of the heritage of Korean cinema and its reinvigoration since the end of the ‘80s.

28 Raging Bull, dir. Martin Scorsese, 1980. Nowhere To Hide is in parts like a synthesis of Raging Bull and Jackie Chan—the sheer formal aesthetic pleasures that stir the audience into a heightened sensory awareness in Raging Bull, combined with the innovativeness of Jackie Chan’s play with martial arts traditions, each action sequence exploring new moves in the combination of slapstick and the martial arts/action traditions.

29 Interview with Anne Rutherford. Lee writes all his own screenplays, but claims that ‘until I shoot there is nothing decided. I’m only constructing plans in order to finally destroy everything . . . It’s not just to shoot as laid out in some pre-arranged plan. So I tell my staff and actors that my working style is only to go forward with one’s feeling. I work after making this sort of premise. Until now I have made all my films by doing the lighting design, set design and many other aspects of [production] design—but the major premise is always there which is to destroy any preconceived thoughts or final decisions’.
a gangster/detective film, you don’t expect to be transported into a hypnotic sensory reverie. When you read Lee Myung-Se talking of this hard-boiled action film in terms of how Monet would paint a water-lily, it comes as a surprise, just as when he talks of the action genre, narrative and character as a ruse, a decoy that allows him to explore the properties of movement and the filmic. ‘The story and the characters are not the main focus of my film. Movement is’, says Lee, ‘this is a film about movement and kinetic energy’. Lee talks of studying dance, animal movement and World Cup soccer to distil these kinetic principles, and of the rain he says, ‘rain is a good medium for showing how movement is essentially about stillness. And stillness contains movement waiting to be released’.

Lee’s affinity with Monet, whose waterlily paintings explore the qualities of ‘light-filled water’ to evoke ‘a vision of immaterial light’, is clear in the rain sequence. Just as Lee talks of the painterly use of light, there’s a translation of this painterly awareness into principles of cinematography and editing, a cinematic sophistication that would be the envy of many arthouse directors. In his work with ‘the play of light’, Monet’s goal was to capture ‘not the landscape but the sensation evoked by the landscape’. Lee’s own description of the way he works suggests an affiliation with the Impressionist focus on appearances aimed to ‘penetrate other forms of experience’. He says, ‘all I show you is no more than a mere impression. This is because what I genuinely want to show you is over there, and then also beyond’.

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30 Im Hyun-Ock, ‘An interview with Lee Myung-Se’ (SAPFF, as above). Lee mobilises the pace and inventiveness more familiar from Hong Kong cinema: only in Wong Kar-Wai’s works *Ashes of Time* (1995) and *Chungking Express* have we seen a fast fragmented editing style with jump cuts, ‘jump dissolves’ (as Darcy Paquet calls them) and shifting camera speeds to achieve such mesmeric results.

31 Im Hyun-Ock, ‘An interview with Lee Myung-Se’. This intrinsic relationship between movement and stillness perhaps gives a conceptual foundation to the dynamic Lee sets up between the fixed dimensions of the frame and their undoing. He has said that he ‘[thinks] of film as a living organism’ (Interview with Anne Rutherford).


33 Spate and Bromfield, p. 5, and Shigemi Inaga, ‘Claude Monet, Between “Impressionism” and “Japonism”’, p. 66, in *ibid*.

34 Spate and Bromfield, p. 56.
Nowhere to Hide (Injongsajong Kot Optta).
Impressionist painters such as Monet exalt a way of seeing, of perceiving, which takes the viewer out of him/herself, which ‘[breaks] down the boundaries between the self and nature’. \(^{36}\) This Impressionist credo is a precursor to contemporary theories of mimetic experience, which define mimesis as a form of ‘reception of the external world . . . which transcends the traditional subject-object dichotomy’. \(^{37}\) Taussig highlights this breakdown of the boundaries between the viewer and the object viewed in Benjamin’s understanding of mimesis, with its recognition that ‘sentience takes us outside of ourselves’. \(^{38}\)

In his description of his method of working, Lee’s approach seems clearly to work through the material, to draw out the resonance of the experience of an object. He says: ‘When I work, I’m in a deep fog, following something vague off in the distance. The form, whatever object you’re trying to find is there—it’s a matter of capturing it’. \(^{39}\) Lee evokes Gustav Flaubert, Henri Cartier Bresson and Zen Buddhism to explain the way he approaches images:

[Flaubert stated that] that there is exactly one word for every object that exists. Along with the photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson who took pictures with this philosophy, I understand this idea as well. For me, the Buddhist methodology is well suited to describe this approach in terms of how to create that one shot. So if there is a methodology at all, I can say it is close to that of Zen (Korean: son). In order to obtain just one shot, I must throw away all thoughts. To obtain what that object is saying to me, I throw away all knowledge and whatever prejudices I have. A more accessible way of understanding this is to think of the poetics of T.S. Eliot. Eliot’s poetics proposes that ‘in order to draw a billiard ball you need to go inside of the ball. This is exactly what I mean by Buddhist methodology’. \(^{40}\)

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\(^{35}\) Interview with Anne Rutherford.
\(^{36}\) Spate and Bromfield, p. 60.
\(^{37}\) Hansen, NOW, p. 5.
\(^{38}\) Taussig, p. 38.
\(^{39}\) Dupont, as above.
\(^{40}\) Interview with Anne Rutherford. Lee says: ‘in order to do so, I first close my eyes. Then there is nothing left but darkness. And then it is waiting until the scene I want comes to me on its own. So rather than thinking of myself as a creator I think
Whereas Ahn Byung Sup has written of the central role of sentiment in much of Korean cinema, Lee has explicitly located the goal of his work as outside the realm of emotional expression: ‘I’m going to investigate an object by intuition: it’s not an emotional thing, but more akin to Impressionism’. He says that ‘what you seek to gain with the Zen-like method is the viewer’s sympathetic response. Only through methods of the Buddhist ‘non-action’ and non-actions of human agency do you get to the true heart of the viewer’s response’.

Lee has talked of the understanding of emotion in the ‘School of Consciousness-only’ Buddhist school of thought:

> ... countless varieties of human emotions have been identified. According to this classification system, what we commonly think of as emotions being actions inside of a person can in fact be classified as the action of the body. In other words, emotion itself is a material thing. What we call art does not give movement to the material, but rather it gives movement to the spiritual. Then the question arises as to what is the thing that touches the spirit of the person who is doing the looking? But that question concerns that which cannot be understood through words.

Despite Lee’s filmmaking method, which works through the materiality of the object to generate experience, he defines his goal in non-materialist terms. Lee’s framing of his central concern in this way challenges a materialist understanding of cinema spectatorship to attempt to articulate that which ‘touches the spirit of the person who is . . . looking’. Is this a fundamental challenge to a materialist aesthetics: is his aesthetics incommensurate with a materialist theory of cinema?

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of myself as a translator. At times. However not all scenes are gained through this method. Sometimes I write and make films with the use of conventional film rules’.

42 Dupont, as above.
43 Interview with Anne Rutherford
44 Interview with Anne Rutherford
Nowhere to Hide (Injongsajong Kot Optta).

Nowhere to Hide (Injongsajong Kot Optta).
In her discussion of Benjamin’s understanding of mimesis as a mode of perception that ‘reconnects with the discarded powers . . . of mimetic practices that involve the body’, Miriam Hansen has emphasised the affective charge inherent in Benjamin’s concept of mimetic innervation. Hansen explains this innervation as a form of ‘mimetic perception of the external world that is empowering’.\(^45\) With this concept of mimetic innervation, a mimetic appropriation of the material world that, in the moment of contact, generates an ‘affectively charged, excentric perception’, as Hansen describes it, we come to understand this double-edged materiality, which is both material and energetic at the same time.\(^46\)

A similar attempt to conceptualise a sensuous, embodied affect, and the potential of cinema to arouse this heightened experience, emerges in Eisenstein’s later work in the concept of ecstasy, which he explains as ‘an awakening, which puts the spectator's emotional and intellectual activity into operation to the maximum degree . . . a movement lifting one out of oneself’.\(^47\) Eisenstein seems to struggle towards a non-dichotomous framework for thinking this movement. As Eisenstein scholar, Jacques Aumont, understands the concept of ecstasy, there is no contradiction between transcendence and materialism: the spectator is lifted in a frenzy into a union with a transcendental object in a process which is also material. The pleasure which this engenders is described as a movement to a type of ‘ecstatic vibration’, and again as ‘a move beyond the rudiments of consciousness to enter the purely passionate sphere of pure feeling, sensation, being’.\(^48\) So what is this transcendence that is also material, this sensation that is also being, this nervous excitation?\(^49\)

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\(^{45}\) Hansen, NOW, pp. 5-6, 10.


\(^{47}\) Aumont, as above, p. 59. Aumont quotes Eisenstein's collected works in six volumes: Izbrannie proizvedeniia v chesti tomakh (Moscow: Izdatielstvo Iskusstvo, 1964 - 71). Here Eisenstein refers to the etymology of the term, ecstasy, in the Greek, ek-stasis, a 'movement lifting one out of oneself'.

\(^{48}\) Aumont, pp. 60-61.

\(^{49}\) This argument about Eisenstein’s concept of ecstasy is explored in Anne Rutherford, ‘Cinema and Embodied Affect’, forthcoming in Cinema and the Senses: Visual Culture and Spectatorship, refereed conference papers edited by George
It would be too easy to assimilate Lee’s film into a depth/surface schema which has a long history in Western thought. One pole of this dyad could be exemplified in a depth metaphor of representation in the expressionist understanding of the image. The expressionist image (or sound), as Peter Brooks has described it in the tradition of melodrama, represents a deeper layer of experience, which cannot be contained in language: the image works to dredge up intense affect from the depths of repression.\(^50\) The trend away from this depth model of representation in contemporary culture has been critiqued by scholars such as Fredric Jameson, who associates a shift to surface with ‘the waning of affect’, the devaluing of the imperative to express feeling or emotion, in both contemporary life and in cultural production.\(^51\) However, Lee’s work with the surface of the image and sound, his exploration of the materiality of the object, is not the obverse of depth, as a surface/depth dichotomy is not applicable to understanding either his method or the experience it generates. Through his play with the elements of the surface of the film, Lee has prised this surface loose from the expectations of an expressive mode, but this is not to say that the film lacks affect. In *Nowhere To Hide*, the embodied experience generated in the spectator does not stand in for something else—its affect is not in that which is absent. It is the sensory that Lee captures through his exploration of kinetic energy, and it is in or through the materiality of that experience, the energetic, mimetic connection with the spectator—the mimetic innervation—that the affect is generated. This is the challenge that Lee’s ‘tumultuous materialism’ throws out to the understanding of cinema spectatorship, and its epistemological foundations.

\(^{50}\) Peter Brooks, ‘Melodrama, Body, Revolution’, in *Melodrama: Stage – Picture – Screen*, ed. Jacky Bratton, Jim Cook, Christine Gledhill. London: BFI, 1994. See, for example, Brooks’ discussion of silent cinema’s reliance on an ‘aesthetics of embodiment’ (19) which ‘[uses] the body in expressionistic ways, as the vehicle of meanings that cannot otherwise be conveyed’ (11).

\(^{51}\) Fredric Jameson, ‘Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism’, in *New Left Review* 143-146, 1984, p. 62. Jameson critiques a focus on surface in the...
Nowhere to Hide (Injongsajong Kot Optta).
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Published Essay: Part Two

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BUT WHAT DOES THE MAN IN THE COWBOY HAT THINK?
INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE:
SILENCE, TABOO AND MASQUERADE

Anne Rutherford

Prologue
Most Aboriginal people involved in production of art forms believe that an ethical, post-colonial critique and practice among their non-Aboriginal colleagues is possible and achievable.

Marcia Langton: 'Well, I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television'...

The redemptive possibility that Marcia Langton offers here for a postcolonial practice in Australian film and television proclaims the possibility of rupturing what she calls the 'immense suffocating silences' perpetuated by the systematic exclusion of Aboriginal voices and experiences from the public versions of history and story-telling. The catalytic effect of breaching this silence and denial has been revealed in the explosive reactions to the legal disrobing of terra nullius, the long-standing basis of Australian systems of land law. In 1997, in the wake of the 1992 High Court Mabo decision recognising the survival of Native Title, and its affirmation in the Wik decision of late 1996, conflicting interpretations of Australian history and land law, which had simmered under the surface of public debate for decades, erupted into vociferous dispute. A dramatic polarisation across the political spectrum ensued. Parliamentary attacks, unrivalled in decades, targeted the core legal rights and social standing of Indigenous people; a public backlash against native title hit new extremes with threats by pastoralists to take up semi-automatic weapons to shoot Aboriginal people off the land, and mobilisation in support of native title escalated, with public meetings, the lobbying of politicians and citizens' statements
demanding a non-discriminatory, anti-racist application of the native title legislation. In this highly-charged political context, in March 1997, ABC TV broadcast Frontier, a three-part documentary which set out to expose to a television audience the violence which accompanied British colonisation of Australia, and to bring to the surface a history long suppressed in the official, colonialist versions of Australia's past. Not just a television program, Frontier was conceived as an interactive media event. Pushing the boundaries of its television format, the on-air broadcast was accompanied by a live internet chat show and an on-line guestbook, generating a rare public forum as responses to the program were debated in a robust and uncensored exchange. The interactive dimension gave the history a direct contemporary resonance, amplified it, as the implications of the historical material were churned over in the new forms of public sphere emerging on the internet. Reconciliation, the question of treaties, the teaching of history and the politics of land tenure were all interrogated in passionate responses to the program's revelations. Based on the groundbreaking historical research of Henry Reynolds, and with Reynolds and Langton herself as consultants to the program, Frontier inserted itself in this volatile political context as a considered, extensively-researched and accredited account of Australian history. To what extent Frontier was a catalyst in the rapid mobilisation of support for native title is a matter for conjecture. What is clear, however, is that the program assisted Australian audiences to understand the historical background to the conflict over land, and the injustice of Australian land laws, which was for so long kept under wraps by the legally and ethically untenable doctrine of terra nullius.

As a timely and strategic television intervention at the height of the Wik debate in 1997, Frontier appeared to be an exemplary ethical, postcolonial Australian television production. And yet, Langton's model for this postcolonial critique pivots around the achievement of an intercultural dialogue. On closer analysis, although the program stages an ongoing debate and dialogue between white settlers, intercultural dialogue has no place in Frontier. The program's very claims to credibility as a serious historical document – an orthodox historiography and a rigid approach to documentary form – constrain it within the universalist models of white culture, and thus render any sense of intercultural dialogue in the final program impossible.

This paper takes Frontier, as one of the most ambitious and problematic recent attempts at postcolonial production, as a point of departure to explore what shape an 'ethical postcolonial critique' might take. What other approaches to constructing or staging a dialogue could these program-makers have taken? How can the dialogic model inform the search to develop new cultural modes for presenting and interrogating Australian history and culture? In the context of film and television, can a more rigorous interrogation of the assumed 'universalist' or 'neutral' models of white culture generate new cultural forms which address more adequately 'both stories' of Australian history?

The historical record: setting the record straight

The historical method deployed by Frontier is made mandatory by its push to establish its central tenet: that the frontier advanced 'in a line of blood' across the continent, marked by a series of land wars that continued into the 20th century. This is the basis of its challenge to 'the seamless normality of a triumphal national history'.
Faced with a potentially incredulous audience unwilling to accept this challenge to the classical historical accounts, fuelled no doubt by the regular denigration of what is disparaged as a 'black armband' version of history, Frontier is presented in meticulously researched and documented detail. In case its message is perceived as controversial or unsavoury, and thrown open to doubt, its historical method appears unimpeachable. The imperative to establish Frontier's historical credibility runs as a defining line through both its presentation format and, by all accounts as a determining factor in production decisions. The producer, Bruce Belsham, argues that 'in the currently highly loaded ideological climate, we had to be absolutely sure of our ground', and Langton confirms the 'rigorous devotion to historical accuracy ... through the devotion to primary source material', a requirement which mandated the exclusion of stories which, due to the lack of adequate primary source material, could not be documented with such certainty. Drawn rigorously from verifiable archival records, the program's credentials as orthodox historiography were impeccable.

Not only is Frontier wary of challenges to its historical authenticity, it also fends off the familiar disavowals of the relevance of history to contemporary life, exemplified by Senator John Herron's attempt to reject any criticism of historical events: 'You might as well go and ask the British for an apology for coming to Australia with the convicts. You can't judge the past by today's standards. (An earlier incarnation of this position is described elsewhere as 'a terse "Get over it".') Frontier presents its audience not with contemporary critiques of 18th and 19th century savagery, but with the voices of the participants themselves. Much of the potency of the program stems from its revelation that 'they knew what they were doing', that the early colonists knew they were engaged in a war for land, they knew of the Indigenous inhabitants' attachment to, economic dependence on, and rigorous defence of their lands, and while many called openly, publicly and without recrimination for outright extermination, many of them saw the slaughter and dispossession as criminal and genocidal. This is no contemporary ethical squeamishness imposed upon the harsh realities of an earlier time - the moral judgements presented are made by the colonists themselves. And it is they who in their journals, newspaper articles and public statements reveal the pervasive participation in the slaughters, even to the extent of some people perceiving them and boasting about them as something akin to blood sports.

Not only are we given the voices of the most savage assailants in their relentless push to clear the land of its Indigenous inhabitants, but also, in a scrupulously 'balanced' historical account of colonial sources, the other voices among white settlers - the humanists, the anti-racists, evangelists - those who decried the violence and argued the natural justice of Indigenous occupation and ownership of land, and resistance against dispossession. No accusation of historical revision can be sustained here when the unashamed calls for massacre, the judicial complicity in the violence, as well as the voices of condemnation and disgust and the legislative attempts to prevent the bloodshed were the documented voices of the period.

Alongside its orthodox historical method, Frontier deploys a presentation style which fits all of the traditional criteria of quality documentary: it is well-researched, culturally-engaged and, above all, apparently 'objective', 'balanced' and believable. Some commentators remarked approvingly that Frontier did not 'hit the audience over the head' with the story, that it was not an emotional, 'subjective' presentation
which could leave it open to accusations of bias, but a somewhat distanced, 'modulated' presentation. As one respondent wrote:

The measured and temperate approach is in stark contrast to the current hysteria drummed up by our political leaders and others ... 16

I assumed, as probably did the program producers when they decided the protocols for what could and could not be included in Frontier, that with these incontestable credentials the program could convince even the most sceptical.

**Frontier as public forum/the reception of Frontier**

*Frontier* unleashed a dramatic and emotional response from its audience, provoking hundreds of viewers to log in to record their responses and to engage in debate – the guestbooks and the live chat-shows are full of active and well-informed debate by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous respondents, as well as a smattering of comments by people of the 'to the victor go the spoils' school. 17 While some Indigenous organisations and individuals commended the program-makers for at last bringing this legacy into the public sphere, 18 and others expressed frustration at having to start at first base even to establish the veracity of the history, 19 for many non-Indigenous Australians, this was a humbling experience. 20 While the groundbreaking historical research of Henry Reynolds had been published a decade earlier, and developed a recognition of the violence of colonisation which had been argued in Australian history since the 1970s, many of the guestbook entries by non-Indigenous Australians register a sense of shock and distress at the revelation of a history they never knew – at recognising the utter brutality of the early dispossession, and the continuing policies of cultural decimation which extended well into this century. A commonly-repeated refrain was: 'why weren't we told this', a sense of having been kept in the dark, a shock and anger at the negligence by omission of Australian school curricula, and a longing for redress. As a document, the program threw down the gauntlet to generations of uninformed or indifferent Australians to look this history in the eye, and deal with its implications:

Can we not respond to the horrific history of our nation, as portrayed in *Frontier* ... with recognition, grief, compassion, and a determination to ensure that our future will be different? 21

Given my own admiration for *Frontier*, its topicality, and its obvious impact on many viewers, I was taken aback when, during a screening of part of the program to a group of young undergraduate students, many of this audience were totally unmoved, bored, and several simply walked out. The only explanation offered for this indifference was that the program was 'textbookish'. Was this response due to a disregard for the historical material, an active antagonism even to its subject, was it a response to the textual strategies of the program, sparse and restrained, or was it a reluctance to engage with classical documentary form? Some of this audience were clearly reluctant to engage with Australian history – the same audience, however, when screened segments of *Dhuway*, a film which recounts the historical background to the land claims of the Yithiwarra people in Cape York, were much more interested and engaged. 22 The Aboriginal voices in *Dhuway*, framed as personal stories, elicited an emotional connection with this audience, and evoked a willingness to look at Aboriginal accounts of Australian history.

How then to explain the indifference of the younger student audience to *Frontier*? Was it targeted to an older demographic, and not to this younger audience of
commercial television consumers? Apparently not, given its marketing as an educational package with CD-Rom, school kits, etc. Was it this very educational format that lent it an alienating and impenetrable air to this young audience—the distanced and impersonal tone, perceived as didacticism—the very 'modulation' that so many respondents commended? Was it the principles of construction deriving from ideas of objectivity and the burden of proof pertaining to history as a discipline, rather than to television as a medium, adhering to all of the traditional criteria of quality historical documentary, with its conventional use of sound and image, but perhaps not catering to the needs, viewing practices, attention spans of young audiences?

The techniques used by Frontier to dramatise its historical account are restrained, pared back, limited to a set of recurrent motifs: the faces and voices of actors reciting the accounts of the colonial writers; colonial illustrations and paintings from the period and towards the last episode some photographs and live archival footage; recurrent shots of land; serious, melancholy music and the voice of the narrator—the overarching presence which pulls the disparate elements into the ongoing flow of the historical narrative. Through these motifs we see the Waterloo Creek massacre of 1838: light flickers through the trees, birds are startled and take flight, kangaroos flee, the land is animated through rapid camera tracking shots to simulate pursuit through the long grasses and swamps, and colonial drawings of the conflict are interspersed with the voices of the actors performing the testimonies of the pursuers and those of moral condemnation, drawn from diary and court entries. The fabric produced by the combination of these minimal devices of dramatisation is marked by an audio-visual sparseness and a minimalist commentary, which to some of the guestbook respondents signified a commendable restraint and therefore, neutrality, but to some young students a lack of audiovisual sophistication or appeal.

Why would it matter how the program uses its audiovisual medium? To some the history speaks for itself—and certainly there are moments when the sheer weight of the material grips the spectator—moments of emotional density which cut through any thinness of the textual layers. This is presumably the assumption of the program's format—to render the techniques transparent, to leave the story to tell itself—that the history itself should carry the spectator in. In a history that is, of necessity, so dominated by the written word, what other options may there have been?

There is no doubt that the production formats and genres of television conflict in significant ways with the imperatives of sustained, 'objective' and persuasive argument that channel the production and writing modes of historical research. What happens when these two modes converge in historical documentaries made for television? Whether broadcast on commercial television or public broadcasters, this televised history is still subject to the vagaries of a television audience and must devise strategies to appeal to an audience for whom TV viewing is expected to be at least as much entertaining as it is informative. While addressing the traditional criteria for credibility may grant a program legitimacy or authenticity in relation to the historical sources, how does this deferral to a regime of authority address the dynamics of spectatorship?

