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A RETURN TO COMMERCIAL CINEMA IN A DIGITAL AGE: REROUTING THE  
AFFECTIVE IMPULSE UNDER NEOLIBERALISM

by

COREY COUCH

Under the Direction of Angelo Restivo, PhD

ABSTRACT

I return to Siegfried Kracauer's questions regarding cinema's capacity to illuminate the state of our political environment through film aesthetics, now within the context of neoliberal economic policy. During Industrialization, norms for the urban center and its technologies were not yet set in stone. Kracauer tracked aesthetic variations and mass interest as commercial cinema eventually settled into traditional Hollywood form. Now, traditional aesthetic boundaries between art and Hollywood cinema begin to blur amidst the "anything goes" media environment derived from rampant deregulation and the era of digital media. I am therefore interested in whether there remains a difference between commercial and art cinema and how we might define revolutionary cinema under postmodernism. For this, I propose an affective genre of politically resistant cinema and explore the process of tracking it in the age of digital media.

INDEX WORDS: Neoliberalism, Affect theory, Frankfurt school, Hollywood, Critical theory,  
Film theory

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by

COREY COUCH

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of the Arts

Georgia State University

2018

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Corey Couch  
2018

A RETURN TO COMMERCIAL CINEMA IN A DIGITAL AGE: REROUTING THE  
AFFECTIVE IMPULSE UNDER NEOLIBERALISM

by

COREY COUCH

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August 2018

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated first and foremost to my family Carol, Scott, and Alex Couch for teaching me strength in compassion and curiosity. However, I'd also like to take this moment to reprimand you for never teaching me how to whistle. Compassion and curiosity feel a bit more complex than whistling, and this was clearly your job. Secondly, I'd like to dedicate this to Diana Massengale, my soul mate and best friend who has fawned over *Trainspotting* and *Lord of the Rings* with me throughout the years. After all the movies we watched in the basement, I have officially bragged about you and our twenty-year friendship (and counting) in a published document on film theory. Finally, I'd like to dedicate this to my roommates Emile Pryor, Isaac Horner, Christopher Wong, and Goop the Cat for celebrating each small success along the way, often with arms in the air and tiny cheers. The stress is not quite so stressful when you know you get to come home and reenact *The Terminator*, film a buffalo wing soda tasting video with wine glasses and fancy outfits, or find a way to work the phrase "the old switcheroo" in your thesis to appease the antics. I love you all so much, and I would not be half the person I am today without you.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

We have learned in school the story of the Gorgon Medusa whose face with its huge teeth and protruding tongue, was so horrible that the sheer sight of it turned men and beasts into stone. When Athena instigated Perseus to slay the monster, she therefore warned him never to look at the face itself but only at its mirror reflection in the polished shield she had given him. Following her advice, Perseus cut off Medusa's head with the sickle which Hermes had contributed to his equipment. (Kracauer 305)

The crisis of modernity amidst German industrialization prompted questions for Kracauer that return with a vengeance in the shift toward digital media today. For Miriam Hansen, “Kracauer's early speculations on film decisively counter his long-standing reputation in cinema studies as a ‘naïve realist,’ a reputation based largely on a reductive reading of his later works written in English” (5). His conception of the Gorgon's head as a mythic equivalent to the horrors of reality certainly attest to this. The moral being: Should we confront the horrors of the beast head-on, we surely succumb to its paralysis; whereas, “the images on the shield or screen are a means to an end; they are to enable or, by extension, induce—the spectator to behold the horror they mirror” (Kracauer 305).

The success or failure of necessarily depends on the curve of the shield, so to speak. It depends on the relative accuracy of that reflection or, conversely, the grotesque distortions therein. Kracauer *knew* distortion was inherent in the cinematic image as “the real-life material disappears in the artist's intentions” but argued this was a necessary intervention to perceive the horror *and* maintain any potential to strike a hitting blow (300). The cinema's distortive qualities are simultaneously redemptive; they provide means to piece together broad societal connections

that become increasingly distant and abstract in daily life. The technology allows for immanent visual connectivity, even if the montage or image itself produces distortion. Those distanced moments can now be reconnected in new ways and extend our experience beyond our own perspective, so its distortions might become illuminating (Kracauer 304). Kracauer's realism was interested in those cinematic distinctions that best revealed the head of the Gorgon Medusa for what it was in his time, with the potential to master it in some way.

Now, however, we are forced to reconsider these ideas within the context of digital media with its new regime of accumulation and structures of feeling tied under the rubric of neoliberalism. For this, Lauren Berlant looks to those pervasive new depictions of precarity that now resonate as something akin to affective neorealism. She situates these new genres and aesthetics as historically emergent in the 1990's, as those which are the result of postwar shifts in political and economic norms and, more specifically, those effects in which "decades of class bifurcation, downward mobility, and environmental, political, and social brittleness" have developed rapidly and become especially relevant post-Reagan era tax cuts and rampant deregulation (7, 11). As Miriam Hansen has done before me, I intend to mobilize Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Herbert Marcuse of the Frankfurt School to reassert the relevance of their questions in the present day. She, and I, believe the questions prompted by rapid transformation under Industrialization provide certain social and political "junctures" with today's rapidly changing media environment. While their ruminations are both strangely familiar and inspiring, I find these need to be reframed and reworked as Hansen proclaims but, more importantly, exemplified and fleshed out using cinema to best illuminate our current situation as Kracauer has done for modernity (ix).

In other words, the stakes are the same, but the terms of the neoliberal environment are

different. The “ideologically shelterless” man of Kracauer’s modernity was marked by a fragmentation of worldviews that released him from any collectively binding norms, and exposure to a vast array of content through digital interconnectivity has only advanced this process in postmodernity. In modernity, the abstraction and fragmented perspective that crept into the supposed objectivity of the sciences “impede[d] practically all direct efforts to revamp religion and establish a consensus of beliefs” (Kracauer 288, 294). The transition into modernity signified the catching up of culture to a system where “money becomes in a second sense and to a second degree abstract (it always was abstract in the first and basic sense), as though somehow in the national moment money still had a content;” whereas it was once “cotton money, or wheat money, textile money, railroad money, and the like” (Jameson 251). Jameson goes on to explain that incompatible modes of realism and perspective then produce contrasting institutions beyond the church. He identifies postmodernity as yet another stage of abstraction attributed to this new period of finance capital and globalized society “brought with it by cybernetic technology,” in which “mass cultural production and consumption itself—at one with globalization and the new information technology—are as profoundly economic as the other productive areas of late capitalism and as fully a part of the latter’s generalized commodity system” (256, 252).

The rapid environmental change brought about with neoliberal policy and digital media is comparable to the shift towards the urban center and new technology under Industrialization. Tracking the state of the political environment in a pivotal, potentially revolutionary, moment was of the utmost importance for modernity, and it has become relevant once more. Thus, Kracauer’s focus on immanence, experience, and surfaces that open up our ability to conceive the whole or structure from its parts maintain their relevancy with a new and different traction in the age of digital media with its attendant technologies of the image. This requires we recalibrate

our relation to the world in a more productive way. Whether this is possible in the neoliberal situation is precisely the question of Olivier Assayas' *Demonlover*.

In my first chapter, I will outline my method and propose the glitch as an affective genre of resistance. To do this, I will expand upon Steven Shaviro's comparison of cinema to digital code in tandem with *Demonlover*'s articulation of neoliberal existence. Shaviro argues that *Boarding Gate* ends with a question to defy the logic of neoliberalism that prefers to close off narrative as a complete fragment (Shaviro 63). I argue *Demonlover* does not leave things here. *Demonlover* knows the neoliberal situation intimately, and the question is not the end but equally the beginning of its own affective flow into the spectator.

The question at the end of the film is what I will refer to as a "break," an opening of ambiguity. The break is intentionally leaving a gap in the narrative that allows for spectator activity and completion. It is a moment of mutuality, of open potential and communal collaboration that is felt to be different in a pre-subjective affective register. In the break, spectators are no longer simply reacting to the proposed situation on-screen but actively participating and questioning what potential the proposed scenario might hold. For *Demonlover*, the question at the end of the narrative also becomes a "threshold." For a break to become a threshold, the spectator must be rhythmically saturated in breaks. The threshold not only opens up for momentary participation but provides an opportunity for the spectator to potentially pass through, desire, and adopt a process of questioning the potential of the given image *as habit, as a standard mode of being*. Finally, what I will refer to as "the code" is defined as the repressed, the behind-the-scenes or typically unseen required to produce the exchangeable image, including individual thought-processes and rationalization. The code is both unseen strategy and execution. In *Demonlover*, the characters feel compelled to strategically hide violent labor and pain in order

to construct the appearance of the desirable, exchangeable image. Both the compulsive mental process and the means fall within the code. In *Demonlover*, I will also compare the code to a “hidden camera” where we must infer the implied actions that might be going on or have gone on in an unseen space. Like a hidden camera, many interactions may straddle the bounds of visible image and repressed code. What remains strategically repressed from certain audiences may be accessible to others.

Essentially, *Demonlover* articulates the way its characters act in secret against the way they present themselves with their audience of the moment to create a parallel to the “code” or “hidden camera” in our perception. The code in lived experience is anything repressed from our view—especially if it is regularly and rhythmically incentivized to remain repressed from our view. The code, while invisible, directly contributes to desirable blind spots that reinforce our version of the world. The code in cinema are those subjects, objects, and events that must be repressed to create the fantasy narrative that also appears logical and coherent. The immaterial fantasy image produced on-screen or in the brain instructs what we desire to bring out in the image and repress in the code; the fantasy image is the goal or end-product of exchange. The collective tendency to operate by the logic of a fantasy image instructing the code can be termed “dominant logic.” Thresholds that desire to reveal neoliberalism’s dominant logic and the unending labor behind a fantasy image that will never find its completion can be said to desire the glitch.

In *Demonlover*, I will first and foremost exemplify these terms cinematically. To answer Kracauer’s second question of whether there remains any potential to master dominant forces in the modern, and now postmodern, situation, what we are looking for to release that energy from its perpetual affective cycle is a threshold. *Demonlover* is cognizant of its implications for the

neoliberal environment and regularly gestures at that fact. It knows its own flows equally begin at the end of the movie with the spectator. By leaving the question open, it opens itself up to dialogue. It asks the spectator to dive back in and weave their own understanding into the narrative gaps it has left blank. I argue the question is merely that pause or break that might open up a threshold, but we must actively take the offer to cross the threshold. We must continue the rhythmic breaks of questioning the given in our perceptual lens as we leave the interaction. We must adopt the threshold as a new mode of being that others might potentially pass through. The revolutionary property of the threshold is a giving back of agency—even if we choose to decline. The major property of the glitch is that it becomes as networked, mobile, and slippery to pin down as a *process* or *logic* like dominant logic itself.