The shifting ground of credibility

The reception of Frontier and the strategies it uses in its address to its audience must be evaluated in relation to the shifting terrain of criteria for credibility, and their relation to transformations in the packaging of entertainment and information. The progressive marginalisation of Enlightenment modes of authority as a guarantee of
credibility is a tendency much discussed in the context of contemporary culture, particularly in its impact on media such as television. Margaret Morse has examined this process in the context of television news, outlining '[a] shift that has occurred in the balance between objective and subjective modes of the construction of the news'.23 Here she argues that older modes of address relied for their authority and credibility on modes of narration, style and content which suppressed the subjective origin of the news story in favour of a reality which seemed to possess a voice of its own: '[t]he Word and the Image were able to assume objective authority because of the separation of the speaker from the message ...'.24 Morse discusses the ways in which TV news is growing out of this mode of 'story' to displace it with discourse: '... no longer a report issuing from apparently anonymous processes, television news appears to emanate from a limited and well-defined set of familiar subjects'.25

These rhetorical modes which are being superseded or marginalised in the presentation of TV news derive clearly from the same sources as do the 'objective' modes of documentary, and the challenges to traditional structures of authority which Morse explores form the same socio-cultural context within which documentary is received. While it could be argued that this collapse of the legitimising foundations of the 'objective' mode renders the documentary form progressively peripheral, or even obsolete, Morse's discussion suggests, rather, a reframing of the terms of documentary.

In so far as the tropes that legitimise traditional documentary demand a deferral to a higher arbiter – the conventions of objectivity – the experience of reception is supposed to be or assumed to be deflected away from an embodied viewing towards a detached judgement. The increasing displacement of this mode by more 'subjective' modes demands a coming-to-terms with both other forms of knowledge and authority and a more embodied viewing practice. Morse questions whether this context of increasing reliance on the 'subjective' mode signals a convergence between contemporary media cultures and older, oral forms of communication and story-telling, and argues that in television news this is not the case: '[t]he hybrid news form, a representation which addresses us as discourse, does not herald a return to an "oral" culture, but rather indicates the emergence of new cultural forms and redrawn boundaries of a complex nature'.26

_Dhuway_ – the program that engaged the interest of the student audience – offers an insight into these more complex, hybrid documentary forms. _Dhuway_ is not an archive-based history in the way that _Frontier_ is, as it recounts events in the living memory of its participants and has access to eyewitness accounts of the events it describes. However, it does use archival footage and a historical narrative, but weaves these components into a dynamic, living web in which history and historical evidence are actively inscribed in the lived experience of the people who are telling their stories. The narration itself positions the archival material by filling in the missing historical context, which, often in an interpretive counterpoint, reframes images in the familiar ethnographic style as politically potent documents.26 The resonance of the past is palpable in the present, and the program constantly reinvokes this resonance as it unfolds around the personal accounts of traumatic memories, familial ties, broken and unbroken, and ongoing affinity for the land. While a complex and persuasive history is told, the documentary principle here is not detachment but connection, not a diminution of the importance of experience to an understanding of history but its validation. It is this redrafting of documentary conventions which draws a greater emphasis on personal modes of story-telling, and evokes an embod-
ied, experiential connection with its audience, that engaged this group in a lively and active debate around issues by which they were otherwise unmoved.

**Credibility/history**

In so far as there is a rigidity in the approach to documentary form used by *Frontier*, this rigidity can be seen as a direct correlate of a conception of history which subsumes any sense of an embodied voice into the orthodox methodologies used to establish credibility. The question of credibility is pivotal to assessing both the potency and the limitations of *Frontier*. An understanding of the structures of authority and credibility which underpin this form of historical documentary is inseparable from a consideration of those which underpin conventional historiography – they are coterminous to the extent that each relies on the primacy of the document. Both also rely on a method that has been subject to extensive challenge and renegotiation from within the discipline of history.

Philip Rosen, in his discussion of the persistence of historical concepts in documentary film, recounts the nineteenth century development of history as a professional discipline, whose ascendency as a 'master Western discipline' relied for its claims to validity and authority on a method of historical enquiry which placed at its centre the study of the written document. In the context of historical research, challenges to this archive-based historiography's reliance on written documents have sought to expose its 'emphasis on written accounts of and by elite power and cultural groups', and its limitations have undergone sustained scrutiny in the context of indigenous and colonised peoples. In an Australian context, Indigenous historians, such as Noel Pearson, have challenged the one-sided accounts of history which an archive-based historiography produces:

> Government documents and to a lesser degree, the documents of missionaries and other whites closely involved with Aborigines, only shed light on one side of the story. Any reliance on documentation – as much of the writings in Aboriginal history up until recently have done – will surely be an unbalanced if not largely inaccurate and naive representation of the history.

Even a cursory glance at *Frontier* will show that it is, of course, not a 'balanced' history. In so far as *Frontier* relies on colonial writings for its historical sources, it cannot 'tell both stories', it is inevitably an account of Australia's land wars told from the point of view of the colonists. In watching *Frontier* we come to know these shepherds, squatters and magistrates, to feel their terror and experience the dangers they faced under the pressure-cooker situations of frontier contact. We hear what they committed to the written record through court records, diaries, official reports, newspapers columns replete with references to 'barbarians' and 'heathens'. This history is an account of what these colonists said to each other - a historical account composed largely of white voices.

There are Indigenous voices in *Frontier*, to be sure, though far fewer than those of the white settlers. The few Aboriginal voices that are included are drawn from the records of the colonists, with all the attendant limitations and distortions of selection, translation and interpretation. What place are there for Aboriginal voices in a history which derives as this does from colonial documents? Where the colonists' voices are juxtaposed with those of their Aboriginal contemporaries, the program does recognise that there are two stories to be told here, and yet a juxtaposition does not make a dialogue, rather a sort of composite patchwork – sure, one voice is tested
against another by the juxtaposition, in a sort of montage effect, but this is not the to-and-fro of an active dialogue. There is no point within the program at which Indigenous voices could come in and correct any misrepresentations which derive from the primary source reliance.

How could a program such as this attempt to correct in its own representational strategies a univocity, a favouring of the colonial voice, when that favouring derives from the very historical method which gives the program itself its authority? In so far as Frontier draws on orthodox historical conventions to guarantee its credibility, its method necessitates its framing within the terms of one of the ‘master disciplines’ of Western culture. It could be argued on one hand that this program is in a sense a limit case – using the terms of the ‘master discipline’ to undermine the ‘master histories’ from within. On the other hand, to what extent this historical method itself counters the potential for the program to offer a post-colonial critique is a complex question.

An understanding of the challenges made to conventional historiography is essential if one is to envisage how these challenges could inform the development of new models of cultural dialogue. A dialogic model of history is indeed a central tenet of some of the conceptual revisions within the discipline, which have undermined the claim that a history derived from ‘scrupulous attention to the documentary record’ can be accorded the status of a science. A ‘play of voices’ and interpretations, a ‘contestation of discourses’, are pivotal to a rethinking of the writing of history proposed by historians such as Ann Curthoys and John Docker, in their survey of contemporary approaches to historiography. Drawing on the work of historian Peter Burke, they invoke the Bakhtinian concept of heteroglossia, the understanding of language ‘as varied and opposing voices’, as a heuristic model for the writing of history, in an attempt to ‘escape the pitfalls of a singular, linear, totalising narrative’ intrinsic to the Rankean doctrine of a ‘scientific’ history (37).

There is, to be sure, a play of voices in Frontier, which challenges a monologic approach to history. Staging the early history of the colonies as a dynamic debate between conflicting ethical positions, the program reflects the methodological approach of its primary historical source, Henry Reynolds, who attempts through this play of voices to recover and position the humanitarian trends in white Australian history. It is indeed the jarring collision between the unabashed and defiant voices of the vigilantes and the ashen witness of the humanists which dramatises the blow-by-blow account of atrocities such as the Myall Creek massacre. However, while the montage effect of these voices may highlight the disparity between positions, it leaves unposed questions about, for example, which Indigenous voices find their way into the written record, and how.

Historian Jan Kociumbas writes that ‘the mere juxtaposition of striking images from the sources instead of rigorous analysis of who produced them and why’ undermines potential critiques of colonialist history. The interrogation of history, she argues, must include an analysis of the strategic use to which documents are put in constructing the historical account. In a history which gives credence to these concerns, the excavation of documents may be accompanied by an explicit analysis of the ways in which these documents were produced, and how they feed into a system of power, how the selective processes of record-keeping and preservation establish a complex web which contributes to the ongoing maintenance of that system. Fundamental to this approach is an understanding that there are at least two stories to be told, and that those suppressed and systematically excluded from the record must be acknow-
ledged. In this sense, an intercultural approach to history would not only involve a play of voices within the historical narrative, but also a dialogue with the historical process itself.

**Indigenous histories**

While several of the analyses outlined by Curthoys and Docker look specifically to the narrative structures of historical writing to identify ways in which it constitutes 'a particular Western discourse with its own rules and conventions' (17), many of the interventions made by Indigenous historians look to questions of the ownership of history, to questions of translation, and to the very purpose of the historical inquiry to remould the monocultural parameters of the discipline. It is these challenges which must also be addressed in an evaluation of *Frontier*.

The importance of the historical endeavour to contemporary Indigenous struggles has been affirmed by Deborah Bird Rose, who describes a 'radically intensified ... historical imperative' among Aboriginal people: what she calls 'the will to remember'. Kociumbas has described the 'ongoing battle for ownership of indigenous history' as crucial to this endeavour: 'as Aboriginal historians remind us, the whole issue of the ownership of the past was and is particularly important for Aboriginal people ...' (5). Mudrooroo reiterates the centrality of this question:

'It is our past and only we can write it, for in a sense we need history and it is not 'ours' until we do the writing ourselves, giving importance to those stories which now matter to us.'

An assessment of the ways in which Indigenous voices find their way into the historical record has been an essential problematic in this debate. In the ongoing struggles over historical methods and interpretation, a part of the challenge to archive-based histories has been attempts to give an equal space to other voices such as oral histories, which cannot meet the burden of proof imposed on the more orthodox 'history by documentation'. And yet, the role of oral history/ oral traditions is one of the greatest sites of contestation. A key focus of this reclaiming of history has been a recognition of the ways in which the perspectives of Indigenous peoples are systematically suppressed and distorted in the classical colonial historical accounts based on oral sources.

Indigenous historians have challenged the conventions by which white historiography has translated Indigenous voices into its own discursive forms. The Indigenous Historians' Working party, cited by Pearson, has elaborated this criticism of 'the abuse of the oral form by white people. Oral evidence has been either translated, arranged or sanitised, no explanation of method is given and as evidence it is of questionable authenticity' (116). This inadequacy, in Pearson's account, derives not only from deliberate abuse:

['the lack of understanding of the cultural form of Aboriginal oral history has resulted in the alteration of the structure and form of Aboriginal stories, myths and oral records ... white historians ... have little sensitivity to the more subtle aspects of the cultural form such as nuances of expression, and modes of humour in verbal communication as well as non-verbal communication, sign language and spatial relationships (137).']

Heather Goodall has interpreted this demand for recognition of the cultural specificity of oral communication and the conventions of oral performance as highlighting the need for a much closer analysis of the use of oral sources and of the complex
relationship between oral sources and documentary records. Goodall discusses the ‘well-grounded Aboriginal suspicion of documentary evidence as serving white ends’, arguing that these ‘technicalities will never give a full understanding of the real situation’ (88), but she argues also that oral history testimony is no more transparent than are the written documents. Non-Aboriginal historians, she claims, must ‘[a]sk questions of Aboriginal statements to locate the areas where we, non-Aborigines, need more information to understand what is being said’ (80), and most importantly, that ‘if the non-Aboriginal historian is to proceed at all it must be in dialogue with Aboriginal analysts’ (94).

Pearson also argues the necessity of this type of analysis, and a testing of one story against another to interrogate the historical record:

As a result of the historiographical problems and shortcomings, Aboriginals as well as whites have been brought up with great gaps in their understanding of their past. When the oral tradition is at odds with the historiography, then written history should at least explain the discrepancies if not reconcile them (154).

Not only does Frontier eschew this form of analysis, but the integrity of the Indigenous voices in the program is also potentially undermined by the limitations of the translation process. Aboriginal commentators point out that the specificity of language cannot be underestimated:

What must be remembered is that language is not simply a tool for everyday communication, but through recording of stories, songs, legends, poetry and lore, holds the key to a people’s history and opens the door to cultural and spiritual understanding.37

The assumed monolingualism of the colonists thereby compromises the documenting of oral histories from Indigenous informants which provided the colonial sources for Frontier. The question of translation is not limited just to language, but includes the cultural specificity of historical and story-telling modes. The limitations of the orthodox historiographical method have been decried for the formal strictures they impose on the process of the telling:

Can our mythologies and stories be rewritten into the dry narrative of a history text? Can the uneven branches, twigs and leaves of our Dreaming Tree of life and death gain meaning from being compressed in an account which ignores the spiritual and writes about Us Mob as victims? ...38

Langton confirms the inadequacies implicit in the conventional modes of what she calls ‘a threadbare colonial history’:

... there are many things that are not said in the historical record, and there are many understandings that the historical record cannot say ...39

She reiterates the importance of Aboriginal filmmakers in attempting to remedy some of these gaps, to ‘convey a sense of the past which is not accessible on the record’:

Many Aboriginal films deal overtly with two-way understanding in order to draw attention to those divergences ... [and] go beyond European mythologies based on strict linear temporalities and embracing more encompassing senses of living past consciousness (SFF).

Clearly, Frontier, constrained as it is within its monocultural structures, cannot ‘tell both stories’, and although it may provide the foundations for a meaningful intercultural dialogue, the program cannot encompass this dialogue within its own frame of reference. However, despite the limitations of its traditional historical method,
Langton validates the approach taken by the producers and director of Frontier, on its own terms:

Australians have long denied that Australia has an unforgivable past and there are many people now who deny that the massacres took place ... Increasingly there is this David Irving chant: it didn’t happen, it’s all lies, it’s all exaggerated. It’s tremendously important to show Australians that it’s all set out in the record, it’s all there ... to have the record read to Australians. The record is as important to us as it is to the Simon Wiesenthal Centre (SFF).

Perhaps the strength of Frontier is, in fact, a clear understanding of its aims, its terms and the jurisdiction within which it can legitimately speak. Indeed, how can a program, an historical initiative be postcolonial, before the colonial itself is understood and acknowledged? The virulence unleashed by the exposure of this history across many public forums in the last few years has unveiled the central potency of taboo and denial to the founding myths of Australian national identity. It is in the act of acknowledgment that Frontier’s importance resides, and that its contribution to a politics of reconciliation must be valued. It is the conditions of possibility for an intercultural dialogue that the program seeks to provide.

In Deborah Bird Rose’s account of the oral histories of the Victoria River Downs people in the Northern Territory, the story-telling process is infused with a more powerful and broader communal framework than conventional history: a vehicle not just for truth, but for hope. She writes that ‘their stories are in the humanistic mode which defines history as “the bridge between what humanity has been so far and what we can still hope to make of ourselves” ’ (xxvi). There can be no doubt that Frontier is informed by the same humanist imperative that Rose identifies in the Victoria River people’s act of remembering: ‘to open an understanding of the present which will lead to an altered future’ (xxvi).

Perhaps the limitations of a critique of Frontier can best be understood by reference to the actual contingencies of contemporary political struggle. Pearson writes:

The test of a strategy is not whether it is radical or conservative, but whether it is smart or dumb, and whether it enhances or jeopardises the rights and interests of one’s people.40

Intercultural dialogue

In her 1993 critique of film and video production in Australia, in an attempt to delimit what an ‘ethical postcolonial critique and practice’ in film and television production might be, Langton argues that: ‘[t]he problem of discussing the politics and aesthetics in film and television production by or about Aboriginals lies in the positioning of us as object, and the person behind the camera as subject’ (WIH 39). She cites here the 1993 estimate of a ‘staggering 6,000 films ... made about Aboriginal people’ (WIH 24). Langton discusses three different contexts in which ideas about what constitutes ‘Aboriginality’ are constructed, what she calls ‘three broad categories of cultural and textual construction of “Aboriginality”’ (WIH 34). The first comprises interactions of Aboriginal people with each other within an Aboriginal context, the second, the stereotypes produced by non-Aboriginal people with very little first-hand knowledge of Aboriginal cultures. The third category involves:

... those constructions which are generated when Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people engage in actual dialogue ... It is in these dialogues ... that working models of ‘Aboriginality’ are constructed as ways of seeing Aboriginal people, but both
the Aboriginal subject and the non-Aboriginal subject are participating (WHISH 35).

It is this third context which she proposes has the potential to avoid the construction of Indigenous people, by non-Indigenous people, as object, and which gives rise to the ‘testing of imagined models against each other’ (WHISH 35).

The arguments made in the context of historical research about the necessity of this type of testing of one story or model against another to interrogate the historical record, and the concomitant challenges to the traditional methodologies of history, are equally pertinent to an examination of media methodologies, and demand an interrogation of the ways in which historical assumptions and methods make their way into media forms. Just as the methodologies of history, in particular the discrepancies between a ‘written, linear historiography’ and the ‘nuances and drama of oral communication’ must be taken to task, so should the methodologies and assumptions implicit in contemporary media practice, with an acknowledgement of the omissions and silences which they condone. This analysis must encompass an acknowledgement of the ways in which both past and present modes of representation have constructed non-Indigenous images of Aboriginality, and in the context of media this examination must address not only content but also assumptions about form. It should address ways in which the content of a program may attempt to shed all vestiges of colonialist mentality, and yet the form may be alien to, dismissive of, or ignorant of Aboriginal sensitivities and perspectives.

Just as Kociumbas has argued the limitations of a juxtaposition of images (or voices) without an analysis of their production and strategic use, an interrogation of the sources and their strategic deployment is equally important in the television/documentary form.44 In a program like Frontier, the very method of construction of a history into a narrativized media format encourages a reliance on just such a juxtaposition, the construction of an evocative interplay between the different positions. Kociumbas' call for 'a rigorous analysis of who produced [the sources] and why' is essential here as well, even more so given the often less than critical reflection over methodologies expected of a TV audience. In television documentary, the 'evidence' is presented in a way which is expected to stand on its own—the forum itself assumed to be a neutral one. As long as the image itself is understood, within the production context, as transparent, and displayed illustratively, as evidence, the interrogation of its sources and the conditions of its production remains peripheral. Just as a positivist history relies on the documents included in the historical record, the recycling of these documents into a media format is, by definition, a positivist project. To what extent does this positivist media format stand in for modes of colonial authority without recognising these structures?

While ethnographic documentary has sustained an ongoing critique of some of these issues, in the context of historical documentary these challenges are much less well-articulated and the recourse to supposedly neutral, universal methods much more pervasive, entrenched and less scrutinised. In the context of documentary film or television, what constitutes the texts of historical analysis, the sources to be read, deciphered? Surely the form of documentary is one of these surfaces to be unpicked, a surface which registers a set of values, assumptions, knowledges and omissions.

In the case of Frontier, one of the most crucial issues here is an analysis of its assumptions about 'objectivity' and restraint. What is the purpose of restraint in documentary? It is conceived as the polar opposite to melodrama: a form which is propelled by knowledge, by the weight of facts, rather than by the compulsion of
emotional identification or investment: cold and hot are the poles of these two. Does this then assume that audiences of documentary are by necessity distant, detached, analytical – and what are the assumptions of filmmakers who attempt to engage audiences in this way? What is the role of the detached analytical viewer in the contemplation of a history of violence, inhumanity and degradation? Why is it that the impassioned voice, the embodied voice has so little credence in the historical account? We as spectators occupy a position and these positions are marked out by exposure, experience, knowledge. History is written on the body, the psyche, and not only on the paper.

**Documentary/spectatorship**

In a documentary such as *Frontier*, the question of who produced or recorded the diary or archival entries, and for what purpose, marginalised enough in the historical project, pales in the reception context by comparison to the physical presence of the image and sound, and the dynamics of spectatorship which work towards an engagement with them. In a contemporary context, it is not appropriate, perhaps, to argue that the documentary form has become redundant or obsolete, but rather that it has been re-inscribed within a contemporary audiovisual culture in which the power and fascination of the image and sound supersede the previous structures of narrational authority and authoritative information. In documentary film, both archival image and sound text as artefact are re-rendered as spectacle, and become the bearer for this fascination. How is it possible to intervene, within this experiential nexus, with an interrogation of the sources of images and texts? In *Frontier*, any attempt to do this would run the risk of merely introducing a greater didacticism.

As a television documentary, *Frontier* finds itself at the crux of complex historical processes, which confirm Michael Renov’s assertion that the ‘cycles or styles of [the documentary film or television program] are historically and ideologically contingent’.⁴² From a consideration of the *Frontier* guestbook responses, and the reactions of the student audience, the audience for *Frontier* could be seen as split between at least two constituencies, partly coinciding with generational shifts, each with radically different expectations and demands: we have one audience requiring the mode of anonymous sources and legitimising structures of authority, and another, indifferent to these structures and unwilling to engage with material which does not address them in more direct and personal ways. On the one hand, the critique of the traditional sources of authority in scholarly historical research has not reached the popular in a sustained enough way to revoke the popular assumptions about credibility held by the generation inculcated in this tradition. On the other hand, transformations in the dynamics of popular spectatorship, which render outmoded the legitimising structures of traditional documentary form, and require different modes of address to a younger audience, have not been adequately appraised by documentary makers.

Where the challenges to the heritage of positivist history demand a more rigorous interrogation of the historical sources, in other words a more critical, analytical approach to the constituent materials of the historical documentary, the dynamics of contemporary spectatorship demand more attention to the dynamics of presentation, to modes of address, to the pleasures and fascinations of the viewing moment. It is this complex redrawing of terms and boundaries which Morse has examined, the shifting and reshaping of the criteria for credibility and for spectator engagement,
that needs to be addressed more actively in the critical analysis of the terms of documentary discourse and their application in the programs produced.

This conflict between credibility and pleasure is, on the one hand, a binarism that goes back to the beginnings of documentary and its roots in what Renov describes as the Enlightenment schism between science and art, between truth and beauty. And yet, the assumptions of this schism are nowhere more obvious than in the form of documentary film. Renov writes that ‘a view of documentary which assumes too great a sobriety for nonfiction discourse will fail to comprehend the sources of nonfiction’s deep-seated appeal’ (3), and asserts that ‘the pleasures of nonfiction are every bit as complex as those which have been attributed to fictional forms and far less understood’ (6). Even the most conventional documentary form does provide pleasures for its audience. While it would be far too simplistic to define these pleasures as simply epistemophilia, an exploration of this question would have to acknowledge the pleasures which attach to its ‘truth effects’, and the orchestration of the fictive elements in documentary into the process of the ‘getting of knowledge’. Renov writes: ‘it is not that documentary consists of the structures of filmic fiction ... as it is that “fictive” elements insist in documentary as in all film forms (16) ... documentary style, structure, and expositional strategy, he claims, “are as tropic and figurative as their fictional counterparts” (198).43

The assumptions of the neutrality and objectivity of documentary form have been dismantled, on a theoretical level, since the structuralist debates of the 1970s, with claims that this ‘objectivity’ is itself a fiction.44 In a contemporary reframing of this debate, this challenge has been extended to a displacement of the assumptions of universalism:

If knowledge arises, in large part from subjective, embodied experience, to what extent can it be represented by impersonal and disembodied language? ... Specificity invokes a realm of embodied knowledge and situated activity. It implies an opposition to the still prevalent documentary tradition favoring disembodied knowledge ... It is no coincidence that the attempt to give witness to personal, subjective experience rather than categorical knowledge coincides with an increased reliance on the techniques of fiction in documentary.45

A closer analysis of the textual strategies of Frontier dismantles any illusion that the program, in its mode of presentation, is neutral, and reveals both some of its fictive structures and ways in which the spectatorial positions which it presents are embodied.

Clearly Frontier does not provide the specular plentitude which is characteristic of a more popular mode of address. The visual montage, despite the wealth of visual material which it presents, is often two-dimensional, austere even; the placing of actors in mid-shot to the side of frame, usually dressed in black, in stark theatrical lighting, is repetitive and highly stylised; their statements direct to camera, and their naming of the person whose voice they are reciting mitigate against any character identification. All of these elements coalesce to produce a sense of coldness, a detachment which in a sense deflects the experiential expectations of the spectator away from the image and onto the sound text: in many respects the program could be conceived as a sound piece with illustration.

Despite this work of deflection, the results of these strategies cannot be understood within a classical model of distanciation and self-reflexivity. It is important to recognise that, to some spectators, the rigours of this mode of address are themselves
a source of invigoration and pleasure. And, regardless of the minimalism of the
textual strategies of the image, it is still viewed within a specular regime, even if
vestigially. The well-known Australian actors, described in the publicity material as
‘a cavalcade of Australia’s acting elite’, can only have been selected for their iconic
status in Australian popular culture. Despite the alienation that the stylised presen-
tation of the actors may bring into play, and the recoil that the sound texts themselves
can evoke, the very familiarity of the actors and the direct address to camera provide
an identifiable locus for an Australian audience, a linchpin for the experience of
the spectator. Even though the moving performances by the less familiar Aboriginal
actors can provide a point of identification, this is not bolstered by the weight of
popular culture to the same extent as it is with the white actors, familiar as they are
from across the spectrum of Australian media, from TV cop shows to mainstream
Australian cinema.

Furthermore, the illustrative material is embedded within a colonial perspective, as
in the drawing of the pursuit and shooting of the Barkindji people in 1837, recorded
by Thomas Mitchell, one of the participants in the massacre, or the observational
drawings of Aboriginal ‘types’, such as the ‘Portrait of Mororé’. And even while
the mobile camera simulates point-of-view, and the sound text works on generating
a sense of country steeped in layers of history, the absence of human figures and the
detachment of the presentation renders the land inanimate: land becomes landscape.
*Frontier* privileges, even if by default, an audience engagement with non-Aboriginal
perspectives.

Despite the pared-back visual mode of its construction, the tone of its statements,
the cadences and resonance of its articulation give the sound text an emotionality
that positions it for its audience. While the voices of brutality may shock the
contemporary audience, the voices of conscience, of ethics, are often redolent with
a sort of wistful regret or unease – disgust and anguish among them to be sure, but
often a more muted sense of moral unease, disapprobrium. The musical accompani-
ment and sound effects give the program a tone, a timbre, which could only be
described as melancholy – the music melds the composite effect into a work of
mourning. This is not the anger of political activism nor the strident voice of political
demand, but a retrospective incantation of a kind of regret. What after all is the voice
of conscience? An expression of outrage, a cry of helplessness, perhaps, but not
necessarily a public outcry – this is a voice which may be kept private, a ‘whispering
in our hearts’.

**Intercultural dialogue: masquerade**

If the juxtaposition of voices undertaken by *Frontier* is structured within a monocul-
tural framework, what would constitute an intercultural dialogue? Langton’s model
privileges ‘those constructions which are generated when Aboriginal and non-Ab-
original people engage in actual dialogue ... and which [give] rise to the [testing of]
imagined models against each other’(35). In film and television, this dialogue must
involve not just a dialogue in the production process, but also a dialogic structure in
the program form itself.

In 1998, SBS broadcast a public forum on reconciliation which provided a meeting-
point for different views that, in its attempt to establish a dialogue, was unprecedented
in television approaches to black-white relations. Aware of the potential for work
produced by mostly non-indigenous directors and producers to perpetuate the erasure
of the subjectivity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, SBS had produced
a set of guidelines for production of programs relating to Indigenous people, aiming to ensure consultation, inclusion and the recognition of different experience and perspective.\textsuperscript{50} Despite compliance with all of these protocols – the \textit{Insight} reconciliation forum was set up under the auspices of Imparja Television and CAAMA (Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association) and attempted explicitly to set up an intercultural dialogue – to watch this SBS forum is to experience an outcome that is uncannily familiar.

The program brings together Aboriginal community and political leaders, representatives of the stolen children, farmers’ representatives, professional politicians involved in the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation and among this assembly two men in cowboy hats. As the debate proceeds through assertion and argument, one cowboy hat and then another glides into the margins of a frame, bobs up and down under the jutting chin of an avid Liberal defender, a visual but unspoken marker of incongruity, as the conversation bounces from one position to another.

But what does the man in the cowboy hat think?

When eventually, towards the end of the session, one of the two is asked to comment on what he sees as positive signs of reconciliation in the Alice Springs area, he begins to speak, through an interpreter:

In the beginning, this place Australia had its own law and order ... when people moved around in their clans there was a certain law and order applied in those situations. In the encounter with the arriving of the non-Aboriginals it broke that sort of law and order. What they’re seeing now is that the non-Aboriginals should sort of learn the Aboriginal concepts, and vice-versa the Aboriginals learnt about the law and order of the mainstream. So these two law and orders or governing philosophies has to work together in order to pave the future ...\textsuperscript{51}

At this point, just as the speaker begins to warm to the topic, he is cut off by the interviewer:

‘What about some of the rest of you ... ?’

While many of the Aboriginal speakers on this program are well-versed in the cut-and-thrust of political debate, the program constrains the man in the cowboy hat within this most culturally-prescribed of media formats. There is no space here for another form of speech, no opening for a rhetoric which builds on a more complex understanding of history or an oratory which embodies a different sense of the teller than is allowable in the political debate format of brief interjections, political point-scoring and the condensation of the knowledge and experience of a life-time into 60-second sound bites.

Watching the program unfold is to witness what could best be described as the elaborate, albeit unwitting, staging of a silence. The conversation by its very structure excludes the exchange of views in any way which would allow for the exchange of modes of being, of talking – cultural difference is only allowed to be referred to here but cannot have a place as anything other than a marked absence. Within this context, the old ‘cowboy’ brought into the studio and attempting to speak within this discursive regime can only be there to establish a ‘legitimacy effect’, as there is no way that the speaking position which he adopts can be received on its own terms, no way that his voice can be heard within the constraints of this format.\textsuperscript{52} The issue at stake here is a silence made more poignant by a masquerade of ‘giving voice’ – an exclusion made more potent by the appearance of inclusion.

Kociumbas has discussed the limitations of liberalism, focusing attention on liberal
historians whose aim was specifically to ‘redress ... the great Australian silence ... the extraordinary omission of Aboriginal experience from prior scholarly accounts of the nation’s past’ (9). There are many issues at stake in her criticisms of this liberal tradition, but the one pertinent to this discussion is the illusion of inclusivity. While this illusion in the historiographical tradition has come under increasing scrutiny, with its recourse to what Huggins and Saunders have called ‘ethnographic ventriloquism’, the examination of a similar dynamic of mistaken identity in operation in contemporary media, equally informed by liberal tendencies, has barely been discussed in the critical literature.53

In the SBS program, these ‘best intentions’ founder on the implementation of a discursive form which recognises and values only one way of being, one set of experiences in so far as they are represented in modes of speech or discourse. The dialogue is framed within a standard media/ current affairs format, and within assumed models of participation, ‘balance’ and debate which themselves are not negotiable. Not necessarily a deliberate ruse, this model pervades so many ‘well-intentioned’ media programs that it is perhaps hard for audiences or even producers to register the gap or lack. The fundamental principle on which the program is established is a flawed one, in that it does not recognise the cultural specificity of its format, the apparent incommensurability of different modes of speech, the non-universality of its basic assumptions about speech. How can the ‘[testing of] imagined models against each other’ ever be possible, how can an intercultural dialogue be achieved, while this reversion to the universalist models which underpin white culture remains unquestioned?

**Interrogating whiteness**

Clearly, there are limitations in focusing on ‘whiteness’, on ‘white culture’: this focus removes the pressure to ‘tell both stories’, with the challenges that poses to universalist mythologies, and potentially gives rise to what Richard Dyer has called ‘the green light problem’. He argues that, ‘writing about whiteness gives white people the go-ahead to write and talk about what in any case we have always talked about: ourselves ... Putting whiteness on the agenda now might permit a sigh of relief that we white people don’t after all any longer have to take in all this non-white stuff’.54

And yet, in any coming to terms with Australian history, and contemporary Australian culture and politics, the importance of this coming to terms with how whiteness has been constructed cannot be underestimated. As Roberta James argues: ‘[t]he issue is not what makes racist thought and practice aberrant, but what makes it acceptable and legitimate’.55

To what extent is *Frontier* about ‘Aboriginality’? Though certainly it does construct ideas of Aboriginality and reconstruct certain assumptions about the experience of Aboriginal witnesses and participants in the early land wars, this program is more about ‘whiteness’ and ‘white’ history – about exposing the complicity of white settlers on a vast scale in dispossession, massacre, the ‘utterably shameful past’.56

It is the challenge to examine the unquestioned assumptions of whiteness and white culture that Noel Pearson poses as the historical task of white Australians:

It is the hardest thing for older white Australians. The challenge of coming to terms with our history is the hardest for your generation ... It is the hardest because you people have gone through the history of assimilation policies, of *terra nullius*, of the denial of the humanity of Aboriginal people. The goodwill and
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paternalism and the desire for the greater good for indigenous peoples – these are all part of the troubling emotions which your generation must come to account.57

Silence/taboo

After watching Frontier, I ask my father whether there were any Aboriginal people in the small country town where he grew up. Out the back of Maitland on the Lower Hunter, Weston was a small coal mining town established in the 1920s, by newly arrived coal miners from the north of England.

No, he says, they wouldn’t want to live there – there’s nothing there.

Swamp Creek the area was called, when it was first surveyed and mapped to facilitate its carving up for the great land grab up the Hunter in the 1820s. I look at a map of the town, and sure enough it’s built on a swamp – plenty of water, but maybe too many mosquitoes? I become fascinated by the map of the locality, totally crisscrossed with creeks and swamps, and with town names that reflect the inundations of settlers from England, Scotland and Wales – Pelaw Main, Stanford Merthyr, Heddon Greta, Abermain, Aberdare, along with the usual marks of the cartographer’s deference to the landed gentry: Bishops Hill, Gibsons Road, Sawyers Gully, Wallis Creek. And yet – the town right next to Weston, only a kilometre away, is called Kurri Kurri – the council welcome sign at the town entrance gives the game away: ‘Kurri Kurri: Awabakal word meaning “The First Man”’. I look more closely at the map – within 2 kilometres from Weston, Black Waterholes Creek. Another few kilometres, Native Dog Hill – and further afield, Nulkaba – faint traces, but traces all the same.58

I start to search for records, scouring old letters, explorers’ journals, surveyors’ reports, newspaper citations.

A letter, 30 July 1824, from Thomas Blomfield on his property only a few kilometres from Swamp Creek: ‘I hope the natives in my part of the country will not get troublesome; they are very numerous, and very useful and quiet’.59 I find there is a land claim on an area of Crown Land just south-east of Weston. I speak to a Wonnarua man from the local Mindaribba Land Council, asking him about Weston.60 Good area, he says, plenty of food sources because of the swamps and creeks.

I ask my old uncle who came to Weston as a 16-year old coal miner in 1924, if there were any Aboriginal people in Weston when he was a young man – no, he says, never had been.

I am compelled by the idea of parallel universes. That I may live in one universe and my neighbour in an entirely different one. I am compelled by my own unwitting complicity in the maintenance of systems of abuse and denial of which I do not even know, by the idea that I am in fact the beneficiary of these systems which go beyond the time of my birth or that of my grandparents but which have assured their descendants a share in the spoils. I am compelled by the regime of silence that maintains this system, and by the realisation that to speak this knowledge is to breach the greatest taboo.

I ask my father again, if he’s sure there were no Aboriginal people in Weston when he was a kid.

No, he says ... oh, except your aunt.61
Epilogue

In 1998, Langton reassessed her aspirations for a postcolonial Australia:

In reconsidering this history I have come to the conclusion that I was naive to expect that settler Australians enculturated as racists and loyal to a conception of their nation-state founded in racism would easily renounce their supremacy and centrality in the nationalist narratives, to permit pluralism and tolerance. The psychological shift required remains the task of a small minority of liberal intellectuals who are now castigated by governments as were the humanitarians of the 18th and 19th centuries in Australia (SFF).

To read these lines, to feel their full resonance, is to feel the full measure of the damage done to the process of reconciliation by the racist backlash which erupted into the public forum so dramatically in 1997–8 and which has seen an elected member of Parliament advocate publicly a return to slave labour for Aboriginal people on pastoralists’ properties.52

In reflecting back on her 1993 writings on the politics of Aboriginal representation, and, by implication, on the propositions she offered for an ‘ethical, postcolonial critique’ produced by non-indigenous film makers and cultural workers, which would ‘[expand] the trope of colonial representation beyond the stereotype’, Langton reaffirms the crucial importance of, but the constraints on, this site of struggle:

The “race debate” of the last three years has jolted me – and others – into less complacency about the importance of these issues. Aboriginal otherness remains central to debates about cultural identity in a country redefining its nationality; but the waterhole has been poisoned. Now the nation defines itself against the Native Title and Reconciliation agenda. The bitterness of the rural white backlash in their rage of downward envy has removed the many possibilities which were available then to move onto matters of sensuality, intercultural discourses which enriched our humanity, and the love of landscape and place which might come about through such discourses.63

What place then for those cultural workers caught up in the desire for a greater understanding of Australian history, spurred on by programs such as Frontier? What place for the redemptive impulse propelling this search for a postcolonial position, nurtured by what Langton describes as the ‘reconciliation metaphor [of] healing the cicatrices’ (SFF). On one hand, as Langton claims so eloquently, the space has closed or narrowed, there is less room to manoeuvre – and as she points out, the importance of the debate about representation becomes more urgent, just at the time that the radical limitations of what it can achieve become manifest: the political stakes of representation become higher just as the potency of other forces to push the agenda in reverse increases. And any attempt on the part of non-indigenous people to focus solely on representation, despite the realities of political struggle in other arenas, could lead to the most naive extremes of liberal evisceration of the push for reconciliation.

In its excavation of white history, of the documents through which white Australian identities were forged, one of the contributions of Frontier to a contemporary anti-racist movement is its exposure of another speaking position – its demonstration that there has always been an anti-racist critique – a voice of dissent. By bringing these voices to the fore Frontier has posited an intellectual and emotional home, a role model, a symbolic site for an ethical, postcolonial critique. As Reynolds claims, ‘it’s important at this stage to let Australians know that there has been this tradition
of moral courage". Perhaps, in the final analysis, this is the achievement of Frontier – to take what was in the 18th and 19th centuries but a whisper, and amplify it into a strong and articulate voice.

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This paper is dedicated to my Aunt Myrtle in recognition that she did, in fact, exist.

Notes
1. Marcia Langton, 'Well, I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television ...' (Sydney: Australian Film Commission, 1993). Further references are included as (W)H within the text.
2. These Coalition government moves included attempts to undermine the financial underpinnings of self-determination with cuts to its funding of ATSIC (the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission), attempts to dismember the High Court’s findings in the Wik case and culminated in an argument that it is acceptable to produce legislation that breaches the Anti-Discrimination Act. In March, 1999, the United Nations race discrimination committee ‘found the Wik law in breach of Australia’s international pledges not to discriminate racially’. Sydney Morning Herald (SMH) 20/3/99, p. 1.
4. The public mobilisation in favour of native title mobilisation was also accompanied by unprecedented public outpourings of emotion in response to the inquiry into the stolen generations, the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families.
5. Produced and directed by Bruce Belsham, and written by Bruce Belsham and Victoria Pitt, Frontier covers the period from 1788–1938.
6. See Frontier Online: www.abc.net.au/frontier (henceforth FO): ‘A national forum for discussing “White Australia’s” forgotten war’. The producers write on their website that ‘Frontier Online’ sets out to link the historical events portrayed in Frontier, the ABC-TV’s documentary series on Australia’s 150 year land war, to the contemporary debate on national reconciliation’. It is described by the producers as ‘the first time Australian audiences are being asked to participate in a national forum on the internet ... the vision of “Frontier Online” is to harness the connectiveness of the internet to provide a place where Australians can be a part of the national reconciliation process’.
7. The program publicity cites two years of research invested in the production, and one of its key sources, Henry Reynolds, Frontier: Aborigines, settlers and land (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1987).
8. For a precise summation of both the pastoralists’ and the Indigenous responses to the Wik case and the Native Title Act, see Michael Bachelard, The Great Land Grab (Melbourne: Hyland House, 1997); also The Wik Summit Papers (Cairns: Cape York Land Council, 1997), and for Aboriginal perspectives on land, Our land is our life: land rights – past, present and future, ed. by Galaruway Yunupingu (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1997).
10. See Richard Hall: Black Armband Days: Truth from the dark side of Australia’s Past (Sydney: Vintage, 1998), for an explanation of this metaphor. The scepticism towards this challenge persists despite the prediction of the Australian anthropologist, W.E.H. Stanner, as early as the 1960s, that ‘the great Australian silence would not survive the research that is now in its course’, quoted in Bain Attwood, In the Age of Mabo (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1996), p. xv. For an extended discussion of the new Australian history, which has worked for three decades to overturn this silence, see Attwood.
12. Langton here is responding to a viewer who was disappointed at the exclusion of the story of the Aboriginal resistance fighter, Pemulwuy. Second live forum, as above, 13/3/97.


15. As Linda Burney, president of the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, says in the first live forum: ‘The history that is told in Frontier is undeniable — it comes from documentary records, from the mouths of the colonial administrators themselves’, first live forum, as above 6/3/97.


17. Over 300 entries were recorded in the guestbook on the Frontier web site, as above.

18. See for instance: Cheryl Moodai Robinson: ‘At long last I am able to say to my grandmother in spirit, that her efforts of survival and protection of her children were not in vain. Australia is finally opening up to the TRUTH.’ GB: 8/3/97: 13:33:08.

19. See, for instance: Vic Hart: ‘how long will we have to tell the story... how long will they tell the story to themselves ...’ GB: 6/3/97: 22:27:04.

20. cf. Marcus Westbury: ‘I was struck by a sinking feeling of watching the missing pages from my history books and realising that they were more brutal and tragic than I had ever let myself contemplate. It is a tragic indictment [sic] that this history is new to me’. GB: 5/3/97: 21:55:41.


22. Dhuway, produced by Noel Pearson & Lew Griffiths, directed by Griffiths and presented by Pearson, Indigenous lawyer, historian and native title negotiator. While some of this audience said they knew it all from studying history in high school, they were not, however, able to name even a single Indigenous language or tribal group – characteristically, they did not see any relevance to their own lives.


24. Morse, p. 57.

25. Morse, p. 57.

26. For example, the ethnographic images of men fishing and in outrigger canoes which in their original context would function as ‘timeless’ documents of material culture, are here reinscribed within the historical narrative of the inhabitation of Cape Melville by ‘countless generations’ being brutally disrupted by colonialism; and ‘picturesque’ footage of pearl luggers and beche-de-mer divers is framed within the accounts of the exploitation and deaths-at-sea of the individual family members of those telling their personal stories.


28. Rosen, p. 68. Heather Goodall, for example, has pointed out the ‘almost total absence of Aboriginal voices’ in Australian history in the mid–70s, arguing that this was ‘not because Aborigines had nothing to say, but because of their structural exclusion from access to the means to influence that dominant history’. Heather Goodall, ‘Aboriginal history and the politics of information control’, in Memories and Dreams: Reflections on twentieth-century
Australia, ed. by Richard White and Penny Russell (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1997), p. 78. (Further references to Goodall are included within the text).


32. Kociumbas, ‘Structure, Agency and Ownership in Aboriginal History’, in Kociumbas (ed), p. 33. (Further references are included within the text). Here, Kociumbas is challenging post-structuralist approaches to history, and, by implication, highlights the potential inadequacies inherent in a method which privileges an interplay of voices but not a rigorous analysis of those voices.

33. For an example of the type of analysis that Kociumbas proposes, see Diane Bell, Xgarrin wyjaarrinjerry Warrawarrin: A world that is was, and will be (Melbourne: Spinifex, 1998); also Goodall, 1997, previously cited.


35. Mudurooro. Us Mob: History, Culture, Struggle: An Introduction to Indigenous Australia (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1995), pp. 175–178. This importance is reiterated in the live forums accompanying Frontier. See for instance comments by Linda Borney: ‘Essentially in this country history has been written by the conqueror. It’s crucial for us to grow together as a nation. We must know the whole history of this country and therefore understand each other better’, second live forum, 13/3/97; and also Walter Saunders, Australian Film Commission: ‘Australia remembering and accepting its true past will not bring one of my massacred forefathers back or give one of the stolen generation their life back. But the recognition of the true history of Australia is symbolic’, second live forum, at above. See also Bain Attwood, xxii ff.

Even within the bastion of traditional historiography – the archive – ownership of and access to resources on Indigenous history has been contentious. Murri academic Henrietta Forumile writes that even the colonial or bureaucratic documents and archives that survive in relation to Indigenous people are often not accessible to those very people to write their own archive-based histories:

‘This lack of our collections of books, documents, and records constitutes a severe impediment in our quest to make and pass on our own history ... The net effect of the lack of our own cultural and historical resources and the difficulties of access to those that exist elsewhere is to foster our dependence on non-Indigenous specialists in law, history, anthropology, education and in Aboriginal affairs generally’. Bringing them home: report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families (Sydney: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997), p. 354 (hereafter BTH).

36. The cultural violence that ensues from this mistranslation has been highlighted by Kociumbas: ‘Translating this kind of history into a written, linear document is itself a kind of violence, codifying Aboriginal knowledge into a commodity or resource which is both subsumed into the culture of the researcher and sold back to the indigenous people as their own’, (6). She here cites Jackie Huggins & K. Saunders, ‘Defying the Ethnographic Ventilquists: Race, Gender and the Legacies of Colonialism’, Lilith, 8 (1993), 67.

37. BTH, p. 299: ATSIC Aboriginal language submission. The central importance of language is reiterated elsewhere in the submissions to BTH. ‘Our languages provide more than just a way to talk to each other. They provide a way for us to interpret the reality we see around
us. The words we use to name things, to describe feelings, understandings and each other, carry particular meanings to us. If we lose these words, we lose a part of ourselves’, p. 299: Kimberley Language Resource Centre submission.