After setting the stage with *Demonlover* to exemplify method and how to mobilize these terms, the three films following will be different variations on how to understand our affective relations, our spatial systems, and what kinds of breaks if any are effected by the films, and how they work. I would like to compare three films to discern whether any difference between desire in art cinema, Hollywood, and a cult movie, that might be considered between or beyond the spectrum, still stands. Now that the norms for commercial cinema, traditionally pitted against art cinema, begin to blur to desire unbounded difference, the traditional dichotomy between the two becomes less certain. When the new dominant mandate is the desire for the newest combination, does the aesthetic strangeness of art and cult cinema get lumped in and even contribute new combinations of fantasy images to perpetuate the cycle of fragmentation? Are there still distinctions to be made? I argue we must turn back to these questions once more in the neoliberal period. If we *must* desire, is there still a way art cinema can truly break from dominant logic in its affective form. Can we recalibrate toward more conscious, collective decisions where



productivity might form new habits and eventually be redefined in more humanistic ways? The question of whether commercial cinema still expresses as symptom the cultural questions of the period is vital to our current understanding of it as a reflective, albeit inherently distorted, form.

I have chosen *The Matrix*, *Naked Lunch*, and *John Dies at the End* as my three films. For *The Matrix*, society lives in a digital program created by a technological species. Technology then farms human bodies as batteries who live out their lives plugged into The Matrix through an embryonic sac. A hacker named Neo is foretold as “The One” who might destroy the Matrix and liberate humanity. Once he learns to command the rules of the digital code and bend the very fabric of its reality, he is no longer constrained by its terms and can implode its enforcing agents from the inside out.

In *Naked Lunch*, we follow an ordinary bug exterminator named Bill who becomes addicted to a household poison and hallucinogenic drug called bug powder. He then seeks out an entirely new life after accidentally shooting his wife in a game of William Tell. Bill then flees to Interzone, a vague location somewhere in north Africa, and experiments with drugs, sex, and non-human relationships until his old and new lives inevitably come together as one and the same. In the next scene, Bill is no longer running from New York or propelled from one scene to the next. He has packed up his life and hit the road for what appears to be a militarized city and, this time, solemnly but intentionally kills his wife’s look-alike Joan Frost to gain entry.

Finally, *John Dies at the End* revolves around Dave and his friend John who try a new drug called “soy sauce” after a local concert. Over the course of their journey, they fight mustaches that fly off cops, friends who host a swarm of sentient bugs, and different alien species that exist in our world. As they scramble to get out of each situation, they rank up a body count of marginalized characters along the way and inevitably stumble across a portal into an

alien realm. After blowing up the ultimate alien supercomputer who can predict the future, they successfully stage its death and return to our world as heroes.

Each suggests a non-human species is influencing our collective human existence undetected, and I argue this premise is particularly suited to allegorize the fears of the neoliberal situation. More specifically, in my *Naked Lunch* chapter I will compare this setup as a counterpart to vampirism. It is the environmental or systemic vision of a parasitic existence that thrives on humanity—although perhaps the dead preying on other dead, as we will see in *John Dies at the End*. Furthermore, each of these proposes a drug to momentarily alter perception so that we might connect some of those forces in lived experience. The drug, in this instance, suggests the necessity for mediation in the digital age in the same way technology acted as mediation in *Demonlover*. There is, however, an important distinction to be made. The drugs in *The Matrix*, *Naked Lunch*, and *John Dies at the End* present a narrative optimism towards our propensity to cross the threshold with the aid of a mediator. *Demonlover*, on the other hand, only proposes the potential for illumination in its dialogue with the spectator. Cinematically, *Demonlover* links up subjects, objects, and events that may seem unrelated as an indistinguishable blur for spectators. Technology in the narrative only further distances the characters from connecting the fragments across scenes. In other words, there is no narrative parallel to the threshold in *Demonlover* where *The Matrix*, *Naked Lunch*, and *John Dies at the End* allegorize mediation as potential for crossing the threshold (even if its characters stick to manipulation and being manipulated like in *John Dies at the End*). While the lens of *Demonlover* resists and minimizes difference against a neoliberal environment that incentivizes it, the mediation of technology in its narrative is often stifling rather than revolutionary. *Demonlover* is not a particularly optimistic take on our capacity to succeed. Thus, desiring the glitch is merely

an affective *genre* and not an overarching take on a mode of resistance or our capacity to succeed. They each retain their own personalities and opinions about the neoliberal situation. The glitch is revealing and resisting the terms of dominant logic—not a specific view of it.

In the same way, Jameson and Berlant converge on the notions that post-Fordist logic has since fragmented further into individualized cultural frames resulting from the historic and economic context of neoliberalism but approach their observations from opposite ends (Jameson 264, Berlant 4). With adjustments for terminology, there are quite a few similarities to be drawn between Jameson's "Culture and Finance Capital" and Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*. What Jameson refers to as an underlying logic with "metabolisms," tropes, and stereotypes, Berlant considers an underlying structure of affect that creates habits, impulses, and rhythms that might evolve into norms, forms, and institutions. Jameson conceives of the underlying capitalist logic spreading like a "virus" and the whole as its own "cybernetic structure," with subversive spaces turned into "experimental instruments and laboratories" to capitalize on should they prove successful. In other words, Jameson approaches the historic situation using terms that conjure up notions of objects, characters, and technology, with recurring words like structure, stereotype, and autonomous fragments (Jameson 249, 251-252, 255). Berlant, on the other hand, repeatedly uses more humanistic terms like historical situation in lieu of structure and lived experience or situation when speaking of fragmented perspectives. While they both refer to the same dialectic between the subject and their externality under neoliberalism, they use separate branching off points and different terms to paint a mental picture for their readers. Jameson leans toward the structure and object world, looking out, and examines the subjectivity that develops with and within it. Berlant takes a more personal slant and looks to how the objects and historical situation affect symptoms in lived experience.

They agree that neoliberal subjects no longer seem to share any dominant worldview broadly governing societal norms on the surface, but Berlant really hits on how value judgments ultimately depend on individual, case-by-case interactions, coming from a subject-centered perspective (Berlant 4). Berlant therefore argues what is collective about subjectivity in the neoliberal public sphere can be found in its precarity. We experience a continual sense of situational change, saturated by a constant stream of information, updates, and contradictory perspectives. These continually update our sense of the present, which appear radically different from one moment to the next, and we must adjust our own values and priorities sporadically (192). She directly links this underlying subjectivity to broader institutions and neoliberal demands that remain accessible to us only through the present as symptoms in lived experience where exposure through digital technology takes on a pivotal role (9, 11).

Since exposure is so radically different, no two combinations of memory and value will look alike. We must rely on intuition to create a tentative link to those broader institutions, utilizing whatever history and frame for history has been made available to us in conjunction with notions and patterns acquired in personal memory (52). Between unlimited frames for history and interaction with widely variant value judgments, each individual perspective evolves with daily exposure. We develop very individualized conglomerations of ideas (and ideals) saturated in a vast sea of digital content and contrasting situations. These fragmented individual frames produce personal content that is seemingly very diverse, though they all chart similar affective structures underneath. What is “ordinary” is short lived, and we begin to find ourselves located in what she terms, “a genre of social time and practice in which a relation of persons and worlds is sensed to be changing but the rules for habitation and the genres of storytelling about it are unstable, in chaos” (6).

It is at this point where Jameson and Berlant notably diverge. Whereas Jameson observes vanishing affect in postmodernity, Berlant finds its surplus, citing the sentimentally present, personal-is-political, intensified artwork across aesthetic sectors. She says, “[Jameson] mistook the aspirationally flat affects of a small elite sector of the aesthetic public for the experience of a general population,” (Jameson 264, Berlant 65) Methodologically, then, she positions affect theory as another phase in ideology theory and tracks the sense of the present not in waning affect but in waning genre in her effort to move away from the dialectic of structure (6, 53, 54). Using affect as key to reading the historical present, Berlant warns that “[affect theory] has not claimed that subjects feel accurately or objectively historical—this is why the concept of ideology had to be invented” and that “emotions vary while the affective structure remains” (64, 81). Thus, the new dominant genre is not characteristic in a traditional sense: the content is highly variable in the way it can manifest on the surface. Dominant genre must now be conceived as a structure of affect, not of narrative or tropes. Individual fantasies are internally constructed by the individual, whatever it may look like, and external content is channeled (facilitated, hindered, dealt with) according to personal taste. The process of channeling the inevitable flows of life to create the best-case surface-level surroundings one can muster remains the same.

The neoliberal subject, then, is always disillusioned by the prospect of the individual fantasy yet stuck in a bind. First, we cannot physically manifest a stable personal fantasy in a realm that must be collectively shared. Our surroundings become a field of tension to manifest desirable scenarios, where an ideal scenario for one will seem like an undesirable scenario to another. That constant tension makes it impossible to fulfill all desired personal scenarios, even if they were relatively stable individually. Second, digital media projects scenarios that exceed

the bounds of anything materially possible, and portions of the fantasy result from stimuli that ultimately rely on digital mediation to gratify. And most importantly, as per Berlant, the goalpost and terms of the environment always appear in flux, so most of our energy is spent channeling desirable or undesirable content that must be dealt with immanently in daily life. A stable subjectivity and long-term conception becomes nearly impossible in a world saturated with digital media and instantaneous access.

Beginning my comparison with *The Matrix*, I will briefly discuss how a film might express breaks that desire the glitch but, without a new logic guiding its construction, cannot propose a stable rhythm for the spectator to move through and move toward. In *The Matrix*, dominance is inaccurately substituted for the visible technology rather than the necessities of the situation. It keeps a tight hold on narrative progression and practically embodies Kracauer's earlier grievances on Hollywood form. My textual analysis will focus on whether there is still room for that pause or threshold in a movie that is tightly bound by traditionally limiting standards of commercial cinema now that the affective situation has changed. With incessant flows of contradictory desires (especially when the end-product is necessarily a collective effort), I will show how breaks from dominant logic can still make their way into commercial cinema. Ambiguous slippage or relative realism (for the neoliberal situation—once again will address this slippery definition later with Fredric Jameson) that longs for something else should be expected.