James Miller, author of Koori Will to Win, has argued that as an Indigenous historian writing in the 1970s and 80s, the established methodology of the discipline required that he cite many non-indigenous writings, and write in a structure acceptable to non-Aboriginal people, for the work to be validated and published as a credible history. He has strongly argued the need for academic history to take on more Aboriginal ways of recording Aboriginal history, and has talked about current moves by Aboriginal people to establish their own research methodologies and to establish resources which are written from an Aboriginal perspective. Slip, Slidin’ away, seminar held as part of Paperbark, The Festival of the Dreaming, State Library of NSW, 1999/97. See James Miller, Koori Will to Win: The Heroic Resistance, Survival and Triumph of Black Australia (London, Sydney & Melbourne: Angus & Robertson, 1985).

39. Marcia Langton, 1998 Sydney Film Festival: Ian McPherson lecture. (Further references are included as (SFF) within the text).


41. Goodall extends this analysis specifically to the use of oral history accounts in visual media: ‘There is a danger in exhibitions, films or history-writing where the power of the eye-witness account is sought for its evocative descriptive impact, but where these witnesses are denied the opportunity to make reflective analytical statements’, Heather Goodall, ‘Working with history: experiments in Aboriginal history and Hypermedia’, in UTS Review, 2:1, (1996), 43–57, p. 52.

42. Michael Renov, ‘Toward a Poetics of Documentary’, in Renov (ed), p. 19. (Further references are included within the text).

43. Renov includes ‘character “construction”; poetic language; emotionalizing narration or musical accompaniment; ‘embedded’ narratives; dramatic arcs; the exaggeration of camera angles, distance, or editing rhythms’ (198).

44. Renov quotes Roland Barthes in this context: At the level of discourse, objectivity, or the absence of any clues to the narrator, turns out to be a particular form of fiction, the result of what might be called the referential illusion, where the historian tries to give the impression that the referent is speaking for itself. Renov, p.27.


46. These actors include Bradley Byquar, Bill Hunter, Rachel Maza, Barry Otto, Geoffrey Rush, Richard Roxburgh, Pamela Rabe, Noah Taylor, Hugo Weaving. A friend who found this panoply of stars a disturbing distraction from the intentions of the program said, ‘it was like watching the Logies’.


48. Drawn from the title of Henry Reynolds’ book, This Whispering in Our Hearts (Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1998). This refers to a public lecture delivered in Sydney by barrister, Richard Windeyer, in 1842, which ‘was meant to be a demolition of the rights of Australia’s original inhabitants, but ended with a question, the acknowledgement of a troubled conscience ... “How is it our minds are not satisfied? ... What means this whispering in our hearts?” ’, Reynolds, 1988, p. 21.

49. Special Broadcasting Service, Insight on Reconciliation, hosted by Vivien Schenke, 21/5/98.
50. Lester Bostock, *The Greater Perspective: Protocol and Guidelines for the Production of Film and Television on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities* (Sydney: SBS, 1997), p. 9. These include:

1. Program makers should be aware of and challenge their own prejudices, stereotyped beliefs and perceptions about indigenous people.
2. An Aboriginal view of indigenous issues may vary from a non-indigenous one.
3. Where non-indigenous people produce programs on indigenous people they should do so in consultation with indigenous people, particularly with those who are the subject(s) of the program.

51. Davey Inkatula, West Arrente Elder.

52. The two men in cowboy hats may not actually be stockmen, but their style could be described as 'cowboy style'.


55. Roberta James, in Cowlishaw & Morris (eds.), p. 166.


58. As Tony Birčić points out, this may be simply 'an imperialist nostalgia ... for the colonists to attach a "native" name to a place does not represent or recognise an indigenous history, and therefore possible ownership'. Birčić, 1997, p. 18.


60. The Wonnarua people are the traditional owners of the area.

61. The uneasy persistence of denial across vast networks of Australian culture surely remains one of the most bewildering questions to be unravelled in contemporary Australian cultures. This has been explored in greater depth by other writers. For an exploration of the dynamics of this denial in a detailed historical context, see Rebe Taylor's case study of memory and forgetting in communal relationships on Kangaroo Island, Rebe Taylor, ' "All I Know is History": Memory and Land Ownership in the Dudley District, Kangaroo Island', *UTS Review*, 5:1, 1999. Deborah Bird Rose writes: 'whether denial takes the form of strident refusal or the more subtle form of blank indifference, the result is the same: the past is concealed, and the living become accomplices in the continuations of injustice'. Rose, 1991.

63. *SMH* 21/9/98: Qld One Nation MP, Jeff Knuth.

65. I would like to thank Kajri Jain, Laleen Jayamanne and Sinead Roarty who have all given very insightful analytical comments and editorial suggestions on various drafts of this paper. I also wish to thank the two anonymous *UTS Review* readers for their detailed and constructive responses, and Meaghan Morris for incisive editorial contributions.

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‘Garin Nugroho: Didong, Cinema and the Embodiment of Politics in Cultural Form.’

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<www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/17/poet.html>

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Garin Nugroho: didong, cinema and the embodiment of politics in cultural form

“. . . chopped up at the blink of an eye, whether relatives or friends, cleared out completely . . .” (Bowen 207).

These lines, quoted from a performance staged in 1978 to applaud the achievements of the Suharto regime, celebrate the massacre of between 500,000 and 2 million people that clinched the victory of Suharto’s forces in purging Indonesia of communists in 1965. Under Suharto’s program of the civic function of the army, strategies of control and intimidation infiltrated onto the micro-level of daily life and cultural activity. The recruitment of the popular form of didong, the sung poetic duels renowned among the Gayo people of central Aceh, as a tool of the New Order, exemplifies this pervasive influence. John Bowen, the scholar of Sumatran poetics and politics who quotes these lines, has documented how, as the army spread its tentacles in the 1960s and 1970s down into the grassroots of local cultures, local government recognised that a popular art form such as didong could become a dangerous tool of dissent. Didong had evolved through the middle of the 20th century from a folk form into a tool for engaging the modern world in a popular idiom, a form characterised by humour and word-play which used the veiled language of metaphor as a vehicle for incisive political criticism. Bowen traces the attempts by the central government under Suharto to counter this potential threat by enlisting didong in its service. Despite the “distaste” that, according to Bowen, many Gayo felt on hearing these lines, their framing within the poetic form of a didong performance provided a potent mnemonic device to keep an awareness of the price of dissent vividly in the popular imagination.

It is no accident that A Poet: Unconcealed Poetry (Puisi Tak Terkuburkan), the first Indonesian film to revisit the 1965 massacres, works back up from the grassroots of didong to reclaim this history, to give testimony to the trauma of those who lived through it. As a work of mourning, A Poet, directed by Garin Nugroho, affirms the other tradition of didong—the powerful humanist tradition of a poetic form for emotional expression which “gives dignity to humanity” (SAPFF). The film starts from the ballads of didong poet, Ibrahim Kadir, an eyewitness to the massacres of 1965 who plays himself in the film, and works with many non-professional actors from the Takengon area of central Aceh who also experienced the events and whose relatives and friends were among the victims. Far from the callous gloating of the
1978 performance, accounts of the production of *A Poet* tell of a process of filming marked by tears and grieving (SAPFF).

The difficulties of making a film that could do justice to the scale, the enormity of the trauma of 1965 must have been a daunting task to the crew of *A Poet*. Facts, statistics or chronologies could never measure the scars left on a community, a culture, by such a history. The solution Nugroho has found to this challenge is to work on the smallest scale, to focus on the raw experience of a few dozen people caught in the mesh of the rampaging army—rice farmers, fishermen, housewives, mothers. The film revolves around the memories of Kadir, arrested at the height of the massacre and held in custody for 28 days before being released, and follows the inmates of two cells as they struggle to make sense of what is happening and to keep a sense of their own humanity even as they await execution.

The Indonesian title of the film, *Puisi Tak Terkuburkan*, means poetry cannot be buried, cannot be surrendered to the grave. The English translation, *A Poet: Unconcealed Poetry*, acts almost as a euphemism as it misses the vital link to the earth, grounded in the knowledge in an agrarian culture of the gritty reality of bodies consigned to the earth. Indeed, the fragile physicality of bodies is ever-present in *A Poet*. The space of the film is the space of incarceration, shot entirely inside two prison cells and the guard’s foyer, a murky amorphous space shot in low resolution, black and white digital video. Fear seeps out of the dingy, musty cell walls—a palpable, all-pervasive fear amplified by the claustrophobia of the camera which pries into tightly crammed corners filled with sleeping bodies, pins people against the cell walls and creeps listlessly in close-up across the startled eyes and clenched faces of prisoners waiting to learn of their fate.

The sound of the film, as if in contest with the tight, rigid, closed-in space, is fluid, mobile—a vehicle of transport—both tugging us in to the space of terror and drawing us back out into the space of survival. The sense of duelling voices, central to the performance of *didong*, animates the structure of Nugroho’s film, as it alternates between the sounds and voices of authority and menace, and the songs and melodies of resistance, of a humanity under duress. Sound echoes the terror of entrapment. The clanging of the prison gates, chains and locks wracks the bodies of the prisoners, ricochets as if through empty shells that can no longer protect the vulnerable organs within, leaving limbs quaking. The voice of the guard calling the names of the inmates to be taken is like an invisible string reeling in unwilling captives. As he recounts the
terrible experiences of 1965, Kadir is still haunted by bodily memory of the sounds of slaughter—the “crak crak crak” sound of bodies being severed by the *parang*, the short sword, as head is separated from body. The memory of a woman shot with her baby at the breast is carried by a scream across shifting levels of reality:

*I looked at the moon and from it there came a cry*

*The moon and the stars were crying just like my own child.*

Even in the face of this horror, as a *ceh*, the leader of a *didong* group, Kadir’s accounts of the events are infused with the spirit of the oral tradition of storytelling, drawing on all of the emotional registers of the voice, and sliding effortlessly from speech to song and dance. The richly layered soundtrack carries the film across invisible boundaries, shifts the mood from the atomised space of isolation and terror, and draws people from the confined space of the cell out into the expanded space of memory, from bewilderment and disintegration back out into the space of communal affirmation.

The animating power of *didong* continually breaks through the surface of the film. Even as the inmates are held captive, the rhythm, the allusions of the storytelling mode take hold of them, transporting them across time and space, beyond their physical confinement, to evoke the sensuous qualities of memory. Lured into the space of pleasure, of warmth and laughter, they recount stories of courtship, tell jokes and break spontaneously into dance and song. If you could say that in *A Poet* the sound is the air that we breathe, then this life-giving force is in music. The opening credits of the film shake with the pounding rhythm of a group of *didong* singers as they beat pillows in accompaniment to their singing and rhythmic swaying in a joyous communal performance. In the cell, the rhythm of a prisoner anxiously knocking on the wall becomes a counterpoint to the melody of a song that gives voice to the fear of the inmates:

*I fear your fate is that of the little chicken, its heart trembling for fear of the hawk,*

*Happy are the waterfowl that even in murky water can float.*
The tremulous song of someone attempting to stay alive is taken up by the group like a lifeline that rekindles and sustains the spirit. At the end of the film, the haunting voice of the singer reintegrates the painful memories once again into the strength of the communal tradition, driven by the rhythm and the vigour of didong performance. It is not just poetry that has refused to be put in the grave, but a poetics, a way of life lived within the ambit of a sensuous poetic tradition.

The intensities of the film are channelled through tightly controlled and paced theatrical performance, cycling around a limited set of stylised motifs. As Kadir tells another inmate of the executions he has witnessed, his hands mimic the sharp slicing movement of the sword decapitating its victims. Hands are involuntarily transformed into tools of violence: Kadir is forced to tie the hands of the other inmates before they are taken to be killed; a bloodied hand scraped across the wall in anxiety symbolises the fracturing of daily life:

*Why do these hands no longer knock on doors in greeting?*
*Why is a knock on the door now frightening?*
*Why do these fingers not point out the many kindnesses?*
*Why do these fingers betray?*

The overcrowded platform on which inmates crush together to sleep, a stage for storytelling and dancing, itself becomes a motif as it is suddenly sparse, the few remaining bodies spread out, separated, empty spaces between them. Sacks made for storing rice are transformed into hoods as group after group of prisoners is masked and led out to be killed, a ritual that punctuates the film over and over. The steady supply of sacks brought into the jail dries up, as villagers realise how they are being used and refuse to sell. At the close of the film, one of the last remaining women finally refuses everything the sack stands for:

*Tie me up if you will . . . but don’t put that sack over my head . . .
Whatever life is, I want to see it.*

It is in this willingness to look, to take off the mask, that the historical importance of *A Poet* lies. The film forms part of a wave of long-repressed criticism of the crimes of the Suharto regime unleashed since the fall of Suharto. The film could not have
been made during the Suharto era, and Nugroho admits that its 1999 release in Indonesia would have been unlikely if Habibie had been re-elected as president (Ryanto 1999). The new scrutiny of public life has coincided with a critical time for the Indonesian film industry. Economic crisis and the collapse of the rupiah at the end of the nineties, which closed cinemas and at first threatened the demise of the movie industries, in fact opened up new opportunities for cheaper local films, and for a new social realist cinema. (Ryanto 2000; Moreau). Described as “a one man ‘new wave’ ” (Rayns), Nugroho survived through this period, shooting *A Poet* on the cheaper digital video format and winning numerous awards with the film.  

Although one commentator has written that Nugroho has “graduated” from working in documentaries to making feature films, his work has in fact alternated between both modes. Before making *A Poet*, he made a documentary on the life of Ibrahim Kadir, and alongside his earlier feature about street kids (*Kancil’s Tale of Independence*), he also directed a documentary about life on the streets in Jogjakarta. Nugroho clearly chooses the medium appropriate to his task: as Tony Rayns writes, “each film is radically different in form and theme from others” (Rayns 2). While the titles at the beginning of *A Poet* state that “a fair and neutral investigation of [the murder of the seven generals that sparked the massacres] was never conducted,” Nugroho does not attempt this kind of investigation. In *A Poet*, we never see the perpetrators of the atrocities, and as for the cause, we are left only with the confusion and questioning of the inmates, “why is this happening?”, “what has gone wrong?”, “why are our lives so out of kilter?”.

*Embodied cultural forms*  

Walter Benjamin writes, of the process of storytelling:

It is not the object of the story to convey a happening *per se*, which is the purpose of information; rather, it embeds it in the life of the storyteller in order to pass it on as experience to those listening. It thus bears the marks of the storyteller much as the earthen vessel bears the marks of the potter’s hand. (Benjamin 161)

*A Poet* embeds this story in the lives of the listener-viewer in a profoundly embodied way, inscribed through the texture of the cell walls, the restless pace of the camera, the emotional qualities of the voice, the cyclic structures of repetition.
Bowen argues that the western idea that history or politics can be understood as objects distinct from cultural and aesthetic forms is inadequate to address the embodiment of politics in cultural form. Certainly, the disembodied voice of history exists in contemporary Indonesia, but Nugroho emphasises his choice to avoid the historical approach (sejarah), and to work with the emotional registers of “the verbal tradition” (SAPFF).

The film bears the marks of two storytellers, the filmmakers and Ibrahim Kadir. Kadir’s performance sees him acting a highly stylised role. It is a performance, and a masterful one at that, winning him Best Actor awards at two international festivals, but it is also much more. There is an intensity to his performance, a complex dialectic between distance and proximity in his role representing both himself and the voice of the storyteller. Kadir, the storyteller, is the potter whose bodily memory marks the “earthen vessel” of the story. Just as Kadir does not locate himself outside the events re-enacted, nor does Nugroho, the other storyteller, take up an authorial voice outside or above the experience of these events, the “judicial” voice of interrogation which would present a case, but render culture, experience and feeling as artefacts or objects to be scrutinised. The trajectories of a history that meet in the experience of Kadir and his fellow inmates are not separate from the cultural histories that weave through the tradition of didong. Nor are these events removed from the experience of them, or the deep incisions they have left in the bodily memory of those who survived.\textsuperscript{xi}

Bowen claims that, in the 1970s, “the poetic medium [of didong was] deemed to be ‘cultural’, and thus somewhat safe from direct suppression” despite its political criticisms (Bowen 202). He does, however, document the strategy of the New Order regime in the seventies and eighties “to subsume all social movements and cultural expression under the Pancasila, the Five Principles that form the state ideology” (125). The New Order strategy of appropriation of didong went hand in hand with an attempt to mute the voice of didong into a folkloric one, subsumed under the broad rubric of cultural diversity within the nation state (126 ff.).\textsuperscript{xii} With resonances that go way beyond the 1960s into the current struggle in Aceh against the central government, didong grounds A Poet in the sense of local culture and cultural affiliation as the life-blood of a people, the vital core of resistance to decimation by military might. Kadir’s performance embodies both the refusal to bury the memory of the victims and a refusal to surrender a rich poetic tradition to
the homogenising demands of a national culture.  By working with the multi-layered affective tradition of didong, Nugroho embeds his film within the complex mesh of layered meanings in contemporary Indonesian cultural politics.

_A Poet_ must be seen within the context of the “homogenised image of national identity” pervasive in Indonesian media under Suharto (Hanan 2004 161). An exploration of regional cultures was a feature of some of the pioneering works of Indonesian cinema: H. Misbach Yusa Biran, for example, has traced the use of local traditions and sayings in the films of Djayakusuma in the 1950s, and the integration by director, Nya Abbas Akup, also in the fifties, of the generic forms of 19th century Betawi theatre (Biran 223-4). Krishna Sen recounts, however, the disappearance of “regional cultural forms, local images and casts” after 1965 (Sen 41). Nugroho’s work with local non-professional actors, regional languages and cultural forms picks up the fractured threads of this cinematic exploration of Indonesia’s cultural and aesthetic diversity and can be seen as a part of what Sen has described as the “re-emergence of the local as a site of resistance at the end of the New Order”.

Nugroho has described himself as “a Javanese living amidst multiculturalism” (Trimarsanto 231) and he has consistently declared the importance of pluralism in the multi-ethnic, multicultural society of Indonesia. While Nugroho has made films exploring Javanese culture, such as _And the Moon Dances_ (Bulan Tertusuk Ilalang), both his films and television work have also demonstrated his commitment to this vision of a pluralist Indonesia. His second feature, _Letter to an Angel_ (Surat untuk Bidadari), explored in great detail the cultural life and rituals of the eastern island of Sumba. Both Sen and anthropologist Janet Hoskins describe _Letter_ as a blend of fictional and ethnographic elements, and Sen claims that it was the first film made under the New Order to challenge the prohibition on the use of regional dialects (Sen 40, Hoskins 130 ff.). Nugroho’s documentary television series, _Children of a Thousand Islands_ (Anak Seribu Pulau), explores the diverse cultures of Indonesia’s children in what he describes as “a medium for early multicultural education (Trimarsanto 222). Perhaps the most politically and culturally challenging, Nugroho’s most recent film, _Birdman Tales_ (Aku Ingin Menciummu Sekali Saja), is set in West Papua (Irian Jaya) against the backdrop of the independence struggle, and is the first Indonesian feature to be set in Papua and to have Papuans in lead roles (Keshvani 29).
Hoskins recounts the extensive research Nugroho did into “styles of [local] play, body movement and entertainment” in the preparation of *Letter to an Angel* and his commitment to “capture ‘the richness of local culture’” (Hoskins 131). When Nugroho discusses this attentiveness to the local, he describes it in terms that go beyond representation and into the specific embodiment of those cultures in the forms of daily life:

If I employ local actors, this is because local actors are the library of local gesture, oral language and culture . . . gesture and oral language are the manifestations of space, time and cultural environment (Trimarsanto 220, 219).

I. Bambang Sugiharto writes that, in Nugroho’s films, “[e]motion and sensation are touched neither through identification with the characters nor through the power of words. They are touched through the exposition of images and poetic scenes” (Sugiharto 190). Sugiharto describes this, following Brecht, as “social gesture: illustrating basic problems hidden behind the daily social behaviour” (190). If we look at the ways emotion and sensation are developed and explored in *A Poet*, however, it is clear that gesture, sound, movement, time and space do not only represent the characteristics of a culture, they embody it in a profoundly affective way. While the affect of the film is, of course, tied in its broad lineaments into the nationally-shared tragedy of the massacres of 1965 and the memories long suppressed in the public culture, the film works on many layers. The recuperative elements, those which re-integrate the grieving process into the present, derive on one level from the assertion of community, but on another from the structure of feeling set up through the ways the viewer is drawn into an embodied engagement with the space of the cell and the bodies in that space. The registers of feeling that the film produces are carried by the movement, the gestures of those bodies — the fluidity of gesture and dance — and the quality of the sound — the shifting emotional resonances that slide through the film across the emotional transitions of the voices, the singing and the soundscape.

These embodied forms — song and dance — are the stuff of a mimetic engagement — that process by which the viewer is drawn in close to the film in a tactile, bodily way. This embodied connection is the core of an affective engagement with the film that works on recognition, affinity and memory. It is here,
in a mimetic engagement with image, gesture and sound, that the politics of the local is most definitively grounded.

*A Poet* does not just *represent* a regional culture—representing Indonesia in its diversity for a national audience—it *speaks to* cultural diversity, addressing a plural audience on levels that are also profoundly local, specific and grounded. Sen describes how *Letter to an Angel* “constructs a concrete […] local community identity in opposition to the imagined national Indonesian one” (Sen 35).xxv *A Poet* addresses the specificity of local culture in ways that are not just thematic and do not just rely on the use of regional languages. It embeds the local and the local viewer in the film affectively through the embodied cultural form of *didong*.

Bowen recounts the transformations in the use and significance of *didong* through his period of study in the late 1980s, as it became “a highly lexicalised shorthand for cultural knowledge” (177). He claims that in the 1980s “*didong* became the center of efforts at cultural revival among urban Gayo living in Jakarta” (207), and was “a relatively transportable art form that [could] be used to recreate cultural identity in an urban setting” (209). To trace the contemporary inflections of the form as a marker of cultural identity and affinity would require updating Bowen’s study. Similarly, to read the nuances of this affect of the local/regional would require an audience study that is outside the scope of this project. Indeed, such a study might reveal many complexities in the reception of this mode of address.xxvi However, my argument is that, through the embodied forms of *didong*, the film offers points of connection and affinity that speak specifically to a local viewer, and that any consideration of the politics of the film must ask this question about the embodiment of its cultural forms.

Indian documentarist, Amar Kanwar, has talked of the diversity and heterogeneity of audiences and his desire “to create a constellation of experiences that have the capability to relate with the multiplicity of life and audiences” (Rutherford). He talks of creating spaces in his films that operate on intellectual, emotional, rhythmic, sensory and other levels and, in this way, addressing a heterogeneous audience on many intellectual and experiential levels.xxvii

This recognition of the heterogeneity of audiences in a pluralist society is not, in itself, a challenging concept, but the most common response, historically, to this diversity has been to pare down a film to essences that can supposedly offer a universal mode of address to an imagined common denominator. The innovativeness
of Kanwar’s approach is his attempt to deploy all of the aesthetic registers of a film
to establish different points of connection for different audiences—instead of paring
down the modes of address, to multiply them.