I find *The Matrix* is best read through Benjamin's concept of child-like play to understand where a desire for liberation tries to peek through. *The Matrix* is instead locked in a desperate cycle of old formats with new twists. Its narrative wants something else but knows no other way to construct the situation except to continually expand outward with a new combination of old formats. In *The Matrix*, I argue its break from dominant logic comes out best

in the scene with the Oracle where the children who might alternatively be “The One” open us up to chance. They also question the given definitions of objects and their typical use. While ambiguous slippage is there, this pause is easily overtaken by Jameson’s concern for “flattening of aesthetics” and drowned out by the rest of the context. It is a world where productively interacting with the alien species is defined in terms of villainy, competition, and defeat, and I find *The Matrix* lacks intentional or rhythmic breaks towards new ways to present this tired situation. When you desire to expose the code, this must become a recurring process to have any chance to create a threshold. Resistance must be as mobile and cyclical as the neoliberal situation itself to resist dominant logic in each new mutation. To combat the Medusa in its newest form, I find the break alone is not enough if it cannot lead, like a threshold, somewhere new.

In the third chapter, I will discuss *Naked Lunch* as a reading of the Freudian unconscious turned inside out and made plain. By substituting the unconscious for the surface, *Naked Lunch* gives physical representation to usually imperceptible influences. In this instance, a bug or alien creature acts as a placeholder to relieve the actual subject or object from blame. The actions no longer appear to originate in the acting subjects/objects themselves but through the influence of the bug or alien body in question. Through the unconscious, *Naked Lunch* finds a way to represent an invisible force while maintaining its accuracy—the way it can jump into every subject, object, and mutate within the same body in new situations. Using this depiction, the spectator does not have to deduce or piece together invisible implications as in *Demonlover*. His solution allows desire and influence to be visibly embodied without falling prey to the obsolescence of stereotype or cliché. Desire that is usually unable to be linked up to its multiplicity of sources can be represented directly in the moment of its perpetuation on the screen. For this, I show how desiring the glitch can manifest through an entirely different

strategy and aesthetics. When one desires the glitch, one desires to expose the code through the medium at hand. In the neoliberal situation, *Naked Lunch* shows how this might present itself on the surface using a completely different aesthetic and addresses the question of how a period piece might desire the glitch of a digital era. Yet *Demonlover* and *Naked Lunch* demonstrate that a stable process of evaluation is still possible when sentiments line up and parallel one another in the way they desire underneath.

In the final chapter, I will show how *John Dies at the End* takes an approach that is very much the opposite of *Demonlover* but strives to achieve a similar effect. Instead of blending the surface-level aesthetics into a singular blur despite disconnection in the narrative, *John Dies at the End* takes spectacle and stereotype outside the credible limits of the storyline and demonstrates how such drastic difference can become the norm. The difference between *John Dies at the End* and *Naked Lunch*, however, is *John Dies at the End* intentionally proposes a stable center to reveal the consequences of a self-centered, inflexible lived experience. *John Dies at the End* produces hyperbolized difference to justify the violent consequences imposed on marginalized bodies that must be rationalized or disposed of as Dave and John progress through their strange adventure. *John Dies at the End*, then, is an especially useful addition to dig deep into stereotype, and it delineates the terms for black subjectivity within the neoliberal environment I have explored in the first three chapters. *John Dies at the End* addresses the extraordinary demands female, disabled, and racialized bodies must operate within to become visible in an externality that naturally gravitates to center the lives of two less than ordinary white men at every turn. In other words, *John Dies at the End* allows me to explore the control affect grants to the surface when aesthetics are flattened to act as a tool to sort bodies. Using *John Dies at the End*, I want to know how dominant logic tends to propel certain bodies in



specific directions more often using the image as both a quick scapegoat and substantial rationale, whichever serves best in the moment.

As to whether resistant film can still move spectators towards a flash of illumination or inspire a desire for equally resistant habits under neoliberalism, the chapter on *Demonlover* shows the answer is unequivocally yes. However, there are new stipulations when commercial cinema's constraints may be strategically hidden beneath the on-screen visuals in affective flows. To connect to cinema's resistant properties, cinematic interaction requires more active cognition taken up on the spectator's end. The resistant film, then, aims to facilitate spectator agency and encourage dialogue over passive viewership.

The genre of the glitch, however, is not merely resistant. The glitch does not open up the threshold with any purpose whatsoever. *Under the Skin*, for instance, centers around an alien operating and feeding on humanity undetected, enacts consistent breaks, moves strangely, and opens up a threshold of resistance. It does not, however, resist to reveal dominant logic. It resists with a feminist purpose. It empathizes with the woman and desires to resist a heterosexual male-centric definition of the woman revolving around his utility. A film that desires the glitch is more specific than resistance. Desiring the glitch is to aim to reveal and resist dominant logic under neoliberalism. The threshold is the determinant for whether a film that desires the glitch also resists dominant logic and achieves the glitch. In the chapters that follow, I will examine the allegory of alien desires that secretly guide humankind and drugs that facilitate our capacity to perceive and interact with them in a more productive way. I intend to use this allegory as a surface-level control to determine how the constraints of commercial cinema Kracauer found in traditional Hollywood narrative find their counterpart in affective genre.

## 2 CHAPTERS

### 2.1 Demonlover

At first, the protagonist Diane appears to be everything her coworkers say of her: cold, ruthless, and inhuman. As the story opens, she injects an unknown substance into her coworker Karen's water on the plane back from their business trip. Karen's vision begins to blur, providing the opportunity for two anonymous men to guide and drag her into a garage and steal the work documents in her briefcase. The movie remains in chronological order, but we never receive such a direct cause-and-effect chain of events again. Casual conversations begin to feel like a front for the pervasive personal strategy at work underneath. Each office visit or limo ride seems to present some new piece of information that dramatically changes our sense for Diane's situation. We become aware of how much the camera is missing in every room and every home, and every actor has their own hidden motive. We can only infer through limited presence and limited dialogue, making it impossible to make any prediction about the true source and motive behind decisions unfolding in the present and how others may react in the next moment. Deeper business connections and long-term motivations are inaccessible to us, and momentary desires crop up unexpectedly that can only be dealt with as they appear.

When they are not strategically producing or reactively managing new affective scenarios, the characters trade most of their energy for those brief moments of surface-level pleasures when they can recharge using porn or video games, but these moments are better conceived as down time. Relaxation is not particularly productive in itself but a necessary part of maximizing affective exchange. In the words of Herbert Marcuse:

The basic control of leisure is achieved by the length of the working day itself, by the tiresome and mechanical routine of alienated labor; these require that leisure be a passive

relaxation and a re-creation of energy for work. Not until the late stage of industrial civilization, when the growth of productivity threatens to overflow the limits set by repressive domination, has the technique of mass manipulation developed an entertainment industry which directly controls leisure time (47-48).

In this late stage of capitalism, alone time and entertainment is transformed into affective productivity. Interactions with the object expose the populace to new libidinal flows that reveal new ways to rearrange their priorities once more, like potential energy recharging for its kinetic release. Motion can be internalized to parallel external, affective supply and demand, and digital mediation provides access to subjects as much as the subjects gain access to content.

Toward the beginning of the movie, digital exposure is very sexual and slightly sadistic, and a strange but seemingly innocent love triangle between Diane, Herve, and their translator Kaori bubbles up on a business trip. Towards the end of the movie, digital exposure is instead more aggressive and slightly sexual. We watch Elise kick and punch through a character in a video game as she lies naked on her bed. We watch women masked and violently tortured for sexual pleasure on a site called hellfireclub, digitally hidden beneath the animated porn sites we watched in the beginning. It is as if the small gestures, the normalization of violence in the sex indirectly produces the violence towards real bodies in the end. Elise, likewise, evolves from a paper pusher and corporate assistant to a major player who puts a gun to Diane's head in the name of the underground business. Diane, too, assaults an American business woman and shoots Hervé once he begins to get too violent with her in bed. Leisure appears to transform into influence. Characters can be guided towards new desire, towards eventual motion and subjective change. Digital stimuli stir value judgments usually reserved to moments of lived experience in what is externally perceived as internal peace, bodily rest, and mind-numbing stillness.

Digital media, from this standpoint, seems stifling rather than liberating. Through digital mediation, any idea can spur desires that seem unprovoked in lived experience and shift the direction of flows. Digital connectivity, in this instance, is like the missing camera—a scene that occurs off-screen or outside a character’s perceptual lens. This becomes apparent as Diane’s team secures a contract distributing Japanese hentai across Europe, and they move to the club to celebrate. Frustrated with Hervé, Diane heads back to the hotel, and he begins to get intimate with the translator. We cut to Diane watching porn in her bedroom back at the hotel, and they eventually call her up to come over and discuss some of the paperwork filtering in late due to time zone differences. The translator leaves the room to collect a copy, and Hervé’s affections flow directly into a passionate caress with Diane and ends as the translator returns. There was sexual energy in the air stirred by the hentai, the club dancers, the porn, and even sealing the deal that set some feeling in motion and allowed it to flow all the way through unhindered by each participant. While we can’t pinpoint the exact source or motive, each character appears to be reactive, not proactive, as they respond to the pressing needs in the moment, regardless of any sort of logical pairing or continuity.

At the same time, that energy didn’t bubble up *from* the objects or events themselves. As the team browses the hentai in the production facility, the upgraded 3-d digital models are compared to the 2-d animation to demonstrate the improvement in quality in response to the evolving expectations of their consumers. Both are violent and sexual beyond any physical capability, and the relative “realism” of the digital model depicts a lingerie-clad woman slicing monsters to a badass background track. The niche, subjective fantasy content is therefore not inspired by the expanding capacity of new technology but motivated by subjective demand. In this instance, the flows from the subject appear to be the active component, determining the

technological content; whereas, the objects and events appear as the driving force for the violence and love triangle. What these interactions with digital media show is how much changes in an instant by being in one space, which necessarily means we are missing much more of the overall situation in all the spaces we aren't. Digital contact acts like an instantaneous event or a hidden scene. Whether sexual, political, ethical, whatever frame digital content takes on the surface, it scrambles value judgments and alters which priorities seem most pressing on a moment-by-moment basis, and this is happening across all spaces at all times.

Likewise, there are infinite ways subjects might culturally behave when we think of all the possibilities. As we navigate the business dealings, our characters aren't geared toward humanistic pleasure, yet its proponents will resort to aggressive tactics and arbitrary social engagements to appear to offer the most profitable qualities (business and personal) and secure the desirable deal. Their livelihoods revolve around those qualities that are most profitable by the terms of business or their preferable peers instead of business and social ideals revolving around human ethics and utility. Characters shape their identities and modify their actions to maximize utility to some external entity— just like the hentai program.

In other words, the suppressing force of late capitalism is not located in any subject, object, or deliberate menacing intent by an institution or ideology, although the incentives of these certainly play a prominent role in managing those norms. It must be conceived as a reversible process, a two-way street. It is neither here nor there but instead in the space between, in the flows and the conditions under which those flows must be maintained in the everyday in their very limited perceived relation to that looming transnational market democracy as an “interlocutor, not a structure” with its “monitored subjects who are permitted to pass by and get on with things if their comportment does not go awry” (Berlant 242). This is where our agency is

unwittingly preoccupied and contained, within the affective task of managing those available options, using the limited present laid before us.

This exhausting cycle of desire often appears as an aspirational narrative of hard work and meaningful progression. In *Demonlover*, we see the same situation in a new way. Figuratively bound and blinded—or literally in full-body leather and chained to a bed in a sex dungeon—every radically different moment for Diane feels the same. Subjects *and* objects construct their foundational content reactively, and the characters scramble to detect any new information about the current external demand to get the jump as the relative supplier, rather than recipient, of the coming action, when there is no moment in which they are truly the active, originator of desire.

Any immanent, connected sense for a postmodern totality requires technological mediation, certainly, but this is clearly stipulated by the digital form itself. Attempting to identify patterns of flows between subjects and objects alike, Steven Shaviro finds, “[Affective labor] has come to have an increasingly crucial role in the organization of neoliberal, globalized capitalism... Instead of seeing the economy as embedded in different sorts of social, cultural, and political institutions and practices, we must now see all forms of society, culture, and politics as themselves embedded within the matrix of the (so-called) ‘free market.’ There is no longer any way to distinguish between work and leisure... The very performance of affective or immaterial labor is already an exchange in which value is, all at once, produced, realized, and consumed” (Shaviro, 48).

The cultural questions of the neoliberal period could not be expressed through a filmic medium because the hentai, the computers, the projection of the X-men character onto the full body fetish suit appear as casual interactions in lived experience but together provide momentary

access to the instantly-gratified desires of a structure that is not just capitalist but particularly affective and neoliberal. Shaviro charts this continual affective motion as a total system in which the rapidity of affective exchange creates a concept that is neither subject nor object yet a viable target of study itself where his texts “trace the lines of force that generate and shape the world space of capital” (135). This environment or air is more like a socially-produced force; it has rules and tendencies like attraction and repulsion. Like the digital image, there is always an invisible code that must exist undetected to produce the surface image. And like the digital image, there is no material referent that seems to instruct those motions (Shaviro 30). There is only the desire for a scenario to exist.

In this way, *Demonlover* traces Berlant’s cruel optimism. What unfolds on-screen is intended for exchange, and everyone is attempting to best shift affect in their favor. Each character is trying to gravitate towards nodes they momentarily perceive to best bring them closer to their version of the ideal “fantasy life” scenario. With each new scene, it becomes clear their perceptual location to the fantasy is always in flux and their environment always appears to be changing. When exchanges only lead to more exchange in value, there is no peace or end-game where the personal fantasy *can* materially exist. Working towards the personal fantasy only stifles its attainment in a cyclical bout of cruel optimism. Even relaxation is just exchange for some expected future return. Leisure becomes preparation or, perhaps, socially valuable to affectively exchange amidst peers. Thus, the personal fantasy is never visible but exists all around us and very materially in symptoms of our lust to make it real.

What does manifest socially, then, is never one coherent fantasy but more like an affective market that reflects the collective desire for value accumulation and exchange. For instance, the correspondent for *Demonlover*, the American distribution company, asks Elise if

it's hard to get pot in Paris, and Elise says she'll try. There is this blurring between business and pleasure, illegality and legality, that is socially rewarded and extends beyond the interpersonal interaction. Desire (affective demand) provides stipulations for the code—instructions for what kind of result they are supposed to produce. It doesn't matter what the code looks like underneath, only that the intended result is produced. The code remains perceptually nonexistent—a non-problem—unless the code causes a glitch, prevents the viewer from the desirable result, and becomes visible. If the stressful, unfortunate circumstances it takes to continually aspire to towards maximizing desire fulfillment (no matter how momentary or unethical) is revealed, perpetuating any and all desire seems selfish, unethical, and undesirable.

The way this logic incentivizes strategic embellishment and concealment parallels Shaviro's observations on our inability to directly link cause and effect, resulting in an affective system where "things feel random when they are not, and things feel systemic when accidents actually happen" (73). Whether Karen was deliberately drugged by Diane or coincidentally mugged by the competition or some anonymous perpetrator hardly matters. The resulting situation is the same and, with the fast pace of business, they have to hire and fill the position. Diane benefits from what visibly unfolds, and it matters not why or how it became that way. Although Diane flips the channel to porn alone in her bedroom, she hides it in her conversation on the phone. It does not become a part of her persona to Hervé, and she says she's watching the news. The porn doesn't fit the desirable image for a business relationship, but it might be something hot to disclose to a lover. There becomes an incentive to create an identity that produces not just a desirable image but one within the terms of what you're willing to offer, and life begins to imitate the anonymity of the Internet. You become only what you create in that space. When subjects are dependent on affective interconnectivity to move towards a more



desirable node, the cognitive space behaves like the digital space—or the digital space behaves like the cognitive one.

Thus, the reverse is also true. If the desired effect can be visibly falsified on the surface, there is no need for any genuine situation. The end product is what matters not the means. The means are just code. When Diane tells Herve she has been with Kaori sexually, Hervé says he doesn't believe her but is visibly unsure. It doesn't matter whether she did. She doesn't hesitate, and the effect is like she had. The hidden code could be Diane legitimately in a sexual situation with their translator, or it could be convincingly making a case for it. Whether she finds a way to achieve her desired image or result in five or one-hundred lines of code makes no difference.

Diane has developed a strategy that almost wholly relies on flexibility and the blind spots of perception. Instead of producing and strategically arranging personal content, she suppresses it. What her coworkers interpret as cold and inhuman is frustrating because it is blank and unreadable. They cannot assess her and strategically exchange. What information she does make visible is not personal. She does not provide any means for latching on and making a connection. She refutes the affective exchange system that constitutes our postmodern social reality, and it renders others immobile in her presence. They cannot advance towards anything desirable using her.

Diane chooses to advance towards her goal through disconnectedness, independence, and her inability to be read. She gets promoted when Karen is incapacitated and appears to move to new locations without the “proper” affective connections but by producing the right time and circumstances. Scenarios that should be locked and inaccessible to her seem to open up without the password. Instead of making connections, she operates in secret, drugging Karen and breaking into the American correspondent's hotel room. She is infinitely flexible but

predominantly off the grid. She operates like a hacker and conjures up the environment she needs instead of struggling and negotiating with competitors. She is unbounded by the collective, legal terms suggested for individual code and unrestricted by any social ethics or norms. As a plant for the competitor, she has strategically aligned her fantasy scenario with a direct demand or goal from Mangatronix. She doesn't have to frantically re-route towards any personal fantasy scenario to acquire her stability. Instead of balancing and re-shuffling, she benefits from the advantage of focusing on one demand and following it through the quickest route. However she became this way, Diane should thrive in this system.

But this is precisely the kind of thinking *Demonlover* instigates then shuts down to make a point. The tide eventually turns for even the most capable character who seeks to operate within the terms of incessant, unending exchange. The point is: it doesn't matter. Every fragment serves the same function and every space becomes effectively indistinguishable from the next. We don't know what made Diane this way, and we don't know what will become of her tortured body when the movie ends. It's not about Diane. That affective situation is the main character, the main subject, the major object. It is the same everywhere, in everything and everyone, at every point in time. What made her this way was the push and pull of the affective situation, floating down the river or struggling to fight the current.

This sense of interchangeability and reversibility is demonstrated through the camera. At one point, it is positioned outside the meeting, watching an event entirely irrelevant to Diane's narrative. One of the Japanese partners is on her phone saying, "I want to get out of here I'm bored to death" and "no, it's not Karen. Her name is Diane, a real ice queen." The conversation is typical. It seems casual, like most dialogue, and it's something Elise has said about Diane on many occasions. We see a man in the background having a similar phone call off to the side out

of ear shot. This moment seems only relevant for us, the spectators. It has no narrative function. It simply makes us aware how many of these exchanges (in both terms of a conversational sense and interpersonal exchange) are happening internationally. We don't know the dynamic between the players in the Japanese business and what connections and flows might be in the works for them. Commiserating with the anonymous recipient might be this woman's own strategic ploy to gain some advantage or an "affective alliance" who wants to console her, expecting long-term exchange and future reciprocation. We could equally, as spectators, be observing the man in the corner or following an entirely different business transaction through its stages in any country, business, and set of characters. Whether we're with Diane in the meeting or outside with some relatively arbitrary character only serves to substantiate the entire situation as a total process.

What is important for the camera in such a world is not which space it chooses to show us in each moment but how it moves. When the differences in content no longer matter, we must look for differences in the motion and gesture itself. Sometimes, the camera looks at objects before the characters reach for them. It knows Karen will raise the briefcase and coyly points towards the constructed-ness of its own situation. The camera can only know in advance when there is a logic, a movie script and a reason to turn. It has intent in its own motion and desires perpetuated through the technology.

Other times, the camera follows the action just a moment behind, trying to keep up when it senses motion or change that out-paced it. It is precarious, improvised, and handheld. It is always trying to best navigate the blur, looking to whatever draws attention and what is making noise or in motion. It is sometimes a little ahead when it senses something coming that we don't, but it can't get very far ahead, knowing seconds before we do. In the same way, we'll hear a sound or see a reflection seconds before it, and it will pan to catch up with the action. Despite its

attempts to always react to anything sudden or potentially important using the same logic “manage the flows,” it cannot keep mechanical precision and offer any consistency in timing or style in which it does this. Sometimes it is just ahead, and other times it is just behind. It can only be sure that it follows the mandate to remain close to the action, one way or another. After all, the action could be a monotonous phone call outside the meeting when the active, significant content is subjective. The fact that the woman is bored with the meeting could be useful information if the anonymous camera were substituted for the perspective of a coworker who wants her job.