In *A Poet*, Nugroho also works with these many levels of a film—
intellectual, emotional, sensory and rhythmic—through the performance, the camera
and sound, the use of space and time, dance, gesture and music, and the ways they
engage memory and cultural affinity. The film’s mode of address, while accessible
on a national/transnational level, is not unified, not homogenised. The way that
Nugroho envisages and addresses his audience—this shift from simply representing
regional culture to incorporating modes of address that have the potential to speak
specifically to a regional audience—gives another dimension to the politics of the
film. It is here that the cinematic significance of Bowen’s argument about “the
embodiment of politics in cultural form” must be understood.
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Notes

ⅠIn the 1960s, Indonesia had the third largest communist party in the world, with “an estimated 3 million members. Through its affiliated organisations such as labor and youth groups it claimed the loyalties of another 17 million” (Kadane 7). While official New Order explanations of the events of 65 claimed that the purges were a response to an attempted communist coup, substantial evidence has been presented to discredit this account, and to suggest the role of factions of the army in staging the attempted coup as a catalyst to overthrow the government of President Sukarno (Griswold; Scott). Statements by CIA-linked operatives in the 1990s have admitted the role of the US, in the context of the Vietnam War, in supporting the annihilation of the Indonesian communist party, the PKI, going so far as to make up death lists and check on the progress of eradicating those on the lists. (Kadane; McGee). While the army was the instigator of the extermination campaign, they recruited and armed civilian groups. See Scott, “political liaisons [of the army] with civilian groups [‘the civilian administration, religious and cultural organizations, youth groups, veterans, trade unions, peasant organizations, political parties and groups at regional and local levels’] provided the structure for the ruthless suppression of the PKI in 1965,
including the bloodbath” (Scott 10). The resulting slaughter was one of the largest massacres of the 20th century.

ii Bowen describes the shifting nature of didong. In the early part of the century didong was performed at weddings and other rituals by individual performers and focused on verbal play. By the 70s, it was performed as a contest between teams or clubs, as key attractions at social events, with the emphasis on competition. He describes the value given to didong in the 1980s, for its “ability to express the issues or emotions of the present through allusion and imagery” (194).

iii Bowen notes that, in the Gayo area, “although all those killed were accused of affiliation with the Communist Party” the denunciations followed previously existing fractures in communal life, motivated by both political and personal rivalries. He writes that, “by the 1980s, men and women were reluctant to discuss the killings” (121). Though the silence was partly due to shame, he argues, it was also fear: “the memories and fears the killings generated are a critical psychological element in New Order strategies of political control” (119): “to question the moral soundness of the killings, even in the 1980s, is to challenge the legitimacy of the New Order itself” (121-2).

iv Quoted from the press kit for the film. Nugroho has said that, as “everyone in Indonesia lives under this shadow, [he] made this film to show that what happened was against all of humanity” (Phillips).

v The film also works with many actors from Jakarta.

vi Didong is staged as a duel between two competing voices or groups.

vii Ron Moreau, writing in 1999, discusses a parallel revival of activist work in theatre, citing in particular the public staging of Marsinah, a play by writer Ratna Sarumpaet, which is about a labour activist killed by the army. After its first staging in 1998, the writer spent four months in jail; in 1999 she was featured as a speaker at a government-sponsored conference.

viii Despite this new openness, Nugroho has discussed the dangers of making this film, and the fears of his friends and family that he would be killed for it (Phillips).

ix The film has won a Silver Award at the Locarno Film Festival in Italy in 2000, Best Actor award for Ibrahim Kadir in the Cinefan 2001 Awards in India, Best Actor and also the jury prize for best film at Singapore Film Festival, 2001.
While Nugroho is not part of the younger DV generation (Mira Lesmana, and younger Jakarta Institute of the Arts cohorts, known as the *Kuldesak* generation after their film, *Cul de Sac (Kuldesak)*, 1998, Khoo Gaik Cheng argues that his work and garnering of international attention paved the way for the younger group's work in the international arena (personal correspondence).

Nugroho has discussed the importance of generating “a dialogue, without revenge, about our history” (Phillips).

Ibrahim Kadir also had an important role in the 1988 Indonesian anti-colonial film *Tjoet Nja’ Dhien*, “the story of the national heroine, Tjoet Nja’ Dhien, who led a band of guerrillas against the Dutch in the mountains of Aceh at the end of the nineteenth century” (Biran 240).

This process is remarkably reminiscent of the process described by Arjun Appadurai of states “systematically museumizing and representing all the groups within them in a variety of heritage politics that seems remarkably uniform throughout the world” (Appadurai 331).

This reading of the film must be tempered by Nugroho’s stated “concern that events in the Balkans could happen in Indonesia, which is also a multicultural society” (Phillips).

I. Bambang Sugiharto writes: “as a result of the totalitarian political regime of the past, plurality has never been properly valued and what is called ‘harmony’ has become very artificial and has lost the two-way communication in the midst of a rich variety of cultures while the body and soul have never been respected” (Cheah (ed.) 192).

For a discussion of this work, see also Hanan, 1997.

Sen has written of the centralisation of the industry in Jakarta and the prohibition under the New Order of films made in regional languages: “films were forced to speak the national language. Films were not even allowed to use regional languages or even dialects of Bahasa Indonesia (the national language) as the principle diegetic language” (Sen 37).

David Hanan also locates Nugroho within this tradition, noting that Djayakusuma was in fact one of Nugroho’s teachers (Hanan 2000: 155). Hanan points out that Nugroho’s work redefines the regional film. He argues that, in *Letter to an Angel*,
Nugroho does not just explore regional specificity, as he claims Djayakusuma’s films did, but explores the transformations of these cultures through the impact of both globalisation and the ongoing influence of the Indonesian state (Hanan 155). See also Hoskins 125.

Nugroho has said in an interview, “if a certain ethnic group cannot appear on TV in a country claiming to be multi-cultural, we are on the verge of bankruptcy” (Ishizaka 113). He has talked of the promise of digital technology to break down the centralist control of Indonesian film and video production: “We hope ethnic groups will have their own video camera as a channel to avoid the oppressing force. Only in this way can the video play its role as a weapon in the digital era” (Ishizaki 114).

Sen writes that “no other film in the New Order had used local casting to nearly this extent” (Sen 40) and no film used so much local culture and minority language.

For a discussion of Anak Seribu Pulau, see Strassler. Strassler argues that, although the series “[rejects] the most virulent ideologies of capitalist expansion and national homogenization . . . [it constructs] a pluralistic yet homogenized vision of diversity” (4, 6).

Philip Cheah writes that, “what [Birdman Tales] brilliantly does is to invert the roles of Indonesia and Papua. Because there is only one Indonesian actress . . . Indonesia inadvertently becomes the minority culture here” (Cheah 117)

This research included living in the area and having the non-local actors “become part of the traditional community.” Hoskins quotes Nugroho here: “he wanted their ‘acting to become part of the geography, of the ways of tending livestock, making a living . . . ’” (Hoskins 132).

Sugiharto here argues that it is not significance, but sensation that matters most in Garin’s work, arguing (from Susan Sontag), that “what matters most is not primarily its ‘hermeneutic’ aspect, but rather its ‘erotic’ matter” (189).

I use mimesis here in the sense of the term explained by Michael Taussig. Michael Taussig describes one aspect of mimesis as a kind of contact—a mode of sensory, tactile perception that breaks down the distinction between the viewer and the object in an experience of contact with the image. Taussig argues that mimetic perception closes the gap between the spectator and image, and generates a bodily response in the viewer, a kind of “visceral experience” that is experienced as a “porousness” between one's own body and the image (Taussig 21 ff.).
Both Sen and Sugiharto make clear that Nugroho does not equate the local with tradition, but explores the “local that has been worked over by modernity” (Sen 36).

This argument about the film’s mode of address is not intended to claim cultural authenticity or cultural correctness for the film. In her study of *Letter to an Angel*, Hoskins examines the film from an ethnographic perspective and finds various weaknesses in it, not least the fact that the mix of local and non-local actors means that the dialogues sometimes take place with two characters speaking different languages to each other. Her interpretation of this is that the film enacts a drama of “discordance and strange juxtapositions” (135). An ethnographic account of *A Poet* may well uncover similar difficulties. And, of course, cultural/ethnic identity does not necessarily mean an identification or affinity with that cultural heritage.

Kanwar says, “If you’re able to see the complex inner diversity and heterogeneity within individuals and therefore in audiences, then you’re able to see the many dimensions of communication itself. Film is an unbelievable medium—you can do what you want with sound, music, ambience, image and colour. You find that when you start putting these together it is possible to create a constellation of experiences that have the capability to relate with the multiplicity of life and audiences” (Rutherford).

This essay was written and published in 2003.
This paper started from a fascination with the opening sequence from *A Season Outside*, directed by Indian director, Amar Kanwar. The fascination came from the way the sequence awoke a sensory awareness of myself watching—a sensitivity to colour, texture, movement, gesture—an awareness that came initially from the movement of the cloth on the workers’ bodies, but focused progressively on the line. It was not just the enigma of the line, the question of what it represented, but the materiality of the line that exerted a fascination on me—its texture, its width, its luminosity.

By the time this attentiveness to the line shifted registers, clicked into grasping its significance as a historical entity—a border—and the fragments coalesced into the bodies of Indian and Pakistani workers passing huge bundles from one to the other across the border—the line was already saturated with an energetic significance that came from the fascination of viewing. This energetic saturation had nothing to with narrative meaning, or pinning it down as significant in a historical narrative, but was tied to the indeterminacy that allowed the image to stay up in the air and gave the space for engaging with it as an image, absorbing it on a material level.

In this sequence the image is allowed to do work, as if the principle of construction of the sequence is to put the indeterminacy of the image and its material properties to work to engage the spectator in a sensory way. This is the antithesis of many documentaries, including many Australian ones, that uses images as building blocks for structuring information but do not envisage the image as something that can be brought to life. Instead, they leave the image itself inert, lifeless, experientially flat. In *A Season Outside*, the image does not just portray experience, it is experienced. The filmmaker’s openness to the potential of the image to work in this way is related to a way of looking at the material world that does not start from pre-determined ideas about what is there. Here the film-maker goes into the world with eyes to see, to connect with the world in a mimetic way.

By Anne Rutherford

*A Season Outside* (Amar Kanwar, 1998) starts with colour: ‘at first I saw colours’, says the voice-over, but only after we too have seen colours, saturated red and blue in close up, the texture of cloth as it ripples across bodies. Rows of legs shuffle slowly forward, some wrapped in sarongs, some in trousers, and then we are drawn into a white line painted on a road and two pairs of feet approaching each other. The feet butt up against each other, the legs brace and then back off. One by one more legs and feet jostle each other in ritual conflict across the white line. We search the line just as the voice in the text does: ‘sometimes you search in a mythical line that is just twelve inches wide’.
Mimesis and Documentary

The concept of mimesis has two parts. The first, a copy, is familiar to a documentary thinking that would explain the documentary image as a mimetic copy of the world. The second, usually overlooked in discussions of documentary, does, however, offer a very productive conceptual framework for contemporary documentary theory. Michael Taussig describes this second aspect of mimesis as a kind of contact—a mode of sensory, tactile perception that breaks down the distinction between the viewer and the object in an experience of contact with the image. Taussig argues that mimetic perception closes the gap between the spectator and image, and generates a bodily response in the viewer, a kind of ‘visceral experience’ that is experienced as a ‘porousness’ between one’s own body and the image. The awakening of this kind of mimetic experience is what Walter Benjamin calls mimetic innervation.

A Season Outside works from the very first moment with a mimetic sensitivity. The film-maker sees this potential in the image and he frames his image to enhance it. The image is allowed to work its way energetically on the spectator, as mimetic innervation, before it’s pinned down.

The potential of image and sound to evoke this kind of bodily sensory awakening, its potential to bring the viewer fully alive, is central to understanding the ability of cinema to generate affect—in tense feeling that is experienced in a bodily way. It is a key to understanding how the image works energetically with the spectator, how it engages ‘not so much with mind as with the embodied mind’ of the spectator. If we accept the importance of affect in cinema spectatorship, why are these considerations so marginalized in documentary theory? How can we develop an aesthetics of documentary that acknowledges the role of affect and embodied experience in cinema spectatorship?

Affect versus Interrogation?

It was this understanding about the centrality of cinematic affect that I brought to a recent attempt to develop a documentary proposal, and immediately I faced a dilemma. The film I imagined was a hard-hitting investigative documentary, driven by the full force of well-researched interrogative journalism. The problem was that this imagined film had nothing to do with my understanding of the dynamics of cinema spectatorship—the importance of mimesis and its ability to generate affect. The dilemma lay in two apparently incompatible impulses: a journalistic impulse—an interrogative approach that would rely on language for its punch—and an aesthetic approach that would demand working with sound and image in an embodied, affective way.

This supposed incommensurability of affect and interrogation has been a predominant feature of documentary theory over decades. Michael Renov traces the persistence of this opposition through documentary theory in the assumption
that documentary is ‘the film of fact’, and, by definition, ‘at a remove from the creative core of cinematic art’. He describes it as a dichotomy between truth and beauty. A corollary of this dichotomy is an assumed opposition between intellect and feeling that disallows any understanding of embodied thought.

This sense of conflict between the journalistic and the aesthetic impulses recurs constantly in the theorization of documentary, and is linked to a privileging of language that subordinates the experiential properties of image and sound. In the definitions of critics such as Bill Nichols, for example, ‘the productive and interpretive power of documentary resides in words’, not images or sound itself. Again and again in documentary theory, we find this primacy of the word and the marginalization of the image and sound. There is a valorization of the idea of a matter-of-fact language, free of aesthetics, in which to talk about the world, and a sense of the corrupting power of aesthetics and by extension of affect—that aesthetics and affect threaten the credibility of the documentary.

If you read between the lines of this suspicion of aesthetics, it seems to carry with it an idea that the image itself is suspect, the image has to be contained, kept under control, pinned down in a hierarchical relation between image and word. I would argue that, linked to this suspicion of the image and the fear of the open-endedness of affect, is a phobia of the spectator, and the embodiment of the spectator. Based on an assumed opposition between rationality and mimetic innervation, a Calvinist impetus seeks to ride above the weakness of the flesh.

What is Disembodied Knowledge?

Nichols identifies the core of this traditional understanding of documentary as a model of disembodied language, and discusses ways in which it is increasingly contested. He argues that, in attempts to escape the universalist assumptions of this disembodied language, documentary has increasingly turned to the local and the specific, and faced with the collapse of its pretensions to objectivity, it increasingly privileges ‘subjective’ knowledge. However, while these moves do transform ideas about where knowledge comes from, what constitutes knowledge—the ‘content’ of knowledge—they do not address the challenge that an understanding of embodiment poses to documentary. This is not just the challenge to a disembodied language, but the need to dismantle the assumptions of a disembodied spectator. To understand this, we need to look at the processes of reception, where the film actually takes place, which is in the experience of the spectator.

The discussion of spectatorship has traditionally been marginalized by the emphasis in documentary thinking on the production process and the characteristics of the text. It is part of an ontological thinking, according to which the interface that matters is the interface between the image and the referent, and then only in terms of questions of truth or authenticity. Spectatorship commonly gets tacked onto this as a given, assumed to follow automatically from the nature of the text. This is implicit in the positing of epistemophilia, a will to know, as the explanatory model for documentary spectatorship. Epistemophilia assumes a rational, intact subject, wanting to know about a referent, a real, which is already complete, formed and unchanging. This is the antithesis of a mimetic understanding of cinema—one in which the image brings the material world into play, to life, in the moment of its reception.

This blindness to the full implications of embodied spectatorship is a commonplace of the approach to the teaching of documentary, which advises prospective documentarists to start from the rules of storytelling in drama, and to adopt the model of the character’s journey, a dramatic arc, etc. There is a formulaic assumption here that character is the way to hook the spectator, which often goes hand in hand with a rather impoverished approach to the image and sound. Storytelling is reduced to characterization, spectatorship is conflated with identification, affect is collapsed into emotion and the potential of film to arouse this sensory, bodily intensity is ignored.

Benjamin writes, of the process of storytelling:

*It is not the object of the story to convey a happening per se, which is the purpose of information; rather, it embeds it in the life of the storyteller in order to pass it on as experience to those listening.*

Why do we think that the way to embed the story in the life of the listener or viewer is to construct it according to the dramatic arc, to code it in character development? These techniques may create familiarity, identification or suspense, but they do not necessarily embed the story, they don’t lodge a story under the skin. To Benjamin, embedding a story in the life of the listener is to do with the senses, his notion of aesthetics is corporeal, and this requires an embodied mode of address. How can we think about this embodied concept of affect in doco? What models of affect can we draw on?

**Affect as Rupture**

One of the most common models for thinking about affect in film is the model of rupture. According to this model, affect erupts in privileged, ephemeral moments, that break the linear logic of narration and open up fleeting moments of sensation, sensory experience imbued with intense feeling. This experience is often described in terms of visual epiphany. Leo Charney describes it as ‘fully inhabiting the moment’. Most familiar as a way of thinking about avant-garde work, rupture is commonly tied to moments of disconnection or shock.

Clearly we can find certain moments of epiphany like this in documentary. However, if we take these moments of rupture to define the way that we understand affect, it is very difficult to envisage how we could work with affect in documentary in any more integrated way. The logic of rupture allows for the intensity and open-endedness of affect to break through momentarily, but leaves the rest of the documentary discourse intact. It does not challenge the homogeneous, linear logic of narration and does not affect the dry impoverished use of visual and aural language in the rest of a program. This essentially leaves us with the same old
dichotomy that Renov calls truth versus beauty, the supposed incompatibility between the aesthetic and the interrogative. It leaves untouched the assumed diacritical opposition between affect and meaning, a dyad in our thinking which
sees affective moments as embodied and the rest of documentary discourse as disembodied, cognitive, intellectual.

After the moment of rupture, it leaves the spectator pinned back down, reined in to the finitude of meaning.

The implications of affect and embodied spectatorship go much further than this.

To address these implications we need to acknowledge that all spectatorship is potentially affective. This demands a paradigm shift in thinking about the nature of documentary spectatorship and a rethink of the assumed hierarchies between sound, image and word in documentary signification.

Is there a way to hold affect and signification together in order to enrich the potency of both: a ‘co-presence’ that could work with the dialectical tension between the two as a force, a source of dynamic dialogue, an energetic drive?

Crossing Boundaries

If we look to documentary films that achieve this affective intensity, we can find some directions for rethinking documentary. The Gleaners and I (Agnes Varda, 2000) is one film that crosses the presumed boundaries between affect and interrogation—they are not separate, but one continuum of expressive possibilities.15 On the surface, the film seems to be a rather anomalous case—many scenes are long segments of talking heads, not what we would normally think of as affective material. And yet, as a viewer, I found myself profoundly affectively engaged. In the sequel to the film, Varda documents the responses of many viewers who wrote of how moved they were by the film, the ‘intense feeling’ it evoked. 16

While ostensibly a film about waste and decay—the scandal of wasted food and other goods in industrial society and the tradition of gleaners who retrieve the left-overs—Gleaners is also a film about feeling. Varda says it is about the feeling of precariousness and about her love of painting. Strange bedfellows on the surface, but this is a film in which these three levels—social reportage, the intensity of feeling, and the culture of representation—are inseparable. There is no base layer of ‘matter-of-factness’ here, from which the other layers could be shed or discarded, seen as superfluous.

This is a world rich in association, redundant with feeling and sensory experience and saturated with political and cultural significance.

The way Varda approaches the filmic medium is inseparable from the way she sees the world—in connections. The film is not afraid of the extraneous—it does not pare things back to isolated essences, but works with connections in a ripple effect. Images and sequences lead in many different directions. Varda’s reality is cultural and she explores the cultural phenomenon of gleaning, through painting, through the history of cinema, through provincial life, urban asylum seekers and psychoanalysis. Ethics, the legal code, self-scrutiny and parody all jostle for position with the sweet taste of a ripened fig, the beauty of afternoon light in an apple orchard and the experience of old age.

Each fragment of the image or sound is like a found object to be put into play, to evoke new associations. With each image we experience a moment of discovery. Like in A Season Outside, there is a sensitivity here to the affective qualities of the image that opens up an attentiveness to these qualities in the spectator, an awareness of form and gesture—Varda sees the stooping gesture, the rhythm of bending bodies. With this attitude to the material world as her construction principle, she explores things not just in the horizontal chains of meaning but in the vertical layers of association. She discovers the properties of the image, and sets up associative links between images not just through the content of the image but through its properties—rhythm, gesture, texture. There is no implicit hierarchy here between image and word, no phobia of the image or its potential indeterminacy—the full capacity of the sound and image is put into play, and with it the affective experience of the spectator.

How can we develop an intense affective relationship with the skin of a potato?

The first time we see rotting potatoes dumped in the field, filmed in an extreme close-up that brings us into contact with the gritty, dry texture of the potato’s green skin, this texture arouses a mimetic connection.17 Varda works with this sensory quality in many sequences shot in macro—pans across the surface of cabbage leaves, the head of a sunflower, the texture of mould on a ceiling, liver spots on an ageing hand. You could say that these moments of sensory awakening are moments of visual epiphany, but the model of rupture cannot explain what happens in the film, its affect. Varda has gone through the avant-garde and come out the other side, worked out ways to integrate the insights of these techniques into a documentary that works with an entirely different logic. These moments don’t leave the rest of the film untainted—the intensity that’s there does not just fritter off, it’s folded back into the film. Moments bleed across the film, bringing about an affective ‘frisson’ in the spectator that is carried across the rest of the film, that transforms the reception of the whole of the film. When the potato returns, its blotchy wrinkled skin evokes a textural association with the ageing skin of Varda’s hands and the potato becomes melded associatively with the hands that we have seen in an earlier shot. The decaying vegetable takes on the weight of melancholy in a ricochet across time that reinvents in our memory the scenes that have already passed. This opens up a way of viewing that involves experiencing pleasure not just in what is told but in the telling. We cannot understand this if we think of the image in isolation: we need to think about the work the image does energetically in the film—dynamically—the way it works with the spectator as a mimetic innervation.

How can we think about the way this film works with affect?

Affect and Signification

One very useful framework for thinking about affect comes from Brian Massumi.18 Massumi argues that it is crucial to distinguish between affect and emotion. He describes emotion as the subjective
content, a conventional semantic coding of the intensity of affect, and argues that affect is not necessarily connected to this content. He argues that the logic of intensity is very different to the logic of rules semantic content: affect is 'outside this loop', it is 'unassimilable'. However, in Massumi's account the relationship between affect and semantic content is not an either/or—it is a more complex one. He says that 'language is not simply in opposition to intensity': while linguistic expression can dampen or interfere with intensity ('matter-of factness dampens intensity')

Varda displays a consummate mastery of how to do this in The Gleaners and I. The relation between affect and signification here is like a layering, a co-presence. Signification does not happen here in a linear way—it happens through all the different registers of the image and sound and through awakening the affective responses of the spectator. The relative autonomy of the affective layer is brought into play to enrich and open up the processes of signification.

This second understanding of affect, as a kind of underlying vitality that can be dampened or amplified, is very suggestive for documentary. This is indeed how we have to understand embodied spectatorship. We could think of it as something like a rumble track—it's always there, setting our nerves on edge, but it can be taken down so low that we can't always hear it. It can be brought up to erupt in sudden moments of cacophony—the pyrotechnic moment—but it can also be raised or lowered to hover around the middle ground. This idea of the different gradations of affect sets us free from the either/or structure of the rupture model.

The complex relationship between affect and language/semantic content that Massumi posits takes us out of the arena of conventional thinking about emotion and suggests a more sophisticated way of working with the relationship between affect and language. What does it mean for the linguistic content of the material to resonate with the affective? This idea of resonance opens up the sense of two relatively autonomous spheres—two spheres that we have to work with in interaction with each other, not one sphere subsuming the other in a relation of dominance.