The camera is particularly human in this capacity. It is similarly subjective in its determinations for what constitutes the action. It first follows Herve’s hands as he reaches for bags but then pans over to the drugged Karen, concerned. Different subjects take precedence wherever it flows to, but it always responds to a sense of danger or immediacy. In the meeting area, it casually floats from person to person and rarely shows everyone in the frame. It looks toward the current speaker, as if we are a participant in the discussion rather than some omniscient technology that can teleport to “optimal” spaces to view the whole scene. Diane will look, and the camera will become intrigued and follow the direction. As Diane’ more pointedly accuses the producer’s characters of being underage, it slingshots back a little more forcefully the same way she turns. It is making subjective determinations through the technology. When the translator speaks, the camera stops cutting her off and briefly shifts horizontally to include her in the frame then moves back to the correspondents. This particular gesture lacks emotion; it’s an action of duty rather than one of interest. It views the translator as a tool, and the camera notices her like it does the cigarette plate when the partners ash into the bowl. She receives focus when the discussion calls for it, but she is not considered a significant player in this scene.

In many instances, the camera will mistake a reflection or mirage for the action itself and linger there. In the club, the camera looks across the floor at the bright colorful lights and frantic movement but turns to find a DJ right up against the lens. We may be distracted by what looks like the action, but it's actually just a spectacle or light show. Relativity can be deceptive, and something very close cannot be sensed in all the immaterial chaos, distraction, and movement. How do we decide what receives focus when it all seems so different, pressing, and demanding our attention? Like the camera, we must make subjective determinations and hope it's the most useful information for our next action. But if we look to the content as a total system, we find that it doesn't matter which direction we face after all. As a totality, it is not in what we look at but how we look. There is vital information that the motion itself can contextualize about the content. When we develop patterns for how things tend to act in response to different content and why, we can use context and understanding to extrapolate a more accurate picture to the missing portions. We can reveal portions of the hidden code through the symptoms.

### ***2.1.1 Trembling Upper World Reflected in the Dirty Puddle***

In many ways, we have answered our first question. To present the Medusa in a more illuminating and productive way, digital mediation, in some form, has become necessary if we hope to potentially master what we would traditionally term "dominant" logic in its new affective form. By exposing its lust for interconnectivity through maximizing libidinal flows, we can reflect the situation more concretely when it desires to stay hidden beneath some proposed perpetrator. A movie like *Demonlover* provides a more accurate shield for which we can spot the medusa, but only through digital mediation do we have access to this kind of immediate visualization which can reflect the affective stagnation of a digital world.

By the end of *Demonlover*, for instance, the small details in perpetual motion eventually

add up to an overall sense of interconnected logic through its sheer disconnectedness. We can now chart a sense for that affective totality alongside Steven Shaviro's analysis in *Post-Cinematic Affect* and, especially, those on *Boarding Gate*. When flows move so quickly and interchangeably between subjects and objects, an untethered floating air of reversibility emerges that flows through and joins all things. It is an adhesive as invisible and self-produced as digital code that renders all these seemingly distinct, random fragments functionally driven towards exchange. We understand how all the parts become relatively interchangeable and, "under such conditions, multiple differences ramify endlessly; but none of these differences actually *makes a difference*, since they are all completely interchangeable" (Shaviro 131, 133). They all perform that underlying affective function, however appropriate in their various sectors, to add up to one total function that wants nothing more than endless exchange (Shaviro 132). The same underlying logic of "manage the action" seems to imply "be near the right action" and "construct action" and "internalize action" modified for the circumstance. Life, work, leisure, relaxation, identity all operate under the terms of value accumulation and exchange. Without value, rest and immobility can't be converted into a marketable, exchangeable, and ultimately active trait.

A genre that focuses on affective flows over linear, cause-and-effect, firmly centered narrative progression, then, has the potential to be penetrative and illuminating instead of shrouding. It breaks through the distortion of the presumed clarity of the pristine perceptual surface and creates an overall clarity in its tiresome, infinite reflection and perpetual blur. The smokescreen is only visible when nothing else is. To unify affective chaos, the cinema must create its own shroud, a redemptive distortion of pervasive irrationality using an endless reflection of desire.

But there's more than just affective flow at work here. Would *Demonlover* feel the same

without the aesthetics on the surface? The recurring blues, whites, reflections, fluorescents, and blurred frames feel particularly sterile like a doctor's office. Diane plays racquetball in the same dull colors and reflective spaces as the offices. It is one compartment that is slightly altered to perform the necessary functions for sport in a world of compartments, each with their own specific utility: an office, a gym, a home, a club, etc. Each have their own sub-compartments to complete a more targeted job and each their own reflective surfaces and moments of digital glow. Likewise, the Japanese offices are only distinguishable through specific cultural signifiers, and their business rituals like the "kanpai" before the meeting are modified for cultural taste. There are paper sliding doors and Japanese fashions, but the square frames and compartmentalized spaces remain the same. It has distinct portioned windows, monotone tan/beige compartment rooms, and fluorescent wall lights. While the culture is different aesthetically, its function to complete its place in the system of flows is the same.

For business workers, then, visibility is undesirable. Abiding by business fashions says something very specific. It voices agreement to a system of interchangeable parts if I feel like I've chosen it. The slight distinctions in my outfit can attest that I am not the same—we just all chose this position and have similar values. This goes for any job and any scene—how well you're received in a punk band absolutely depends on your look. All the feeling that constitutes an individual is flattened to their perceptual image in the viewing subject:

In Jarman's *Last of England*, however, about which words like surrealist have loosely been bandied, what we really confront is the commonplace, the cliché. A feeling tone is certainly developed here: the impotent rage of its punk heroes smashing about themselves with lead pipes, the disgust with the royal family and with traditional trappings of an official English life. But these feelings are themselves clichés, and disembodied ones at

that. One can certainly speak of the death of the subject here, if by that is meant the substitution for some agonizing personal subjectivity (as in Buñuel) or some organizing aesthetic direction...But everything here is impersonal on the mode of the stereotype, including the rage itself. (Jameson 263)

In *Demonlover*, physical laborers like servers, dancers, and flight attendants all stand out with bright colors or fancy outfits to be easily identifiable for those who utilize their labor. Aesthetic is matched to function, and the dancers' outfits must not only stand out but also accentuate their sexuality. There are aesthetic parameters for each business, but a relatively interchangeable aesthetic for each sector says you are apt for advancement should a slot become available.

In a more sinister view, camouflage is a strategic luxury afforded to corporate workers because it allows them to easily blend in with the environment when making moves from one room to the next. In one moment, Diane finds the bottle she used to drug Karen with a note on her desk. Just before, Hervé told Diane he last saw the needed folders at her desk. Because of the seemingly direct link, Diane believes Herve put the bottle on her desk and asked her to find it. Later, we find out Elise placed the bottle at her desk. Along with the hustle and bustle of the urban space in Kracauer's modernity, the blur of the crowds that match the sleek, minimalist surroundings provide the perfect cover for constructing "chance" events and direct cause that will become lost in the fray. The beauty and terror of a prospective encounter that might unfold in the modern street becomes the perfect mask for intent in the frantic scramble to get ahead by any means (Kracauer 72). The mute outfits grant protection as a perpetrator of deceit and criminality. The ease of blending in is a sign of systematic trust. They are assumed to be performing the correct motion, even and especially if that motion is unethical or illegal. Correct is defined in terms of value accumulation, and they possess the most potential to do so—and



even more if they can do it illegally without exposing the code. This style is the privilege and comfort of corporate aesthetics. In the streets on her moped, Diane's shiny black helmet and her reflective sunglasses bounce back outside images and protect her own. Yet that image is only met by car windows, glass bus stops, metal trains, and endless reflections back and forth and back again.

To answer our question then, of course, Kracauer and *Demonlover* would agree. It is not that the surface becomes meaningless or impotent with respect to its affective flows, even within this new digital context, but quite the contrary. Just as affective flows cannot manifest except through subjects and objects, any total structure cannot be visualized except through the surface, the actions, the narrative, and the aesthetics themselves. *Demonlover* demonstrates how the surface features are imperative to the visibility of the whole. It does this through aesthetic coordination that bleeds into each scene. There is no access to its assertions about the terms of that totality except through the surface, and digital video reaffirms Kracauer's view that the film of modernity was not merely appearance or imitation that interferes with access to the sentiments of true inner life but instead a "gateway" rather than a "dead end or diversion" (286, 287).

### ***2.1.2 Desiring the Glitch***

As for Kracauer's second question of whether there remains any potential to master dominant logic in the modern, and now postmodern, situation: What we are looking for to release that energy from its perpetual competitive logic is a threshold or break. To gauge the different ways that cinema comes to express or negotiate the spectator's relationship to their own affective impasses, then, we must first identify the way postmodern cinema posits the terms of the environment. What kind of world do they intimate, and what does this imply for the spectator's own positioning and their abilities within these terms?

With all these stimuli already in motion, flows cannot be diffused or suppressed; they can only be redirected. Societal organization already requires a transformation of the libido. It must be redirected to incorporate painful situations of work in order to achieve progress, common interest, and delayed gratification (Marcuse 43). The break I am considering must be more like a pause—a moment that allows for thought and conscious redirection. In the words of Herbert Marcuse, “the instinctual energy sustains and even enriches the life of the individual. The restrictions imposed upon the libido appear as the more rational, the more universal they become, the more they permeate the whole of society. They operate on the individual as external objective laws and as an internalized force” (46). If dominant patterns have been naturalized as habit and taken as natural order, the pause is a means to open up potential to do something else. It is a break in the cycle that allows us to question the givenness of the natural order and flows. Using Berlant’s terminology, the break provides an opportunity to redirect toward new habits, impulses, and rhythms that might eventually evolve into norms, forms, and institutions—even if it doesn’t.

Thus, Shaviro says *Boarding Gate* “does not offer answers to any of these questions; its accomplishment is precisely to keep them open *as questions*, when the logic of neoliberalism seeks rather to foreclose them” I would argue that *Demonlover* does not offer any liberatory answer here in terms of intra-narrative suggestions, but it does give its answer in a procedural form. The question is the pause, but this is only the first part of the process. *Demonlover* is self-reflexive and recommends a new way of desiring altogether. It is aware its own flows equally begin at the end of the movie *with* the spectator. If *Demonlover* proposed a clean narrative answer, events would be easily aestheticized and internalized as pure content and perspective, like Jameson’s punk rage. When movies close the narrative, events often appear to happen over

there in the narrative space. Fictional worlds appear separate from their viewers, and we feel safe to pick whatever value we might attribute to the cinematic world while repeatedly exposing ourselves to the same affective logic of value, hierarchy, and exchange.

Since *Demonlover* leaves the question open and indeterminate, the movie as the active component becomes more visible. A question places the responsibility for its contents clearly on the spectator's shoulders. When the intent is not clear through the narrative, its presence is noticed only in its absence. With the moral on the surface, we feel we know what the movie wants. When we don't, it becomes unsettling. We're forced to recognize the movie is not the narrative but an interaction. What it has done and what it wants from the spectator is different than what it says on the narrative surface, and there are desires it may not even know it has. From here, there are two options. We either resort to the instinctual habit and rationalize the movie as bad aesthetic content, as a disappointing story with poor narrative design, or we learn to want to understand it.

However, the open question is an eminently modernist tactic, such as we see in Antonioni, Bergman, or Fellini. To move the break towards postmodernist needs, we need to move from a shock of agency towards an environment of agency. We need breaks that saturate the spectator for a period and illuminate not just a new impulse but a new regular mode of being. To learn to question our perceptual register in each moment as habit, we need a flexible and rhythmic procedure that can push back against a dominant mode of rationality. To break with dominant logic, we must continually perpetuate a sensorium that requires questioning the given and the gratifying as a mode of desire.

In *Demonlover*, its continual breaks of confusion, of the seen and unseen, become a threshold to question and explore new ways of desiring to piece together the unknown. The

continual breaks ask us to use our own agency, our own logic, to deduce the missing piece. With all the uncontrollable desire in the atmosphere, we cannot, nor should we desire to, go back to any instinctual form of libido. Libido, masked by the necessities of modern and now postmodern life, requires its own suspension to reap the long-term benefits and joys of advanced organized society (Marcuse 18). It is instead a question of how we can redirect that momentum using the same desire underneath the fantasy to develop more grounded fantasies toward more collective desires. In other words, it is about desiring more productive scenarios where productivity is defined in human terms with more compassionate rather than combative modes of being—not about eliminating desire, subjects, or technology that mediates individualistic, competitive desire. These are merely channels. How do we re-calibrate desire toward more exploratory, humanistic tendencies where personal gratification cannot be achieved without mutual gratification instead of a winner/loser dichotomy? Using these same channels, how can we forge connectivity and perceptions of similarity that are not at odds with personality when our fragmented worldviews glorify individualism?

This is not a question a film of the glitch reserves for academia. Extensive affective analysis is not necessary. The spectator who wants to answer the question can look at the film and feel the desperation. At the most basic level, *Demonlover* uses aesthetic continuity and gestures to its spectators in a sort of challenge as if to say, “What are you going to do with *this* proposed situation and *these* stimuli?” A frustrating, stagnating, and painful reality is not triumphant. Citizens are like frightened animals, assuming a naturally competitive stance to best preemptively defend themselves from incoming aggression. They can only afford to look out for one another if that person is valuable and compatible. In this context, you either become the aggressor to manifest personal desire, assume a passive stance—or even just fail to keep up—

and be left vulnerable to the scenario of someone else's desire.

This is one of the answers *Demonlover* provides. The way we construct and express the situation is vital. If the situation feels driven by choice, even in dystopic films, we don't desire to break from that situation in the first place. As I will explore in *The Matrix*, the narrative dystopia appears like meaningful progression. One need only choose the heroic path and gradually work towards some stable goal. The source of dystopia has a sense of reasonably contained "thingness" that made the bad choices rather than an invisible logic or air that permeates even those people, actions, and objects we view as good and beneficial. When we conceive of an imperceptible logic as cause, we have to reattribute the aggression from the visible source to an invisible one. In lived experience, assembling the patterns and fragments to a more accurate whole is time consuming and difficult to connect. When we experience aggression, we are incentivized to believe it is accurate to blame the immediate, visible cause.

What *Demonlover* reveals so well is that blaming the momentary stimulus is inaccurate. Revealing the context, the environment that necessitates these flows is how we reflect the Gorgon Medusa more clearly. By blaming the immediate stimulus, we redirect in a way that feeds the cycle. If we focus narrowly on the stimulus itself, we cannot slow down, empathize, and channel our efforts to fixing the actual source. But this is impossible if we cannot perceive it. Much of our experience actively tries to rationalize and mask the source of aggression. *Demonlover* asserts that piecing together the context, assembling patterns, fostering understanding is a liberatory move in its own right. It reveals to the spectator tangentially the Gorgon Medusa when it cannot be revealed head-on. *Demonlover* exposes the hidden code, the stress and suffering it takes to continually produce the newest desirable image, even in a well-off finance sector.

This leads us to the third and final implication. If everywhere we turn, the content is interchangeable, why is this so significant? We have learned it is not in what we do. It is in how we do it. This process, in other words, is not primarily cognitive. It is a slow re-programming of the sensorium in the same way we see technology and peers saturating and affecting the senses of our characters. The glitch exudes an air of naturalization and requires a willingness for spectators to inhabit the break. A film that breaks with dominant logic will not induce every spectator to look in. This is where the narrative surface matters most—it is dependent on the tastes and perceived self-gratification incentivizing the specific spectator to look in.

What *Demonlover* proposes is a cinematic mode of desire that continually reveals the political state of neoliberal society. To answer the question of how the same desire might manifest in widely different forms and strategies, we should look to our scholars. Whether you approach the situation following Jameson, Berlant, or Shaviro, there is still a way to acquire a stable, factual conception of the world where the terms begin to line up despite different preferences in interests, medium, or process. The cinema is no different than these theorists. What aesthetics and narratives seem most interesting to one movie of the glitch may appear radically different from another on the surface.

*Demonlover*, for one, desires the glitch but doesn't have high hopes for the casual spectator. The spectator in *Demonlover* is compared to the American child. The kid at the end of the movie takes his dad's credit card to access the violence and sex on the other side of the screen, in an entirely different location from digital production. The all-American family registers, to spectators, as a trope. The family lives in the stereotypical white, picket-fence suburban home. There is a stocked fridge with beer for the dad and action figures and a personal computer for the kid. The kid doesn't know Diane's story as they torture her anonymous body on

the other side of the screen. Like the kid is the stereotype to us, she is one of the X-men characters they digitally lay over her face. Diane becomes just a part of a product in a movie for our consumption.

Likewise, if we view ourselves as the consumer and capital as the true cost of exchange, we can distance ourselves and repress the undesirable costs of the sexual labor on the other side of the world. We can feel as if we are detached from that portion when we consume. The visible situation comforts us; it is equivalent exchange if we isolate capital and end-product. Situations become even murkier when “products” can be people, relayed instantly over webcam from one side of the world to the next. In every sense, we don’t contextualize the international violence it takes to reap the benefits of late stage capitalism in developed nations from our fragment of lived experience. When we reach for the beer or wear our cotton sweater, we don’t extrapolate the context or necessities of production. The situation is easy to stomach when probability is rigged in our favor, and we are often the recipient of the pleasurable image but rarely the collective code. It is even easier when we are increasingly disconnected and distanced from its material implications through digital interconnectivity. When we are forced to view the suffering before the point of exchange, we understand the image as inseparable from the code. If we must see ourselves as the perpetrators who actively participate in its cycle, the image isn’t so desirable. To get a desirable image once the code is exposed and burned into our minds like a Benjaminian afterimage, we can only change the code.

If we came into the movie desiring a product, *Demonlover* doesn’t give us what we want. *Demonlover* doesn’t predominantly desire to trade money for gratification, so it doesn’t incentivize it. It desires something else. Only when the movie disappoints does it become clear we rationalize cinema as a product for our utility. This is dominant logic in cinematic

viewership: the sensory information is the product we felt entitled to. The cinema, however, is not just about the monetary exchange for surface-level access. It is equally an affective exchange. If it mostly wants money, it will give you what it thinks you want every time. With a simple question at the end of the movie, we can change the next step from “Did I get what I wanted?” to “What did it want from me?” and when we answer that question, we know what it prescribes.

*Demonlover* knows it is active and interactive. It knows it produces flows that move beyond the screen when the movie ends. Even if the viewer disavows its interaction, it does not allow the spectator to leave without feeling its impact. You must recognize its influence. *Demonlover* not only resists dominant logic but desires to expose it. Thus, it desires the glitch. It wants to reveal the code often hidden from our view and shows it is not about abolishing the code; it is about changing the code. Does the code tarnish the surface image when it is revealed or substantiate the human-centered ethics of our process in its beauty? Like the digital image, the code it takes to create the image cannot visibly manifest in perception *and* produce a desirable image unless the code itself is beautiful. Similarly, the invisible labor is not included in the image when we desire, and our view of the whole digital product always appears incomplete.

If the instructions of the personal fantasy are revealed, that image looks tiresome, unhappy, and manipulated. We are suffering to try to manifest it. How do we pause the immediate impulse and provide the means to reach a more conscious and productive destination where productivity is defined in terms of mutually beneficial prospects for both code and image? We show what happens when we follow the flows that come easy and naturally without resistance. Movies of the glitch do not offer a tangible solution since the affective atmosphere is “shared, not solitary” but the different styles of narratives on the surface are “simultaneous” and



“incoherent” (Berlant 15, 4). Our situation may seem very different from the proposed narrative, but it shows what flows and aesthetics are the same. The way we approach the invisible system, whether through the technology or lived experience, does not matter when we chart symptoms that are the same and search for understanding. We must learn to desire the circumstances that will reveal the code time and time again, even as that code is rationalized, re-suppressed, and distorted by inhuman, profit-driven logic. If we come to desire the glitch, we continually work to manifest the code in all its new forms. There has to be a point where its reflection is so grotesque that the sight remains an afterimage burned into the mind. In lived experience, we are paralyzed by trauma. If we see it in the cinema, we might be mobilized to desire the glitch as well.

*Demonlover* concludes with the physical subject of Diane, anonymous in a full body latex suit, as the digitally produced character is digitally projected onto her material body. In its final moment, Diane looks directly into the camera—both intra and extra-narrative—signifying *Demonlover*’s own flow outward and into the viewer as a part of a larger narrative where the subject is capital, and its desire never ends.