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1. Michael Taussig, Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses, Routledge, New York & London, 1993, pp. 21 ff. Jane Gaines' discussion of 'political mimesis' brings both aspects of the concept together in the idea of a connection between the audience and the screen in the sense that the bodies of the audience are induced to mimic or copy the actions of those on the screen. See Jane Gaines, 'Political Mimesis', in Jane Gaines and Michael Renov (eds), Collecting Visible Evidence, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 1999. Taussig's separation of the bodily from the sense of copy removes this assumption of a deterministic relationship between the two and allows us to think of a more flexible, mobile one.
2. Taussig, op. cit., p. 38.
3. This mimetic attentiveness to the sensory properties of the material world is paradoxically more familiar in fictional film than in documentary. Feature film director, Theodorus Angelopoulos, for example, talks about shooting on location in terms that are very similar to this idea of mimetic innervation. He describes how he focuses on the process of bringing into play the full sensory registers of his own experience in feeling, inhabiting that location, in order that he can construct an image that will evoke this awakening in his audience. For a discussion of Angelopoulos' mimetic approach to location shooting, see Anne Rutherford, 'Precarious Boundaries: Affect, Mise en Scène and the Senses', in Art And The Performance Of Memory: Sounds And Gestures Of Recollection, edited by Richard Candida Smith, Routledge, New York & London ('Memory and Narrative' series), 2002.
6. It is important to note here that aesthetics cannot be reduced to 'the beautiful'. It is also important to recognize that many documentary films themselves do not necessarily work within this dichotomy as it is set up within documentary theory.
7. There is a fundamental assumption here about affect, emotion and the senses and their relation to thought or intellect. According to this classic model, to draw the affective in would detract from the clear, clean stream of thought.
10. In a paper presented by Jane Gaines at Visible Evidence, 2001, in Brisbane, Gaines' notion of the 'curious spectator' gives spectatorship more
theoretical centrality, but does not address the embodiment of spectatorship.

Siegfried Kracauer has written of the ways that film ‘addresses its viewer as a corporeal, material being’, arguing that film ‘stimulates the material layers of the human being ... it brings the material world into play ... the material dimension assumes a life of its own and triggers in the viewer associations, memories of the senses ...’, in Miriam Bratu Hansen, introduction to Theory of Film by Siegfried Kracauer, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 1997, p. xxviii, and in Miriam Bratu Hansen, ‘“With Skin and Hair”: Kracauer’s Theory of Film, Marseille 1940’, Critical Inquiry 19, Spring 1993, p. 447.


The sequel to The Gleaners and I, shot two years after its release, is included on the DVD version of the film.


ibid., pp. 219-221.

ibid., p. 219.

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This essay was written in 2004.
At the first step into the Mumbai subway a bolt of heat shoots up from the swirling crowd like a blast from a furnace. You keep walking. It is peak hour, and a few million people converge on the two central terminuses of Mumbai Metropolitan Railway. You are walking against the crowd. A mass of steamy bodies surges toward you. Even as your own body moves precariously forward, the energy of your momentum is overpowered, tugged backwards by the crowds streaming in the opposite direction. Dizzying rhythms pulse through your body in waves of heat, of energy, cross paths and tug you in contradictory lines of force. The centre cannot hold, threatens to fragment, to drag you backward with the vectors of the crowd.

To slide into the slipstream of the city, to feel the vertigo of the metropolis—it was documentary maker, K.P. Jayasankar, who first described this experience to me, recounting how, as a young man newly arrived from the village, he would go to the terminus and walk against the crowd in a kind of delirious rehearsal of modern life—putting oneself in the eye of the storm until the storm seeps into the rhythm of one’s own body. Is it mere coincidence that this filmmaker and his co-director, Anjali Monteiro, develop a philosophy of the image that places emphasis on the ‘Heraclitan river’, the transience of all phenomena and an attitude of ‘humility’ toward the limits of that which one can know and control? That they develop a filmmaking practice that puts the boundaries between the self and the world into play? Monteiro and Jayasankar talk of a vulnerability to the image, a sense that, rather than the image confirming their own sense

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1 Heraclitus was a pre-Socratic philosopher best known for his doctrine of flux: in Cratylus’ account, Heraclitus said that ‘one cannot step into the same river twice’. Cratylus’ interpretation, which is not uncontested, is that ‘Heraclitus, comparing all things to a river, meant that things all changed all the time’. Paul Edwards (ed.), The Encyclopedia of Philosophy New York: Macmillan Co., 1967), p. 479.
of mastery over it, of certainty or plenitude, it somehow conveys to them an awareness of their own finitude, their own susceptibility.²

In the subway, proprioception, so fundamental to the stability of vision, denies the mastery of the ocular. Rhythm, movement and tactility blur the boundaries between self and other in a prototype of embodied mimetic visuality, a kind of perceptual experience that brings the ‘subject’ into proximity with the ‘object’.³ This sense of proximity or porosity between oneself and the object perceived recurs again and again in Saacha (The Loom), Monteiro and Jayasankar’s film about the transformation of Mumbai with the closure of the cotton mills in the 1980s. The film traces the demise of the rich working class culture and culture of the left—literary, theatrical, artistic, political and social—that grew up around the mills and the ongoing changes to the public spaces of the city with globalisation and the expansion of the middle class. These transformations are experienced in the film through this blurring of boundaries in a way that draws the viewer in close to the rhythm, the feel of the city. In their filming of Mumbai, spaces and objects are not neutral but imbued with memory and feeling and the process of filming is one of allowing oneself to become immersed in that feeling, to be touched by it. Says Jayasankar, ‘one can discover fragments of one’s memory in every space that one encounters . . . and you are looking for those fragments that begin to instil in you a cinematic experience . . .’

To Monteiro and Jayasankar, these fragments evoke what they describe as compassion: ‘those fragments that seemingly are meaningless fragments begin to speak to me in a tone of compassion—it’s beginning to feel some kind of closeness to that object, sometimes inanimate. So compassion is a word that we like to use and when we are editing we keep in mind that compassion’. (KPJ) The directors make clear that ‘at the obvious levels of the politics of representation [you] look at the person you’re shooting

² Henceforth AM and KPJ. Unless otherwise cited, all quotes from the filmmakers are from an interview conducted in Mumbai in November, 2003.
³ Taussig, Michael. Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses (Routledge: New York & London, 1993, pp. 20ff.). This proximity between the perceiver and perceived is pivotal to the concept of mimetic experience, a kind of embodied perception that opens itself up to tactile sensory experience.
with dignity’ (KPJ), but this idea of compassion is fundamentally about the conceptualisation of the image—a compassion with/for the image itself. Jayasankar talks of a ‘pact’ which they come to with the image that allows themselves to be implicated in it:

‘[the image begins] to talk to me and to others around me. That’s a pact that one is signing—give it a chance to speak. It’s a small fragment somewhere and when it’s seen, it doesn’t speak to anybody. But when we bring it up on the screen it begins to speak to me and somehow universally to the other. It may not give up all its secrets in one go, but at the same time it can begin to tell me about my own vulnerability as a viewer and a maker and about my own finitude. At the end of the day, the need for some kind of compassion . . . Implicating oneself is allowing that image to point to that vulnerability’. (KPJ)

Monteiro and Jayasankar make clear that they are unsure to what extent the philosophical underpinnings of their filmmaking practice actually find their way into their films, but an excavation of these ideas reveals a vigorous questioning of the nature of the documentary image and the relationship between the self and the material world that seems to resonate through every aspect of the film.

**Documentary as affective encounter**

This kind of conceptualisation of the image and the filmmaker’s engagement with it is rare in the rhetoric of the documentary image, which Jayasankar describes as ‘like a black box and in that space itself there’s not allowed any kind of introspection’. In documentary thinking it is as if the technical vocabulary of the camera—to shoot, to take—has appropriated the conceptualisation of the filming process and marginalised the moment of looking as the primary encounter. The camera is potentially an instrument for seeing, for enhancing and framing a way of seeing, and to capture the vitality, the aliveness, of the act of filming demands that one use the camera to see, not just to take. In the context of fiction film one can find attempts to talk about and come to grips with this encounter with the image, particularly in the context of location shooting, and a
closer exploration of the cusp between documentary and fiction could be a productive site to explore the implications of this encounter for documentary.  

To think about documentary in this way as an encounter between filmmaker, cinematographer or editor, and the image or sound, is to open up the question of experience in the production process—the experience of the filmmaker—perceptual, visual, sensory, rhythmic, emotional and intellectual. What happens in the bristle, the thrill, the immersion of that encounter; what does one make of it? How does the filmmaker re-stage or translate this encounter for the viewer?

Monteiro and Jayasankar describe the moment of looking through the viewfinder as an affectively-saturated encounter with the image:

> Each part of that image is something that we feel is secreted by our being, so to speak—it’s not that they’re just pictures—it comes out from there and [in] each of those images one’s heart has gone there, it goes out to that image—one is seething with a lot of pleasure when one is actually looking there . . . (KPJ)

In *Saacha* this pleasure is palpable. It is a film saturated with pleasure—the pleasure of looking translated into the pleasure of viewing. The film intersperses footage of the city with a series of interviews with a painter and a poet about their work. The poet, Narayan Surve, alternately recounts stories from his childhood among the working class of Mumbai and recites his poetry that twists and turns these anecdotes into small fables of

struggle, survival and wit. The painter, Sudhir Patwardhan, reflects on his own artistic practice and his evolving relationship with the city and the left. Despite these apparently conventional techniques, the image here is not an indexical illustration of the spoken text. The filmmakers’ own construction of the city as a film has as much integrity in the film as the constructions of the painter and the poet—the film, the poetry and the painting are all in a kind of dance with each other. This seems to be a very different way of thinking about the image to what one finds in a lot of documentary film.

This relation between sound and image is often unexpected, following tangential rather than literal trajectories. As Surve talks of the 20-month strike of 1983-4, which broke the back of the textile industry and led to the closure of many mills, the sound and image start the sequence in parallel, but begin to diverge in ways that allow the image not to illustrate the voice but amplify it, to add another dimension. Surve talks of the differences between European workers and their Indian counterparts, whom he describes as half workers, half farmers. As he recounts the mass exodus of Indian workers during the strike to their villages and the fact that the abandoned factories were left with no-one to carry the strike, the camera begins by panning across the idle factory machinery. As the poignancy of this belated realisation sinks in, it moves in to close ups of a wheel shrouded in cobwebs, a bolt, a dusty cobweb, and comes to linger on a roughly-woven bag hanging on a rafter. As the camera moves in closer, this pivotal moment in the industrial and cultural history of Mumbai is remade as a mimetic encounter. The empty bag drifting idly in the breeze takes on the poignancy of the moment—its languid swaying, its rough, frayed texture, its grubby countenance evoke a mimetic encounter with the viewer which takes on the affective charge of the deserted factory.

At another point in the film, as Surve recites one of his poems about ‘the struggle for the daily bread’, the image of the looms takes over the visual field. Shuttles jolt up and down, cross-arms swing back and forward, leather straps slip and slide across the beams, spindles jiggle and twirl. The looms shuffle and clatter on the sound-track, but it’s the visual rhythm that articulates the spoken word with a rhythmic undercurrent, a
The first thing one notices about Saacha is the sensory qualities of the image. In a musical montage of rhythms the relentless churning of machinery in the textile mills frames coils of cotton that unwind languorously onto a spindle and workers’ faces are masked by twisting strands of thread like enormous cats’ cradles. The film captures and releases fleeting moments of sensory intensity—light passes across piles of coloured jujubes glistening in a glass case in a cafe, drops of water light up momentarily on a table, reflecting passing traffic, deep red tomatoes and baskets of green chillies shine in the sunlit street market, baroque gargoyles keep silent watch as endless feet stream up a staircase behind elaborate brass balustrades out of the railway station. The life of the city is built up out of a multitude of small fragments, intimate moments, glimpses, and out of moments of sensory experience the film weaves a fabric that has the texture and the rhythm of the city. Saacha is experienced as much as a love affair with the city as a documentary about the city.

Despite a focus on sensory and rhythmic qualities, the film never spins off into lyrical play in the manner of many of the great city films. It is a politically-committed, engaged investigation of the cultural history of Mumbai—a rich, layered exploration of a milieu that generates a sense of intimacy, of being inside the cultural life of the city—but the conceptual, intellectual work involved in this investigation is not separate from the affective work of cinema—it never loses sight of the cinematic encounter. The dualist oppositions so familiar from documentary rhetoric, which would see an exploration of cinematic possibilities as antithetical to the significatory aims of documentary do not seem to operate here.

5 Visually, as a kind of ‘symphony’ of the machine, these segments of Saacha have an affinity with Dziga Vertov’s spinning factory machines in Man wit the Movie Camera (1929). However, the relationship between sound and image makes the sequence much more complex and subtle.

6 The classic lyrical city films would include films such as Walter Ruttmann’s Berlin: Symphony of a Great City (1927) or Jean Vigo’s A propos de Nice (1930).
The painter, Sudhir Patwardhan, interviewed in the film, talks of a sense of fragmentation with the demise in the 90s of any ideology of the left that could provide an ‘integrative grand narrative within which to frame the city and its people’. He describes the overpowering albeit exhilarating experience of the city crowds, as he travelled on the trains everyday, and of the conflict in his painting between two poles—the desire to ‘allow the city to flood into [his] work’ and the struggle to focus on the individual, the desire to find a way to bring the city and its people into a single frame. Patwardhan talks of how to grasp this life without imposing on it any overarching meaning, and the importance of capturing the emotional charge of the city on canvas, of how this mark on the canvas ‘can’t be a dead mark’.

*Saacha* also takes up this challenge to represent the city and its people. The film does not attempt to mould the image into a grand narrative—fragments co-exist, comment on each other. This is not a didactic montage but carefully structured by rhythm and association—Jayasankar talks of using the metaphor of the loom and the strands that make up the whole as a guiding metaphor to structure the film itself. The film is grounded and there is a sense of humility to the city—any rhetoric of the film has to face, be tested by, the complexity and multiplicity of the city. The city *is*—the relentless traffic churns on, the gargoyles sit silently on the railway terminus, feet stream up the railway bridge, crowds move through the streets.

**The self, the material world and the auratic power of things**

Monteiro and Jayasankar’s sense of a pact with the image, a saturated encounter with it, is far from the conventional rhetoric of documentary, but has an affinity with some of the early theorists of cinema whose work was infused with a passionate engagement with realism and also with the possibilities of the cinematic image. In Kracauer, film ‘puts the material world into play’ and the image speaks: (‘And I? says the leaf which is falling—
*Irani.* Sudhir Patwardhan. *Saacha (The Loom).*

*Train.* Sudhir Patwardhan. *Saacha (The Loom).*
And we? say the orange peel, the gust of wind . . .) 7 In Balasz, the close-up reveals ‘the hidden life of little things’. 8 In Benjamin, the camera opens up the optical unconscious, ‘hitherto unperceived modes of sensory perception and experience’. 9

Laura Marks has highlighted the continuity between what she describes as the ‘anthropomorphic’ analyses of critics such as Balász and Kracauer, and the interrogation of spectatorship in contemporary film theory that attempts to come to terms with the ‘unsettling (auratic power)’ that derives from the ‘ability of film and video to make contact with things’ material presences’. 10 In focusing on the ‘embodied nature of the cinematic viewing experience’, Marks has outlined two different understandings of vision—an optical model, which describes vision in terms of mastery and control, in which the viewer ‘isolates and comprehends the objects of vision’ (184) and haptic (tactile) visuality, a ‘mimetic visuality’ that implies ‘making oneself vulnerable to the image’ (185).

It is important to distinguish here between two different understandings of mimesis. The first is commonly used in documentary rhetoric to claim a copy or mirroring function for the documentary image—in other words to assert the indexicality of the image. The second use of the term, as elaborated by Michael Taussig, describes a mode of perception, a type of perceptual experience in which the viewer experiences a sense of bodily, tactile contact with the object perceived, a blurring of boundaries between self and other. 11 It is this concept of mimetic visuality, with its assumption of proximity between the viewer and the object, that Marks brings to bear in this demarcation.

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11 Taussig, op cit.
between two modes of vision, and it is this understanding of mimetic visuality that informs the investigation of this ‘auratic power of things’ in the cinematic image.

Explorations of this ‘auratic power’ have enacted a major paradigm shift in film theory away from the text-based analyses informed by semiotics, with its fundamental focus on meaning. Documentary’s self-positioning as other, as pertaining to a fundamentally different logic to other cinematic genres, has held it largely immune from the productive, invigorating challenges thrown down by the interrogation of spectatorship and the rethinking of realism in the realm of fiction.\(^\text{12}\) The spectator’s experience of this ‘auratic power’ of things is, however, pivotal to untangling some of the tougher problems of contemporary documentary thinking, in that it takes the question of realism away from an exclusive focus on indexicality. Opening up the question of the auratic recognises the implication of the perceiving subject in the material world and shifts focus to the relation between that subject and the object perceived. This awareness is prefigured in Kracauer’s concept of realism which ‘... is bound up with the problematic of the subject (rather than simply film’s referential relation to the material world)’.\(^\text{13}\)

The question of the self is by definition excluded in the notion of indexicality, which postulates a relation between the image and the thing, a residue that derives from the contact between the thing and the implement of filming. The contact that the concept of indexicality describes is a (causal) technical one. The contact between the viewer/perceiver and the thing or image, so central to mimetic perception, is irrelevant to this ontological preoccupation, which assumes that we can make deductions about how

\(^{12}\) This relative exile from the body of contemporary film theory is replicated by theoretical work that duplicates the supposed dualism between documentary and fiction. See, for example, Robert Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction*, a putatively comprehensive survey of film theory that has no entry on documentary theory. One exception to this exclusion is Trinh T. Minh-ha, who writes of these unproductive boundaries: ‘a documentary aware of its own artifice is one that remains sensitive to the flow between fact and fiction’, Trinh T. Minh-ha, ‘The totalizing quest of meaning’, in Michael Renov (ed.), *Theorizing Documentary* (New York & London: Routledge, 1993), p. 99. See also Lesley Stern, ‘Paths that wind through the thicket of things (things in the cinema)’, *Critical Inquiry* 2001 28:1, pp. 317-355.

\(^{13}\) Hansen 1997, op cit., p. xvi.
things exist or have an identity autonomously in the world, regardless of how we perceive them. Self is not implicated in the nature of the material world.

This positivist understanding of the material world forms the bedrock of unquestioned assumptions in conventional documentary thinking, even in contexts where ‘self-reflexivity’ is supposedly embedded in the documentary practice. In the debates on self-reflexivity, the question of the self is often limited to the acknowledgment of the subjective point of view of the filmmaker and the potential impact of their presence on events unfolding at the moment of ‘documenting’. Trinh T. Minh-ha has written of how the function of self-reflexivity is so often reduced to one of ‘harmless decoration’ suppressing its potential as ‘processes to prevent meaning from ending with what is said and what is shown’.14

In the work of Monteiro and Jayasankar, this questioning, self-reflexive mode goes beyond simply acknowledging the influence of the filmmaker on events that unfold before the camera, to the heart of the conceptualisation of the image and the understanding of the nature of the material world itself. The blurring of boundaries between self and object/other that is characteristic of mimetic experience is central to the idea of ‘vulnerability to the image’. Monteiro and Jayasankar see a challenge to indexicality as central to their documentary practice and this critique takes up the open-endedness of meaning that Trinh celebrates, refusing simple unitary meanings: ‘it’s certainly contesting the whole idea of image as evidence, image as indexically-linked to reality in a referential one-to-one fashion but trying to explore how that image itself has more layers and meanings than one could ever hope to comprehend all at once’. (AM) The idea of vulnerability to the image is linked to this multiplicity—the image can’t be contained or controlled easily and they ‘don’t know where it will lead [them]’. (AM) (They compare the assumed linear unity of meaning to Humpty Dumpty, whom they

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ridicule for his claim: ‘When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean, nothing more, nor less’).

In Saacha, by withholding the immediate solidification of meaning, Monteiro and Jayasankar open the viewer/image to the potential ‘auratic power’ of the image: ‘one is looking for images that do not yield up their volume or their meaning so quickly, but lure you into looking at it and lure you into the pleasure of the image itself’ . . . it invites the viewer to look at that image, but at the same time, it doesn’t give up its meaning so quickly’. (KPJ)

Jayasankar argues that this idea of layering cannot be reduced to the idea of indeterminacy:

‘It sounds very closely similar to a post-modernist celebration of polyphony but I don’t think we’re working with that—it’s not to say it’s a celebration of some kind of semiotic democracy of images. As documentary filmmakers one is walking the tightrope of having to use the image as evidence as well, because one is committed to certain struggles, to a certain kind of resistance to immediate forms of power. But at the same time how does one do it, keeping in mind the image, the pleasure or the aesthetic principle that goes with constructing those sort of images? How does one take into account the cinematic also into that? In

16 This approach to a fragmentary meaning has interesting resonances with Bazin’s notion of the ‘fact image’, which, according to Laleen Jayamanne, ‘is slippery because it is fragmentary, only partially visible, like the rock over which water flows’. Jayamanne writes that Bazin’s ‘fact image has a certain semantic autonomy within a sequence and can harbour sensory forces that cannot be reduced to the logic of action’ (142). Framing Bazin within the temporal terminology of Deleuze, she argues that ‘an image event infused with the senses [. . . ] before action can take shape in it [. . . ] opens up a hitherto imperceptible sense of duration in bodies, objects, and even the cosmos’ and is ‘an inducement to thought through the activation of imagination and memory’. Laleen Jayamanne, Toward Cinema and its Double: Cross-Cultural Mimesis (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), pp. 139-143.
that sense it is not just a celebration of a certain kind of relativism but it’s also trying to bring together these two concerns’ (KPJ).