## 2.2 The Matrix

In the opening sequence of *The Matrix*, our perspective is technically omniscient yet starkly predetermined. As Trinity leaps from one building to the next, we instantly teleport beneath into the opening to view the jump in all its excellence. In other moments, we might pan right beside her in hot pursuit. Characters navigate the streets next to towering office buildings to show off their immaculate sheen, but they also creak through rusty doors on a ship and eat gruel from a dish. Each of these can be rationalized as unfolding action, an incredible new view, or a necessary sacrifice in our hero’s journey.

At the same time, it doesn’t matter which direction we turn if every subject, object, and

event appears desirable as long as it progresses a narrative. We can teleport beneath Trinity or pan next to her, and they both communicate movement. We could omit this scene altogether, choose an entirely different path, or an entirely different story. It need not be heroic or uplifting. An entire movie of death and destruction at the hands of the aliens might produce a “right fit” for desire if it appears to follow a logical progression. Its movements are predetermined in that aesthetics appear to change, but its function remains the same. It is what we have seen in commercial cinema time and time again with a new story. Every direction we turn is important only because we turn.

The chance encounter is thus thrown to the wayside. The elimination of the chance encounter or, rather, the precise construction of it beckons a return to Kracauer’s concept of the street. The street is “not only the arena of fleeting impressions and chance encounters but a place where the flow of life is bound to assert itself... one will have to think mainly of the city street with its ever-moving anonymous crowds” (Kracauer 72). For Kracauer, the street was not limited to the physical street but extended to public spaces in the bustling anonymity of the urban center: “Bar interiors suggest strange adventures; improvised gatherings hold out the promise of fresh human contacts; sudden shifts of scene are pregnant with unforeseeable possibilities” (170). In modernity, he revered the newly concentrated population of the Industrial urban center (and cultural norms that followed) as a place of amplified possibility. This new possibility was once inaccessible to rural living which centered life around the church. The urban center was a place of potential; one might be exposed to an encounter that prompts an entirely new way of being in just an instant. Open potential was this looming suspense of the unknown. An event might be pleasurable, frightening, or not occur at all. It was the knowledge that one could enter the street one way and leave a changed man.

In my chapter on *Demonlover*, I argued this space of chance has since developed into the perfect mask for intent. The characters in *Demonlover* fall prey to the incentives of the desirable surface and learn to use the pretense of the chance encounter to their advantage. I find, despite its philosophical underpinnings, *The Matrix* does the reverse. First, I will show this does not mean a pause does not open up within *The Matrix*. Furthermore, this does not mean the break or threshold isn't possible for Hollywood cinema in the digital age, and I will prove that its contents suggest the opposite. Finally, I will show how and why *The Matrix* does not desire the glitch in its own affective exchange and, thus, cannot open up a threshold. Its breaks might substantiate alternative rhythms taken up in separate encounters, but it does not open up the threshold on its own. To desire the glitch is to consistently desire to expose the code with each newest edit, update, and mutation. Here, it rhythmically fails.

For readers unaware of its premise, *The Matrix* revolves around a young IT professional who doubles as an anonymous hacker named Neo. In his time off the clock, he uncovers a program called The Matrix and begins digging. With a security team hot on his trail, Neo is eventually captured and questioned but links up with a rebel force to escape. He learns humankind is predominantly grown by technology and plugged into a collective mainframe called The Matrix, which uses human bodies as batteries to sustain technological existence. It is now up to those people who are liberated from its grasp to defeat it and overcome their technological masters.

As Neo is unknowingly recruited into the band of rebels, he descends into the grungy aesthetic of a gothic nightclub. Every attendee is decked out in alternative attire, including styled hair and matching accessories. The scuffs on his friend's leather jacket are meticulously placed, and the once absentminded effects of wear and tear were clearly chosen and produced in a

moment off-screen. These clothes are strategically tattered and worn but otherwise in perfect shape. Every club goer has some sort of latex, chains, hair gel, and tattoos. Any outlier that does not fit the image is virtually abolished from the cinematic fantasy. Only an idealistic view is permitted to exist within this image where ideal in this moment is determined to mean coherent and pristine. The unbelievable details in the world are easily rationalized as fiction, but a tension is regularly produced between the supposedly haphazard and the meticulously planned.

In other scenes, *The Matrix* mimics the complexities of life by providing artificial moments of tension where contrasting aesthetics can collide or come together. When Neo and Morpheus enter the Oracle's home as part of his training, they wear black formal attire, and they feel distanced from and The Oracle's green patterned top and the cheery, comfortable look of the space. The international styles of the children in the background contrast both the American home and Neo's rebel garb. Likewise, notions of children and childhood seem to contrast with the children's own concentration and wisdom. In the Oracle's home, Neo appears to gain what he needs in a one-way flow, and the opposite flow or exchange is repressed from the picture. Neo speaks with a child who gives him insight on bending the rules of the Matrix, and he is permitted access to the Oracle's gift of foresight. There is little context for the relationship-building, trust, or affective alliance that must be in place prior to their entry. We take focus on Neo, and we do not shift to the other ends of exchange. Different aesthetics come together in one room, but the logic here keeps everything in its neat place orienting around the needs of our protagonist.

Likewise, the children's bodies in the background act like video game bodies, who might be designated as "farmer," "merchant," or "spellcaster" but, in this instance, each represent a separate nation. They are stiffly working away at their given task like empty shells who would

give a pre-programmed line if we approached them to talk. They work diligently as if the concept of “work” were a piece of furniture to complete the room’s aesthetic. The children are used to imply the potential for liberation could spur from anywhere in the world. With those odds, what a coincidence the savior is a straight white male from the U.S. In other words, the children perform chance, but the narrative’s own logic contradicts the purported rules of the image. Every character and every interaction in the frame exists for Neo’s story, even the scenes without him. Every person, space, and event is constructed to move him forward or increase the overall aesthetic value in the narrative image. There is no “logical” reason to expand any details that are not useful in a narrative capacity when one sees no value in it, and there is no need to substantiate the idea of potential when audiences aren’t interested in it. We get a sense for the movie’s recurring definition of value. *The Matrix* does not see any logical motivation beyond the narrative itself, beyond satisfying the paying spectator. The children are produced out of necessity. They represent chance and potential when the narrative calls for it, but it closes off any feeling that potential could ever really exist.

Its own aesthetics seem to solve the Matrix’s origin story: “The first Matrix was designed to be a perfect human world where no one suffered, where everyone would be happy. It was a disaster. No one would accept the program. Entire crops were lost.” These thoughts are so unabashedly those of Jean Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation*. The prisons exist to pretend we are free, and Disneyland is the imaginary to attest that the rest of society is the real (12). Such a reading of *The Matrix* is the project of Catherine Constable in her essay “Baudrillard reloaded: interrelating philosophy and film via *The Matrix Trilogy*.” What is especially important in her reading is the background for its production:

[Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*] appears on screen and the film script for *The Matrix* makes use of quotations from the first essay, 'The precession of simulacra', specifically Morpheus' line: 'Welcome to the desert of the real.' Importantly, it is the only text that the directors designated as required reading for cast members, thus conferring on it a privileged status above other philosophical source material (Constable 234).

She makes an important point that the creators not only knew the reading but relied on Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* for production, yet there is nothing new in *The Matrix's* cinematic gesture nor in the narrative logic. While the movie initially proposes a world of corporate workers against the underground scene, the world of the real in *The Matrix* merely extends liberation into new aesthetic zones. The rags in the "real" world are nondescript compared to the connotative wear in the nightclub. It says *these* clothes are really worn. These possess all the non-markings of clothes of necessity, clothes that must be scavenged.

Constable argues the movie's narrative is indeed liberatory just widely misunderstood in its interpretations. She makes an excellent case for this and meticulously sifts through the various philosophical references throughout the series and addresses each comprehensively. She asserts the movie's understanding of Baudrillard was not simplistic and that "The Matrix Trilogy can be seen to draw on Baudrillard's imagery without promulgating his nihilism" (241). Constable also criticizes Deborah and George McKnight's reading of *The Matrix* who conclude that Science Fiction is merely defined by its focus on "Big Questions," and its references are purely for effect. Constable states, "Knight and McKnight's article can be seen to perpetuate a traditional hierarchical distinction between high and low culture. Pitting great literature against genre fiction, they reach the unsurprising conclusion that only the former is able to pose points of

philosophical interest” (234, 236). Instead, she sides with Le Doeuff who argues that “the western philosophical tradition allocates two apparently diverse roles to the image. In the first it is seen as a distraction, an embellishment that should be expunged from truly philosophical discourse; while in the second, the image acts as an illustration, translating complex ideas into an accessible form for the less able reader” (Constable 235).

Constable’s efforts are in the right place, but her interpretation distinctly falls into the same pitfall as *The Matrix*. Both remain interpretation, a narrative, a perspective. She understands value systems but does nothing to address how they are employed. It is not the aesthetic costume itself that is wrong for the cinematic experience; it is hierarchy and value the film may or may not resist. When we believe *our* kinds of stories, emotions, values are more valuable, we fight to win points for our team instead of fighting to find solutions or procedures that bring us together in more productive ways. Constable says *The Matrix*’s imagery draws on *Simulacra and Simulation*, and its narrative doesn’t promulgate its nihilism but omits any mention of how the movie functions to do anything but redistributing value.

In every moment, the camera is used as a tool to indicate speed, intensity, or attention and is otherwise just as empty as the potentials in the Oracle’s waiting room. As the story moves on, nothing ever changes. Content appears to shift, and the movie’s impact is dulled to a consistent hum of content and action. *The Matrix* virtually obliterates any space for potential unless the spectator compensates with agency on their end. It does not propose a new way of being but a new story to go with the old:

All of the characters, whether they are presented as good or bad, are associated with particular value systems. Neo, Morpheus and Trinity can be seen to epitomize the values extolled in Corinthians: faith, hope and love, each taking up different roles across the

trilogy. The Merovingian explicitly acknowledges the false nature of the sensations that he and Persephone so enjoy; yet both continue to prize particular sensory experiences over others. Agent Smith's critique of the insipid, illusory nature of human values, particularly love, in his final battle with Neo presents his own desire to obliterate the irrevocably human programs as a pure, pitiless, machinic crusade. The films can thus be seen to offer a Nietzschean way out of Baudrillard's nihilism in that the recognition that all values are illusory does not result in their destruction. Instead, such values become necessary illusions because they are intrinsic to the process of self-definition, enabling each character to become what they are (Constable 248).