Postcolonial documentary, temporality and Buddhas made of ice and butter

This commitment to ‘implicating the self’ in the image is not separate from an intellectual commitment to interrogation of the self in culture:

. . . how does one look at the idea of difference itself, identity and difference, because it is difference from the other that allows one to constitute oneself as a thing or as something given, and that difference at times becomes a sense of threat in relation to the other. So I think it has a lot to do with questioning the boundaries of the self and other, realising the fluidity, questioning the way we look at differences, whether it is oneself as a living thing or a non-living thing — oneself as a normal being versus another or someone who may be ‘deviant’. One element of compassion is an ability to enjoy differences, to be able to not feel threatened by them. (AM)  

Srivani Mulugundam has written of the work of Monteiro and Jayasankar in the context of other postcolonial filmmakers, in whose films the reflection on questions of identity plays a central role. While Monteiro and Jayasankar also emphasise the grounding of their work in the historical context of national politics, their approach to documentary diverges from that of many of their compatriots. They locate the concern with challenging the self in part as a reaction to the constraints within which the tradition of Indian documentary developed historically. They talk of the pivotal role that social realism, with its emphasis on instrumental reason, came to play in the Nehruvian project of modernisation, which led to only certain kinds of documentaries being produced: ‘[i]n our context the documentary has been seen very narrowly. Films Division has set the

benchmark for a long time in terms of what a documentary is or should be’ (AM). In these films, neither authorship nor an assumed indexicality were questioned:

Documentary film in India comes with this very normative position from which you speak, which is either you are producing evidence or as an author your position is quite strong. [In our work] one is also looking at what is that position from which one is speaking. Is that a secure position and is it not very important to subvert that position at the same time? (KPJ)

Their work has interesting resonances with the films of another Indian documentarist, Amar Kanwar, who has talked of starting from an interrogation of the self to develop a recognition of the heterogeneity of audiences—‘when you see the multiplicity that exists in your own reality you have to accept that similar multiplicities exist everywhere’—and of working with this recognition to develop modes of documentary communication that work with multiplicity rather than attempting to control it. ¹⁹

Monteiro and Jayasankar emphasise the hybrid cultural positioning of their work:

I don’t know whether as modern urban Indians we could still talk about ourselves as situated within some ‘Indian culture’ because our whole education and upbringing [and] the language we speak is globalised in many ways . . . In some sense [we are] of course also situated within [the western philosophical tradition] (AM)

However, they also locate their work as contesting ‘the whole dualist tradition where one dichotomises between mind and body, thought and feeling, form and content’:

¹⁹ See Anne Rutherford, ‘“Not firing arrows”: multiplicity, heterogeneity and the future of documentary: Interview with Amar Kanwar’ forthcoming in Asian Cinema, Autumn 2005. There are other contemporary Indian documentary makers working in various ways to challenge this normative position. See for example, the work of Madhushree Datta, Mani Kaul and others.
one also has at one’s disposal or one has grown up in a tradition that is a little different where a lot of the cultural forms don’t work with those kinds of dualities or that kind of indexical relationship with a real world out there—whether it is music or dance forms or even the stories that one has been brought up with. So I think somewhere in our work we are trying to explore a movement away from that way of looking at oneself and the world and the image and the word, form and content. (AM)

When they discuss their commitment to work in a non-indexical way, they question how they should do this in their own cultural context and some of the solutions they arrive at draw from the philosophical and ethical precepts of Buddhism to develop a philosophy or ethics of the image:

One of the ideas we are committed to is the Buddhist idea that one could neither be an aspirant for that image in the sense that one could not allow desire to overtake one’s relationship with the world but nor can one renounce that world and go to the other extreme. So the Buddha is talking about the position in terms of striking a middle path that takes into account that everything is dukham, misery, (sarvam dukham) and everything passes, is transient (sarvam kshanikam), so we’re trying to look at that image as something that begins to tells us this idea and to look at the image as a layered entity... And also the idea that you make Buddha icons with ice or butter, knowing that they would melt away, but there’s this pleasure of constructing that image on the larger horizon, that it’s transient, it’s going to go away, but at the same time, you build them all the same. So you’re looking for that kind of image that embeds in it this idea that it is at once real and unreal, at once desire, pleasurable to look at, but at once it’s pointing in the direction of one’s own finitude, one’s own vulnerability. (KPJ)

Buddhas made of ice and butter? As opaque as this idea may seem to those not familiar with Buddhist thought, it holds a key to a philosophy of the cinematic image that brings together a challenge to ideas about the nature of the image, of indexicality, of the self
and the relationship between the self and the material world, the self and the image, and
the nature of vision, and holds a key to the contemporary rethinking of documentary
form.

By putting temporality into the conceptualisation of the image, the image becomes
ephemeral, loses solidity, just as it undermines the solidity of the self in relation to it.
With the emphasis in conventional documentary rhetoric on the function of the camera
to record, fortified in documentary theory by Renov’s taxonomy of documentary
functions—‘to record, to preserve’—documentary takes up the role of attempting to fix a
moment in time. A conventional indexical approach to documentary aims to contain any
variability of that moment, to still the flux of time, the Heraclitan river, by capturing and
pinning the moment down, by attaching to the image a sound that delimits variable
interpretations. In this way it closes potential meanings within the narrowest possible
range, pins the spectator into the intended meanings and holds the experience of the film
tightly within the ambit of meaning. The focus on indexicality is not separable from an
implicit understanding of temporality, or more explicitly an attempt to control
temporality.

*Saacha* works with the temporality of the image to avoid the ossification of the viewing
process that characterises conventional documentary. The relation between sound and
image is not parallel, but plays out in syncopated rhythms as sound and image are
staggered, at times converging and then diverging. This staggered complementarity
disrupts the parallel logic of indexicality with its attempt to fix the signifier into a
signified at the moment of its reception, to curtail any possible reverberations beyond
that moment. The experience of the auratic, of staging the encounter with the image,
relies on the amplification of a moment—its dilation, its opening to registers of
experience that go beyond those implied by the concrete content of an image in a way
that challenges the indexicality of the image. By allowing the image to speak, to have its
own space, to come alive, the audience is allowed to take in the image, its feel, its
texture, its rhythm, to come alive with it, to yield to the environment of the image in the
mode of mimetic visuality. The film opens up the mutability of the material in its
reception – this thing born of a living relationship with the viewer, by nature a transient, ephemeral thing.

In *Saacha*, transience is embedded in the conceptualisation of the image and the city:

‘Both of us were acutely aware of the processes that are taking place in the sense that it’s like the Heraclitan river, that you can’t step into it twice. How does one begin to represent the world around us keeping that as one of the presiding principles?’ (KPJ)

The idea of transience plays out thematically in the film:

In terms of the visualisation itself both the poet and the painter are talking about some kind of transformation, personal memory and transformation of their specific spaces and the images and representation so we thought we would primarily look at processes that threaten to transform in some ways. (KPJ)

This focus is carried through into the ways of working with images of the city, its spaces, its people, its rhythms:

We revisited or re-shot the same kind of situations in more than one way. One example would be the lady who is selling tomatoes on the street. When it appears in the beginning, it’s more a business-like image and when it comes back there’s some kind of dark turbulence about it. So we were looking at city and space and personal memory and representation as not given or static, but at the same time dynamically transforming and we were more interested in that process that’s at work there. (KPJ)

The directors also implicate themselves in these processes of transformation, and describe the film as partly ‘a reflection on our own history as first-generation migrants to the city’. They talk of the changes that have taken place since the 1970s when those involved in the left had a strong sense of hope and of possibility for change and the

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20 ‘It’s a process that underlies human existence—how we are in that sense unable to cope. [It’s] a certain amount of humility vis-a-vis that process but at the same time the necessity to take a stance vis-a-vis those changes that one is perceiving’ (KPJ).
much more difficult and complex contemporary circumstances. It is in this context that the film explores these processes of transformation and ‘the need to keep that hope alive’:

What we tried to do is to celebrate what we feel is really like the spirit of a city like Mumbai. However adverse the circumstances somehow people get on with their lives. That’s something we tried to explore visually—all these very visual public spaces which are under threat and are now being swept aside by the forces of globalisation and supermarkets and the malls and the burgeoning upper middle class that is so intolerant of other forms of life like the hawkers or people like that, so somehow trying to reflect on all these complex changes. (AM)

The awareness of transience and temporality is also embedded in the structure of the film. The painter, Sudhir Patwardhan, talks of how he constantly shifts the focus of his painting from the dynamic, overwhelming rhythms of the crowd to the relative calm of intimate studies of individual workers. In an elegant analogous move, embedding self-reflexivity in the structure of the film itself, the fabric of the film weaves its way through different melodic paces, weaves complex rhythms of the city as it moves through different time-spaces—from the calm contemplative oasis of an Iranian café to the hurly-burly of the street, from the electronic dazzle of upmarket consumer stores to the relative calm of the street market.

By translating these ethical precepts of the self and the relation to the material world into a philosophy of the image, Monteiro and Jayasankar’s work throws into relief the ways conventional documentary is also founded on assumptions about the self and the world. Documentary conventionally affirms the mastery of the self over the world and meaning and does so through the relationship it constructs for the viewer with its image and by extension the relationship the camera/image and sound create with the thing. The idea of a middle way, a third way, is key to understanding how these precepts find their way into filmic form in Saacha. Jayasankar talks of not renouncing the image—he says ‘you do what you have to do’—but not grabbing the image either. Monteiro and Jayasankar
talk of bringing the rhythm of the body into the camera, of lingering. Monteiro describes this as a non-predatory relationship with the camera: as camera operator, Jayasankar is ‘not in a hurry to capture an image—it’s a much more contemplative stance vis-a-vis that image, sometimes taking the risk that you might lose it altogether but not in a hurry to capture what’s happening. It’s more taking a stance that’s respectful or contemplative in relation to what is happening and through that seeing what emerges’. They talk of their pleasure in the calm ‘rhythmic stillness’ of Chris Marker’s work.

By drawing these insights into an aesthetic mode, they create a film that has a particular quality of feeling that is uncommon in documentary. It seems to stem from this non-dualist approach—not renouncing but not grabbing—somehow in this third way the image has an integrity, is allowed to speak, and we the audience are allowed to listen to it, to engage with it, to relive the encounter of the filmmakers. Somehow, the cinematic qualities of sound and image are allowed to exist side by side with an exploration of a cultural milieu, a history, a politics. The individual is able to find a place that does not deny but does not entirely surrender to the tug of the city, that moves with it, absorbs its rhythms and feels the life-stream of the city. The accumulated encounters with fragments of sound and image work their way into the spectator as a form of mimetic innervation.21

21 Miriam Hansen explains innervation as ‘broadly, a neurophysiological process that mediates between internal and external, psychic and motoric, human and mechanical registers’. (Miriam Bratu Hansen, ‘Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street’, Critical Inquiry, Winter 1999: 25:2, p. 4). Crucially, in Benjamin this is understood as a two-way process, i.e. ‘not only a conversion of mental, affective energy into somatic, motoric form’ (5), but also the possibility of the reverse. The concept of innervation is linked here to Benjamin’s concept of the ‘optical unconscious’ as the condition of possibility for this innervation to be brought into play (10). Hansen points out the associations between Benjamin’s ‘innervation’ and the mimetic ‘psychophysical correspondences’ which Kracauer explores (TOF xxvix).

21 It encompasses both ‘a decentering and extension of the human sensorium beyond the limits of the individual body/subject into the world . . . and an introjection, ingestion or incorporation of the object or device’ (Hanses, op cit, 10).
**Documentary and mimetic innervation**

Radhika Subramaniam has written of the fast-paced montage cacophony of the Bombay cinema as an allegory for the city, for ‘the jostle and press of the Bombay crowds’. She draws on Benjamin’s discussion of the tactile and kinaesthetic properties of distracted habitual incorporation of the city as a model, arguing that a ‘physiognomic reading of the city requires the lexicon of the crowd . . . close, enlarged and shifting, not distanced, stable and contemplative’.

*Saacha* works with the lexicon of the crowd and with the tactile and kinaesthetic texture of experience of the city but it is constructed in an entirely different idiom to the Bombay cinema. As fragmentary as it is, *Saacha* does not build its sequences through the distracted mode of perception that comes with shock effects and the jarring of fast cutting to stimulate the perceptual rhythms of the city. Nor does it take up the other pole of the perceptual/experiential dyad that Subramaniam cites—‘distanced, stable and contemplative’. The film carves a middle ground—it is calm, to some extent contemplative, but by no means distant. It is close, enlarged and works with the shifting, transient nature of the city, but does not produce a fracturing, distracted mode of experience. There is a sense of yielding to the environment—the characteristic of mimetic visuality that Marks describes. The film goes into the city, into the sensory tactile quality of the city spaces, its rhythms, but rather than the jostle of distracted shock, it works through this mimetic visuality to produce what can best be described as ‘mimetic innervation’, an awakening, an enlivening of the senses, a bringing of the full sensorium into play in the experience of the film. It produces, in other words, what Benjamin proposes as a third way, the antidote to the numbing anaesthetic effects of distraction that marginalise the contemplative modes in modernity. The film brings both the city and the viewer to life.

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That the redemptive possibilities that Benjamin evokes in the concept of mimetic innervation find a congruence with the middle way, the third way that Jayasankar draws from Buddhism raises very interesting questions. Given Benjamin’s and Taussig’s account of the degradation of the mimetic faculty in industrial modernity, it would not come as a surprise that tools for thinking mimesis outside the dualist concerns of western philosophy would be found in the archive of Buddhist ethics and aesthetics. Despite Benjamin’s own spiritualist leanings, the formulation of mimesis offers a secular way of thinking about modes of experience that do not assume the overarching supremacy of the individual self and as such challenge the uncontested self assumed in much of documentary.

While there is a congruence between this third way and the notion of mimetic innervation, each idea has a different inflection. Monteiro and Jayasankar’s work has embedded within it a whole set of problematics specific to their cultural context, while also connecting with debates on documentary occurring in a more globalised forum. *Saacha* draws on a set of fluid, vital ideas, an aesthetic reservoir, a substratum that feeds into their film production in a vigorous, intuitive way. This substratum may not be deciphered explicitly on the surface of the film but leaves its residue in a quality of feeling, an immersion, a subtlety that resonates through the film and whose implications should reverberate through the theorisation of documentary.
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Walter Benjamin
WOA  ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.’

Tom Gunning
AA  ‘An Aesthetic of Astonishment.’
CA  ‘The Cinema of Attractions.’
NYSI  ‘“Now You See It, Now You Don’t”.’

Miriam Hansen
BCE  ‘Benjamin, Cinema and Experience.’
MPS  ‘The Mass Production of the Senses.’
NOW  ‘Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street.’
TOF  ‘Introduction.’ Theory of Film.
WSH  ‘“With Skin and Hair”.’

Adrian Martin:
DE  ‘Delirious Enchantment.’
MES  ‘Placing Mise en Scène.’
SOS  ‘S.O.S.’ Film: Matters of Style.


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Appendix 1

“Not Firing Arrows”: Multiplicity, Heterogeneity and the Future of Documentary: Interview with Amar Kanwar

Anne Rutherford

Amar Kanwar is a Delhi-based documentary maker whose recent work challenges many of the conventional precepts of documentary film. Profoundly political works that explore a range of issues around power, the rhetoric of violence, conflict and dissent, the environment, and issues of gender and sexuality in contemporary India, his films also explore the potential of sound and image to evoke an energetic connection with the spectator that is rare in documentary. Kanwar’s willingness to cast aside pre-determined ideas about his subjects and about documentary form leads him to discover unforeseen approaches to the material world and to the fragments of sound and image that make up his films. His hybrid works rewrite the possibilities of documentary form.

Kanwar has made over 40 films and was the first Indian filmmaker to present his films in Documenta, the major international art exhibition held once every five years in Germany (in 2002). His films have won multiple awards, including the Golden Conch Award at Mumbai International Film Festival, the Golden Gate Award at San Francisco International Film Festival, and numerous other awards at festivals from Kathmandu to Toronto. His work has screened at diverse sites ranging from multiple international film festivals—including Oberhausen, Yamagata and as part of Film South Asia in Kathmandu—to art spaces, open public spaces and in local political campaigns. His three recent films—A Season Outside, an exploration of the rhetoric of violence and non-violence; To Remember, a homage to Gandhi, and A Night of Prophecy, a poetic journey through sites of conflict, dissent, and survival in India—have toured as a trilogy, screening at MOMA in New York, Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Geneva, and at numerous other venues.

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Rutherford: You have talked about wanting to create spaces in your films where multiple relationships could coexist within a specific sequence, operating on intellectual, emotional, rhythmic, and other levels. Could you explain how you think about these levels of the image?

Kanwar: If you were to just look at your own self, you would find that there are many experiences, thoughts, definitions—fragments that span a very large amount of time in history that all constitute your own self. My own reality at this point in time is not uni-dimensional, and when you see the scale of multiplicity that exists in your own reality, you have to accept the fact that similar multiplicities exist everywhere. The moment you accept that, you have to realize that when you communicate, you are not talking to any one single point. Even if you are speaking to one single person, that person is put together of so many different layers. Then you see the possibility of being able to communicate differently. It is possible for me to speak in a simple, straight, uni-dimensional way, and I’m not saying you should not, but it’s far more enriching, interesting and real to be able to communicate in multiplicities. I don’t want to make a fad out of the word multiplicity—it’s not some mystic thing. If you’re able to see the complex inner diversity and heterogeneity within individuals and, therefore, in audiences, then you’re able to see the many dimensions of communication itself. Film is an unbelievable medium—you can do what you want with sound, music, ambience, image, and color. You find that when you start putting these together, it is possible to create a constellation of experiences that have the capability to relate with the multiplicity of life and audiences and eventually the multiplicity of the maker as well.

Rutherford: You’ve talked about the way you approach a film and said that at the beginning, you “fatten” yourself and try and put yourself in a frame of mind where you start to develop intuitions about locations that might otherwise seem to be quite ordinary. Could you explain what you mean?

Kanwar: What I meant by “fattening” oneself is [it’s] the preparation actually—it’s useful to get confused, to broaden one’s canvas, to speak to as wide a variety of people as possible about the work that you’re doing. If you keep getting obsessed in that way, without being very worried about whether you’re going off track, then there is a possibility of suddenly slipping into a certain mental state of mind. It’s easier to explain this if you see a dancer or a musician getting into a certain zone during the performance. If the build-up before and through the performance is right for the dancer, you’ll find that at a certain moment the dancer finds his or her inner center. As veteran dancers would tell you, if something like that does happen, then the audience gets released as well, the relationship changes, and for that period of time, there is a connection that moves into another realm during the performance. Many little journeys then begin. It’s not something peculiar to film; it’s a state of mind you can get into.
It’s easy to see something special in something special, but it’s the ordinary images that are filled with the untold stories. If you prepare so as to allow yourself to relate to the multiplicities of reality around and within, listen to every stray remark, guess the end of every stranger’s unfinished sentence, constantly try to understand the outside world and at the same time search for your own inner center, then you may, at different points during the research of a film, get into that state. Those states are nice. Your relationship with the world around changes. You then easily start seeing these sets of ordinary sites, physical locations, objects, people—you start reading them differently and so start filming them. Every image taken, therefore, has an inner link that you discover and rediscover, even more so when you reflect or when you see the images you have collected later.

What I’m saying is that if you’re at a particular place, and if you’re able to relate to that place first in its multiplicity, which is actually what its reality is, and if you are able to listen and so on, then you have the capability of finding a multiple set of signs, images, and words that constitute the soul of that place and person. Then, when you get that image or word/image combination, you find suddenly that it has far more meaning than you had thought, and not just for yourself, but for a much wider set of audiences as well.

Rutherford: A lot of documentary reduces multiplicity to one or two channels and that’s why I think this idea is fairly radical in documentary thinking.

Kanwar: Many documentary filmmakers have moved into other realms of short film making, driven by the urge to satisfy their own search, hence creating newer types of stories and storytelling. The conventional documentary world has to enrich itself by reworking its own understandings of reality, the meaning of communicating, and relating to multiplicities.

Rutherford: Multiplicity of form? Structure?

Kanwar: In form and structure and not just that. I mean you cannot have multiplicity in form if you don’t have multiplicity in content. They feed each other. I am not talking about tripping out with some zip zap broken down, “oh! can you feel the texture of the soil” kind of thing scrambled up and presented in some incomprehensible kind of non-linear way. You have to be able to relate to reality in its many-dimensional way, since the reality you are trying to talk about itself is filled with many dimensions. Compassion, intelligence, honesty, responsibility, plurality, and multiplicity of discourses funnily enough power form. The depth and meaning of your relationship forces you to evolve a method whose inadequacies you subsequently keep working on.

I keep getting fascinated by Indian classical dance where, for instance, you may find that within the nine minutes of a performance, the dancer has switched twelve characters. You understand because you know the basic story, but still the skill and accomplishment of the form is amazing. Not only is

Asian Cinema, Spring/Summer 2005
the dancer switching between human characters of multiple ages and different
genders, but is also becoming a bird, a snake, a god, a cloud, a butterfly, etc.
Simultaneously, each character is traversing a very wide range of emotions
and supposedly conservative audiences are sitting very happily
understanding it. When I compare that to film, film offers you so much more
that you can do, and if you are able to relate to this multiplicity in terms of
content, then your form will actually evolve in that direction. Then you’re able
to interlace your image, sound, music, ambience, and words in a way that
allows different individuals to find different sets of meanings in it. You find
that if you have that kind of a sequence, your audience starts saying that they
want to see the film again. And in a sense, they would want to keep seeing it
again and again because every time, they are finding more hidden in that multiplicity,
hidden in their own multiplicity. So there are all kinds of connections which do not
necessarily form in the first viewing.

**Rutherford:** Your editor, Sameera Jain, has said that before *A Season
Outside*, you hadn’t necessarily worked in this way, and it wasn’t something
that was fully formulated. She talked about the process of trying to work out
how to make this film work, about a structure and form that evolved during the
process of making the film.

**Kanwar:** Yes, before I hadn’t worked in this way, but was probably driven
to it by the fatigue of trying to construct documentaries in the conventional
way. It’s about experimenting...it’s not that you have a format that you worked
out and applied...if you research in a certain way, if you follow interconnected
leads, if you allow association to lead you in any direction, does it enrich you,
lead you to find the threads that tug at many hearts? How do you find a zone,
place, territory, image, icon, or symbol that has many unseen strings coming
out of it. What will make you stumble upon that image? Could your method of
searching for that image impact upon you finding it or not?

**Rutherford:** I’m interested in exploring the ways that documentary can
work with the sensory qualities of the image to open up the spectator to a certain
kind of looking, and to me, there are many sequences in *A Season Outside* that do
that, particularly the border scene. The way you’re talking about how you construct
your image in terms of the language of sign and symbols seems very different to
this idea of the sensory qualities of the image.

**Kanwar:** I don’t think it is very different actually. I presume that when
you refer to the sensory relationship, you are talking about a more meaningful
relationship between the audience and the image. If I were to ask what is
meaningful, then somebody would say more wholesome, somebody may say
more physical or emotional, more integral or organic, and different people
would prescribe sensory differently, but I presume you mean all the words.

**Rutherford:** I wouldn’t talk about it as meaningful actually. I’d talk about
it as a certain quality of experience, bodily experience.
Kanwar: But if I were to push you further in terms of what you mean as bodily, then what would you say? Something hits you in the pit of your stomach?

Rutherford: Yes, visceral. And that doesn’t necessarily rely on the content of any sign or symbol.

Kanwar: I don’t think so. I don’t look at it like that. This cup can become a sign and a symbol depending on the way you look at it, depending on what happened to it before and what’s happening around it. I presume it becomes a symbol or a sign because it has something inside it that is relating to you. . . then I’m saying it actually has many things inside it, which is why it has the power for you to relate to it. Some things probably have meanings, connections, and memories inside them that can have the capacity to relate to a larger number of people. If [I was] to have a visceral reaction to an image or a sequence in the film, it has to be pushed further as to why have I felt this inside me. Obviously something has touched or triggered something, somewhere, and I’m saying that this can only happen if there are many things that are working at the same time, because it’s loosening up something, pushing you somewhere, creating a certain space inside of you. Not just when you see that, but maybe just before that or just after that.

Rutherford: So, when you’re trying to develop an intuition about an ordinary location, is this what you’re talking about, to find signs and symbols that can be generated from that location?

Kanwar: Yes, I’m saying that sometimes you will see something that you will not normally see and you will then subsequently fill it with your own energy as well, your own gaze, your own interpretation, and your words. It inherently also has a certain strength and power in it, [that is] why you picked it up. All these things will not necessarily give you a sensory feeling; they will only create a possibility of doing that, more than some other images.

In A Night of Prophecy, for instance, there is a lot of work on skin in the film. . . skin is very important in the film, in terms of your body and so on. [The images] may not be creating a certain sensory, gut level reaction to you when you see it, but they may be doing it to somebody else. There are some sequences in A Night of Prophecy that will make some communities’ skin tighten and not for others. [For instance] an image on the old man’s shoulder, when the camera goes into the texture of his body...

Rutherford: The quality of his skin?

Kanwar: It’s not a question of the quality of the skin. It’s about un-touchability; it’s about your physical self, your body; it’s about how critically huge and mammoth is your body when you look at it.

Rutherford: Is it like the camera giving you intimacy with the skin?

Kanwar: No, it is not [that]. It is actually, that in the collective experience of the [Dalit] community, if you were to speak to them and to see their literature and a lot of their autobiographical work, you will find that—to give a parallel—

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like in the stigma of race [where] it’s the color of the black man’s skin—in this case it is with your entire being. If my shadow were to cross your shoulder even, then you would have to go take a bath to cleanse yourself. So it is myself, it is my physical body, and the sheer impact of that is enormous on the mind and emotions of a person who is in that situation. I can only imagine.

I’m creating a certain terrain for audiences to relate to that sequence through varied routes...intellectual, emotional or through instinctive gut level feelings. There are signs for that community itself, but signs that I am searching and creating. They also have my energy, my eye in them. Again, I cannot assume that every audience will have a sensory gut reaction to every part of my film. There will have to be sections that will work differently for different people.

Rutherford: You talked about finding a way that that multiplicity is no longer an impediment but can actually enrich the ways you work and the vocabulary that you work with. Could you explain this?

Kanwar: Once you see and accept that there is a heterogeneous audience, that each member of the audience has a complex history of life experience and memory, it is a bit pathetic if you are going to start making unilateral messages for such a rich, complex audience. You will find no end of people telling you how this kind of audience or that kind of audience will react, but actually I feel it doesn’t work like that. The power of ideas and images and ideas put together is far stronger than just saying this works and this doesn’t work. When you relate to multiplicity, when you allow yourself to relate to different dimensions and different ways of communication, it frees you, it allows you to start relating to the world around you in a far more complex way. The moment you accept their complexity and your complexity, your film, your communication, is more real and it’s easier to do. You find the possibility of enjoying your work far more. There’s less pressure, there’s less anxiety of finding the right pieces. You will find the pieces which will become right for you, not the fragment that is supposed to be correct, according to some preconception.

Rutherford: You could probably say that the audience in India is the most diverse audience you’re going to get anywhere, but you’ve said that this way of thinking about the audience as multiple is actually not the common way of thinking here.

Kanwar: As far as documentary is concerned, not as far as dance [or] theatre [or] literature [or] poetry is concerned. None of these places necessarily have related to audiences as uni-dimensional.

Rutherford: But documentary does?

Kanwar: [Yes]. Every form evolves, so... classical dance and folk traditions are several hundred years old.

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Rutherford: If you’re working in this way there’s a lot of open-endedness about how the images get interpreted. How do you work with that politically, given that your project is to make political films?

Kanwar: I don’t think that dealing with multiplicity and putting forth your point of view are contradictory. Further, I think in the global political situation, any political activist would know that the audience he is trying to reach out to is of many kinds with many rationales and many histories. Even if you want to make just a convincing kind of argument film, you will find that you don’t end up convincing all.

Rutherford: The classic response to that is to narrow the discourse down into the most simple and the most banal.

Kanwar: Yes. I’m not trying to oppose one with the other, but it does not mean that every message, every communication, has to be like this. We are not firing arrows that have to hit a single target. We are trying also to create certain experiences. How can every communication work if it is unidimensional? It cannot. It can achieve certain things, but communication is a much larger phenomenon. I sometimes find it useful to describe the film as a space for a set of experiences. In a situation highly charged with political debate where people are asking what is your message, what is the solution, how do you argue and so forth, I find it far more fruitful to say that I’m momentarily changing the way you perceive things, the way you relate to things. From the experiences that I create for you for that 40 minutes, there is a possibility that you may come back to where you were before, but if my content and my imagery has the capacity to relate to many aspects of your life, then there is a very powerful possibility that you may not be the same person after you’ve experienced this. That experience will not leave you or will stay with you for far longer, because it’s connected with you at many levels, rather than just connected with you at a single rational or intellectual level.

Rutherford: Do you think that the ability to acknowledge reality as multidimensional is a personal thing or that it’s something that comes out of the experiences of being Indian?

Kanwar: No, I wouldn’t say that it is Indian.

Rutherford: The question comes in some ways from hearing Dipesh Chakrabarty talking about the “British idea of personhood.” I think that Griersonian documentary is totally infused with the British idea of personhood which is tied up with empiricism.

Kanwar: Yes, I would then want to ask [why has] this concept of personhood been constructed, what objectives does it fulfill, does it have any relationship to the market and capital. More industrialized societies have tried to homogenize their own selves in a certain way. So I would say it’s not necessarily Indian. I’m not an expert to be able to make such a generalization, but I presume that you can find ways of relating like this in several parts of

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Asia and Africa, and maybe South America as well. Maybe also when you live in the degree of this diversity, you’d have to be daft really to not see it.

**Rutherford:** Could you talk about how you think about structure in *A Season Outside?*

**Kanwar:** When you reach the point of scripting, that preparation points you in a certain zone, so that you’re able to say things and absorb certain things. The film is very carefully constructed, every word, every paragraph has been rewritten and rewritten over three or four months, and, in the process of honing, it has been opened, it has absorbed a lot. There is also one track that is working very clearly through the film—there are sequences that keep oscillating between something very large [and] something very small, something that is very intimate and something that is totally public, so in a sense you expand and contract and expand and contract.

The film is also in many ways constructed [around] a lot of correspondence between the public at large and Gandhi on the whole question of violence and non-violence. There are many schools of thought that support violence and each of these has a fundamental argument. Many of the letters that Gandhi received in his active politics of 30 [or] 40 years, he made public and responded to them publicly. In many ways the film is also based on these schools of pro-violence as well as the letters that Gandhi received and [his] replies. [The film] is entering into the inner-space of each of these pro-violence arguments and finding images that draw you into that scenario, open up that argument, disturb it, confront it, release it. I have carefully constructed sequences intellectually, conceptually, philosophically, personally, and analytically that have been put deliberately in a certain order, so that it keeps connecting through different schools of thought, as well as different contradictions within the same person. You are able to find a way to weave yourself through the intimate parts of what people are thinking, and because it keeps connecting and releasing between the intimate and public, you find you let go and enter a certain journey. That journey is the solution, that passage is the experience and not the end of the journey.

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Appendix 2

‘Negotiating Indigenous Documentary: Storytelling, Audience and Cultural Sensibility.’

Gulpilil: One Red Blood, directed by Darlene Johnson, follows the life and career of multi-award winning Aboriginal actor, David Gulpilil, through interviews, clips from Gulpilil’s films, and footage of his life with his family and community in Arnhem Land. Darlene Johnson talks about some of the difficulties she faced in attempting to make a documentary that would do justice to an Aboriginal sensibility, specifically to the humour, the vigour and the complexity of David Gulpilil.

Anne Rutherford: Marcia Langton has written of the desire in Indigenous cinema ‘to move onto matters of sensuality, intercultural discourses which enriched our humanity, and the love of landscape and place which might come about through such discourses’. Gulpilil: One Red Blood seems to take up this challenge through its focus on the life and work of David Gulpilil, whose experience in Australian film culture and whose very presence throws many of these issues into relief. Could you talk about how you came to make this film?

Darlene Johnson: I first met David on the set of Rabbit-Proof Fence, and he approached me to make a documentary about his life. I just said yes, of course, surprised that it hadn’t been done before. David approached me originally as an Aboriginal—I would have never thought of approaching him to make a film about his life. He approached me, and that’s proper protocol from an Aboriginal perspective. He wanted someone to help him document his life story, something he could pass down to his family, a document with an Aboriginal sensibility.

What kind of agreement did you have with David about how you would work together?

I gave him a copy of the cultural protocol that I had developed for Stolen Generations and said, this is how I work—you can have copies of all the rushes, you look at the editing, make suggestions, check for cultural authenticity, sacredness—we do it that way, we work culturally. That helped set up trust from the outset. Given the priority you gave to making a film with an Aboriginal sensitivity, did you get to make the film the way you wanted to make it?

Not fully. I filmed with David in Raminingin, and there was no substantial research time. David is very camera-savvy so he said just come up and film as soon as you get up here. Also documentary is largely constructed in the editing process. A lot of it is trial and error and I didn’t have the time to really explore the possibilities, to explore fully what the documentary could have been.

How do you think it could have been different?

The approach to making a doco from an Aboriginal perspective could have been developed more. Like the way that David tells stories—it’s very poetic and that was one thing that I wanted to capture in the film, his style of telling stories was really beautiful and it wasn’t straight and bland and boring, it had a lot of colour and a lot of layers to it. There could have been more depth, more of David and his world and his personality, more feeling, more of his subjectivity. There could have been less constraint.

Were those constraints because the documentary form is linear and you couldn’t fit his personality, his subjectivity into a linear form?

Yes, it’s like there is an assumption that documentaries are made in a certain way, and the film could have pushed those boundaries more.
Do you mean giving more space to Gulpilil’s performance, the way he tells stories?

Yeah, exactly. Based more on his imagery, rather than a linear narrative. I was interested in exploring his voice — getting layers of his voice, bringing out the layers of David’s story and his life so that you weren’t just getting one single meaning in the doco that just went from beginning to end, but different levels of meaning coming through at different stages. What I love about David is that his sense of humour and insight gave me an opportunity to make connections to layers of representation in cinema, black and white sensibilities and different interpretations of history.

Do you think the film is essentially linear?

Yes, there is a sort of chronology to the way the story unfolds. That was one thing the broadcasters wanted.

So you didn’t necessarily want that chronology? Did you want to organize it differently?

I would have liked to work in different ways, exploring the possibility of cultural themes or different ideas based on facets of David’s life. Like jumping back and forward in time and being more edgy and creative and artistic with that. But I didn’t really get a chance to do that, and you can’t really know that unless you do that in the editing, try that approach out.

Why do you think a non-linear approach would be more appropriate for working with David?

Because David doesn’t tell stories that way, he doesn’t talk in any chronology — he’s such a passionate, intensely creative, interesting, complex character, he speaks and says everything at once. And it’s trying to capture that and make sense of it in a way that’s coherent but also works with his way of storytelling, trying to get that sense of meaning across in the way that he does. And if the structure of it was developed in a similar way, based on a lot of things coming together … it could be more Aboriginal, a more original, culturally-appropriate approach to the structure.

Do you see that as an Aboriginal way of storytelling or a David Gulpilil way of storytelling?

It’s definitely an Aboriginal way but David has a specificity to his mode of telling stories because he’s such a worldly person and he’s got so much in his life to talk about. David talks in circles so that there’s no clean beginning, middle and end, and it’s that way of telling stories that comes back around and around, and sometimes the story gets bigger or longer with each telling or more dramatic, or there’s a little bit more added to it, and that’s where the fun is. I think that’s an Aboriginal thing, but also a Gulpilil thing, because he’s a bit of a drama queen, he’s a performer, he knows how to keep an audience captive. He has his own dramatic build-up technique in the way he develops stories and I think it’s pretty hilarious.

How do you imagine that you could work with film in a way that would do justice to that?

I would really love to make a film based on the Aboriginal sense of time. Like the notion of Dreamtime — past, present and future are all in one, so time is here and back there and in the future. And I would have liked to get more of an in-depth look at David’s cultural interior world, from a Mandaplingu perspective, to open up the cultural space — looking at the culture from within, so that it’s not just observed from outside …

Do you feel that the film just scrapes the surface?

Oh yeah, there could have been so much more, definitely. I think for people that know nothing, it’s pretty informative, but for me there’s so much more that could have gone in there. Like being able to illustrate and work with the cultural belief system, the Dreamtime and the cultural things that relate to that particular group up there, being able to use that in a way structurally, to transmit information about cultural stuff. Like using paintings as devices to transmit a whole lot of things to do with maintaining land and culture — it’s a very powerful tool for the people up there. David’s also a painter. I wanted to film David working on a painting and telling me stories about the importance of that, but we only had three weeks in Arnhem Land.

I can see the potential for One Red Blood — the sequel. If you were going to do part two, what would you do?

[Laughs] You could have a series of paintings based on the Dreamtime and Aboriginal law that would be like little chapters, and that would be a way of structuring it, like chapters, but also to show the mythic qualities and realm. You could show traditional songs or legends that have relevance today and use visual techniques to link them to contemporary footage. It could be so creatively interesting and artistic. I didn’t get to work with the contrast between the cultures as much as David lives it. I wanted to play visually with the contrast so it wasn’t just transmitting information but made sense in a visual way, more poetic, so you see meaning and interpret meaning in different ways rather than a type of didacticism.

So you wanted to push those boundaries?

Yes. My whole reason for making the film was about who David is as a person. I’ve tried to let the subject — in this case David and his world, his story — dictate how we make the film. I feel that what gets set up a bit is like culture versus technique. There’s a cultural perspective that I’m interested in and committed to, and people don’t trust that as a basis to work from. You could do that so much more if there was a clearer recognition that that can be a way of working. The implication is that you have to do it the way that’s familiar and secure.

Do you think this is to do with ideas
about who the audience is?

Maybe it is. In this case it was made for the ABC and has to work for an ABC audience. When I asked what the criteria are for what kind of films you make for an ABC audience, I was told, ‘so long as it’s a good film’!

Would you say that the imaginary

What I love about David is that his sense of humour and insight gave me an opportunity to make connections to layers of representation in cinema, black and white sensibilities and different interpretations of history.

ABC audience was implicitly a white audience or a non-Aboriginal audience?

Definitely a non-Aboriginal audience.

From the discussions we had at the time of the editing, I had a sense that you were constantly negotiating to keep things in there that addressed an Aboriginal viewer, things that might not be clear or might be obscure to a non-Aboriginal viewer. But your position was that to an Aboriginal audience, they would be very clear.

Definitely, and that’s why I was keen to leave those things in. In the film, there are things that Aboriginal people get. Like the ceremony [footage of a young boy’s initiation ceremony], and other points throughout the film that’ll speak specifically, directly to an Aboriginal audience. It would be nice if other people got it too, but if they don’t then that’s fine, because not everyone’s going to get everything. There seems to be this whole process about documentary, everything’s collaborative, everyone has to have their say, but who owns the story? I mean foremost this is David’s life story. It’s not my story, but I’m the director, so I have a responsibility to his story and the way it should be told.

Is that a big part of the challenge you face, to get people to understand that it’s not a unified audience, that you’re catering to several different audiences?

Yeah, I realized that more in the editing, that that’s what was important in terms of this film—there is a multiplicity of audiences, and we shouldn’t be making films just for one particular audience.

So how do you work with that sense
that in a film one part of the audience will understand some parts and not others, and there will be other sections that other parts of the audience will get?

That will vary every time you make a film. It’s a negotiation. You could have examples of where it works successfully in film, but in making films you have to arrive at that through the process of doing it. I think it’s important to acknowledge that as a framework for thinking about documentary film-making, and making films that deal with cultural stuff. I didn’t really think a lot about it as a way of working before One Red Blood, but I intuitively knew that David’s Aboriginality, things that would speak to blackfellas, had to be in there.

What difference does that acknowledgment make to the kind of film you would produce?

Well, it would definitely have more humour in it, a particular Aboriginal approach to humour, it wouldn’t be so straight and flat. It would have more of a black sensibility in lots of things—in telling stories, in the interactions and relationships between people. For example, when Gulpilil tells the ‘yes story’ [the story of his first meeting with director, Nicholas Roeg] he tells it four times and it’s the drama of how long it takes him to tell that, and having its own sense of style and drama to the telling, which is hilarious. And the reaction of Aboriginal audiences is that they relate to the flow and laugh their heads off. Thankfully, a lot of whitefellas find it funny too.

I would like to have more of that style. Not that everything would be a comedy, but more based on an Aboriginal way of seeing and doing things. It can be little things, from family-oriented events or ceremonies, the respect or acknowledgment that Aboriginal people give to each other, the way that things are understood and known between people—lifestyle things, connections to family, connections to country.

Do you think that if a film is seen as addressing a non-Aboriginal audience you can’t include those things, that there is an assumption that they wouldn’t translate?

Well, I think there is a general assumption of that, and somehow it constrains you when you know that in the editing stage there is more of a push for the conventional approach. But I think that I can include things that speak more directly to an Aboriginal audience, and I think, all right, so not everyone’s going to get it. When you think about Aboriginal people watching films that are white films made for white audiences, well sometimes it works the other way around. I just think there is a lack of cultural understanding about making films for a plural audience.

In the process of making a film the way that you’d like it to be, are you actually inventing a new form?

It’s not just a question of form, it’s within the form. Every time you construct meaning in the editing you’re making so many decisions about what you’re constructing as a story. That’s hard to identify and it does come down to personalities and opinions. The difficulty was because it’s so fluid. It was hard to argue why something didn’t necessarily work, or was right for the sort of documentary that I wanted to make, because it then comes across as a personal issue rather than as an issue of a cultural framework.

Would you say that there’s a documentary form that’s like a skeleton, but the way people interpret and fill that out is very intuitive—what feels appropriate to them in a culturally-specific way?

Yes, as well as the type of documentary they make. It’s very instinctive.

If your intuitive judgements were sometimes not understood, do you think that was because they did not match recognized documentary practice?

Sometimes, yes. Because there wasn’t a framework for what I was saying.

Meaning nothing that’s already been done?

No template, nothing to point to saying ‘see, this is how it’s been done before. This is how Aboriginal people do this’. That’s not to say that there aren’t any, but I didn’t have one at the time. It’s hard unless you actually spend so much time up in Ramingining with David and his mob and understand their cultural references, their way of telling stories and communicating. That was one of the main challenges.

Is it something you know as lived, but maybe haven’t seen represented on the screen?

Not fully. I think it’s a common problem across the board, unless it’s films made specifically for Aboriginal people, for their own purposes and in their own communities. I’ve seen instances of what I was attempting to do, which was making a film that can be for lots of audiences, not just for Aboriginal audiences, but which included an Aboriginal mode of storytelling.

How about something like Bush Mechanics? Do you think that works well with an Aboriginal sensibility?

Yeah, definitely—there you’ve got a whole black perspective on bush mechanics. It’s a whole other take on how they maintain their cars and survive that no-one else would have thought of, but blackfellas do because they’ve had to survive with that kind of humour and quick thinking. And in terms of the overall story, it’s not a conventional story. There’s no climactic ending or a set-up and a pay-off like in a conventional storytelling sense.

Are there other films you’ve seen that achieve that?

Mitch Torres’ film, A Whispering in Our Hearts—it’s an oral storytelling history and that’s based on a cultural perspective on knowledge and family. Her’s is such a personal thing, and you don’t often see that. Like Erica Glynn’s film about the spirit men, Ngungkari Way, you don’t often see that kind of culture in film either. Even in fiction—Atanarjuat, the Inuit film. It was exciting seeing that film from an Inuit cultural perspective.
How do you think you can overcome these problems that arise in cross-cultural collaboration?

There are people who regardless of their ethnicity or culture have spent time with Aboriginal people, have lived with them, worked with them, who actually understand an Aboriginal aesthetic, or storytelling or a point of view. It’s not so much who you are, but that intercultural experience … that knowledge base. I find that it is an obstacle, not having a knowledge or an awareness about a sensibility that is so in antithesis to your own, and why the conventional process may not be appropriate. I’m told that even in the case of camera operators, it’s better that they can have this objectivity, but with an Aboriginal context that is such a complex cultural system, surely by being familiar with the way it works, codes of behaviour, attitudes, cultural beliefs, it would inform the film-making approach much better. Because otherwise you’re shooting in the dark a bit.

What do you want from the collaboration process?

Rather than me having to go over into my collaborators’ head-space and translate what they are doing I wish that would come the other way. That a white person would know this stuff from a cultural framework position or from an instinctual one, and could translate my perspective. To have that communication, that shorthand. I want to get to that point where interesting work can be produced, so we can start developing things that take us to another level.

Do you think there is a misunderstanding about cross-cultural film-making, thinking of it as translating one culture into the terms of another, into the mainstream?

Yeah, I think so—for example I could want to do something one way but it could end up being interpreted with a very white perspective.

But what is the white perspective that it would be translated into?

Just something that speaks to white people. It takes the whole black thing, and turns it into a white thing. It just changes its meaning.

Do you think a model of cross-cultural film-making is a good model to work with?

Sometimes. One of the ways I like to work in documentary when dealing with Aboriginal people is that the Aboriginal subject has input and control over the way their story is represented. But I think that in the white way of making the film, with the director and the producer, there’s a hierarchy. When you’re dealing with cultural stuff, say with Aboriginal people, if it’s their story, their culture, it’s important that they look at the film. Other people get really nervous with that and don’t like it because it’s like the subject has veto. The difference, say, with many whitefellas, is that everything comes down to control and power, but it’s not really about power, it’s about a cultural understanding. You’re dealing with a different culture that tells stories in different ways, communicates in different ways and expresses themselves differently. So I’m trying to work out other ways of understanding how that is and documenting it.

So that has some integrity?

Yes. It’s their culture, they know more about their country, their language, their law than we do. It makes much better sense if they can look, comment and give us feedback during and after the filming about things to do with authenticity or culture, sacredness or gender issues. Because you think you might be getting something at the time which is correct, but it might not be correct or later you might alter its meaning in the editing. A sense of cultural ownership is important and should be acknowledged. There’s an economic ownership—it’s the Western thing, it’s the white way of doing it. Then there’s cultural ownership, and that’s not valued or respected.

What struck me about the way the film ends is how you asked David and the community, ‘are you happy with the film?’. Clearly that was important to ask, but also to demonstrate that protocol within the film itself. It’s unusual to see that kind of negotiation on film. How significant is that within the film?

Well, take the ceremony, for example. People might just look at that and say ‘Aw, yeah, it’s blackfellas just dancing around’, or some other people might find it truly amazing, which it is. What’s more important for me is that it’s actually a big deal for the people up there, because it speaks to them. And it took weeks to negotiate [its inclusion]. There are actually people in the film who are negotiating, and only those people know that that’s what’s going on, to do with that ceremony. And that’s great too, I love it. It’s very specific to that mob up there at Ramingining and Maningrida, and only they know the real importance of that. There’s stuff I don’t know and can’t even ask, but it was a big deal for them, and involved a long process and a lot of people to make a decision to have it in the documentary. And that was one of the best things about making that film, going through that and then flying back up to Ramingining in a little plane, showing it to the elders and to the community before I locked it off. My producer was tearing his hair out, but I said, ‘Well, this film won’t be finished till I go back up there’. I couldn’t imagine doing it in any other way. It was just the best outcome for the whole process, the documentary, my relationship with David and the people, the elders. And at the end of it there was a film that they [the community] were happy with. And I realized this filled in a bit of a gap, when David said, ‘they’re proud of it, they believe me now’. A lot of the young people in the community had no idea of the body of work that he had produced over the years. They hadn’t seen him in that light before. So it was really an important process for a lot of reasons. It was amazing.

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