This argument in particular is both solid and noble, but the sentiment is misdirected. This argument is an excellent example of content or medium versus the way it is employed. There are absolutely ways in which Hollywood film itself can become a gateway, but *The Matrix* is not one such example. Aesthetics, characters, sensory emotions all necessarily have value judgments attached, and they are also necessarily tools in cinema. It is also true that we cannot convey affect without a concept to work through. Content, in this instance, is the distinction between affect and emotion where affect is "non-conscious" and "asubjective or presubjective" but "emotion is affect captured by a subject, or tamed and reduced to the extent that it becomes commensurate with that subject" (Shaviro 3). The issue is that emotion is necessarily already controlled, definitive, and therefore relative and subjectively determined. Without the change in affect, such definitive enclosures merely shift up or down in value. We might move in perspective, but we're stuck competing for our specific worldview of what constitutes faith, hope, and love. In the same way, *The Matrix* might mobilize spectators towards new fragments and tastes, but these can be easily manipulated once more to fit a new stage in life. It does not



resist the logic of competition and accumulation.

Constable successfully makes her argument that readings of the film's narrative have been misunderstood, but the assertion that the cinematic medium instead aids in making resistant narrative contents more accessible is insufficient for impact in the neoliberal period. This is, of course, unless it is supplemented by consistent rhythmic breaks elsewhere, but that action cannot be credited to the film. Surface-level sentiments are flattened and translated *as aesthetic*, as a viewpoint, opinion, or perspective alone without a new form to motivate action and understanding. Its translatability is rendered impotent if it remains a fictional narrative where all the turns and twists, the highs and the lows, feel the same as the next. It does not matter which interpretation and which direction we run with our interpretation, and it does not matter how much or little we value the movie in the end if there is no affective revealing of the code. Looking only to what *The Matrix* says, no matter how accurate, complex, or philosophically correct, is not the same as what *The Matrix* does in its interaction with the spectator. In this capacity, *The Matrix* does nothing to re-route the way we evaluate and project desire in our interactions.

In *The Matrix*, then, the appearance of chance, ambiguity, and uncertainty is reasserted into the movie as a part of its construction. The camera possesses the ability to pan impossible angles and down the side of the building. It gives the impression that we can go anywhere by transporting us into spaces we could never achieve on our own. When Neo and Trinity break into a corporate building to save Morpheus, they pull out their guns and kill off the security guards. As one dodges to the side, the camera cuts to him and follows the action to appear sporadic. In these moments, it insinuates that it must adjust to keep with spontaneous changes in direction.

For *Demonlover*, I made a similar claim. Sometimes the camera knows just before and

other times just after. *Demonlover* does not cut off potential when it moves, however. It often drags, whips around, blurs, or hustles to catch up. It is specifically employed for its personality, and it has its own desires and emotions. It has a logic for movement that goes beyond spectator utility. It is not empty like the children turned into furniture. In *The Matrix*, the only logic the camera knows is “be useful to the spectator.” It is the affective logic that guides us under dominant logic: create value, be useful, exchange upwards. When the camera slides back from the hallway to view telephone as it rings, this is not like the slingshot back after a troubling response in a *Demonlover* meeting. The camera, here, feels disconnected and disinterested in what is happening on screen. The intensity in sound complements its speed, and it might give a rushed or tense feeling, but that is narrative utility.

Instead, *The Matrix* must keep itself distanced and quiet so as not to unsettle its spectators. It obediently stays on stage and puts on its show. It acts like an object for consumption where resistant films are freed from our servitude. There is a vulnerability in openness to resistance, and a resistant film is the chance encounter of the street returned to us. Likewise, in the chance encounter, an event might end up uncomfortable or distasteful, but it could also be an insightful new acquaintance. This is part of the exhilaration of the street. When we go into a chance encounter, we don't know what we're going to get. We might leave entirely changed or with nothing at all, but the potential is there nonetheless. When that unknown something that forms in interaction also desires to reveal the code of dominant logic, the interaction fits within the affective genre of the glitch.

Thus, while we are permitted to desire in response to new combinations in *The Matrix*, the image is limited by narrative utility and norms of spectatorship first and foremost. So long as our definition of cinematic utility hails narrative above all else, there will always be rules that are

tough to cross. Commercial cinema, then, rules out countless methods of cinematic existence that contradict this logic and can back up these decisions with monetary data. The only potential for pause in *The Matrix* would be to look to a moment where the cinematic construct unintentionally reveals a glimpse of something ambiguous and uncontrolled in its search for the perfect oppositional relativity. To determine where *The Matrix* might still present a break in its steadfast desire and ponder a different life, I turn to Walter Benjamin and his concept of play.

In the history of toys, toymakers modulated the size of their products based on environmental circumstances. Once the Reformation forced church artists to fill demand for craftwork in the domestic space, toys became small to fit on cupboards and display on shelves. They became large once more when children acquired a separate playroom to contain their own books and playthings. Toys took on different forms to best sell their wares amidst historical context proving that toys are “emancipated” from the needs and desires of their consumers: “The more industrialization penetrates, the more it decisively eludes the control of the family and becomes increasingly *alien* (emphasis my own) to children and also to parents” (114). Though they possess a life of their own, its life cycle can be tracked through history, development, and the needs of culture and production.

Ultimately, Benjamin proves that the product is not made for the children. He emphasizes the overarching error that “the imaginative content of a child’s toys is what determines his playing; whereas in reality the opposite is true” (116). It is not that the children playing inspire creation but that what is most desirable, given the circumstances, wins out in the market. When it comes to the children’s imagination alone, the product would look different:

On the one hand, nothing is more suitable for children than playhouses built of harmonious combinations of the most heterogeneous materials-stone, plasticine, wood,

and paper. On the other hand, no one is more chaste in the use of materials than children: a bit of wood, a pinecone, a small stone-however unified and unambiguous the material is, the more it seems to embrace the possibility of a multitude of figures of the most varied sort (115).

In other words, the elaborate toys are constructed to excite the child but first within the norms of the current historical situation. There are levels to our logic that take precedence. The product is made for its audience but only if it does not contradict logic at a higher stage. The processed toy always relays the necessities of its development, distribution, and the desires of the surrounding culture. The product proposes stipulations for how it should be used in its very construction, and the product influences the resulting habits of use and interpretation that follow. Benjamin does note that this assertion does not imply children are ever cut off from societal influence when they play but that these can be gradually whittled down into narrower terms with narrow interaction and exposure: “Their toys cannot bear witness to any autonomous separate existence, but rather are a silent signifying dialogue between them and their nation. A signifying dialogue to the decoding of which this work provides a secure foundation” (116).

Kracauer notices the same in film, “Each popular film conforms to popular wants; yet in conforming to them it inevitably does away with their inherent ambiguity. Any such film evolves these wants in a specific direction.” (164) Gesture in *The Matrix* is mostly unambiguous but, despite its drawbacks, Neo’s visit to the Oracle relaxes its hold a bit. The signs of class disparity are just as clear as those neon lights and edgy music in the nightclub, but the signs that are available to be dramatic here aren’t as easily separated from our world. The colorful graffiti and scratched messages in broken down elevators are closer to something we’d realistically encounter in any urban center. While the waiting room serves its purpose in narrative

progression, the film slows down, both formally and narratively as we take our time to survey the room and assess the other potentials. The combinations of these two aspects create a feeling of genuine difference. Though the potentials themselves feel empty, the narrative space asks what other alternatives to the hero there might be and lays out the potential in children yet undiscovered.

The “potentials” who might alternatively become “The One” and liberate humanity from *The Matrix* are all playing with different objects. Some are toys, and others are household tools; this doesn’t seem to make a difference. They teleport toy blocks and bend spoons with their minds. Here, the toys are unlimited by any stipulations of construction. For these children, any object can do anything. There is a sort of nostalgic longing for that kind of freedom of possibility here. The children do not see constraint in the tools. This is the point at which the potential for the “chosen one” breaks just a bit in its own narrative uncertainty. There is almost a small yearning for collective potential, to break with the heroic narrative altogether and give way to a new generation.

This brings up the question of whether it is even possible to wholly contain any stable desire in the neoliberal situation or whether a pause or break always manages to crack through. *The Matrix* revels in dominant logic, but it also provides a clear moment of pause. Following Berlant once more, desire is contained by the fantasy scenario but not limited to it. It is limited by those things that appear to hover closest to our goal but instead only stifle its attainment. *The Matrix* is caught up with idealism when it sees no apparent alternative in sight, and a break can exist *within* the fantasy itself. The desire for liberation can constitute a brand for exchange or even slip through the cracks unconsciously, especially in a work that is necessarily a collective production. While we often attribute a movie’s impact to the intent of a director, there are so

many minds that go into cinematic production. Perhaps the head makeup artist found a way to slip ambiguity into his or her design. The cinematographer, in particular, has significant sway over the camera's style, lighting, and motion when the script might intend to keep patterns of exposure and repression under its strict direction.

To glitch, however, is to expose and resist the code guiding dominant logic. If the threshold has not been crossed, we cannot depict it through the narrative. We can desire to break from it, but the break alone is not enough to become a threshold and allow another to potentially pass through. In its current state, the break created between the space, the tempo, and the children is not mobile. It is too quickly swallowed up by the current. For Kracauer, "Films may represent an indefinite number of material phenomena—in such a way that their forms, movements, and light values jell into comprehensible rhythmical patterns," and *The Matrix* does not present any new rhythms that retain their experiential quality and have not been pre-rationalized (68). A few breaks within a sea of constraining motions and deliberate constructions is not enough to combat an ingrained logic. Spectators will easily rationalize the break to fit what we know. A break alone cannot evolve into revolutionary norms, forms, and institutions when the rest kicks in to rationalize it immediately after.

Likewise, as Benjamin moves into his essay "Toys and Play," he becomes more prescriptive. He similarly looks to rhythms and habits if we are to open up to the new:

Before we transcend ourselves in love and enter into the life and the often *alien rhythm* (emphasis my own) of another human being, we experiment early on with basic rhythms that proclaim themselves in their simplest forms in these sorts of games with inanimate objects. Or rather, these are the rhythms in which we first gain possession of ourselves.

Last, such a study would have to explore the great law that presides over the rules and rhythms of the entire world of play: the law of repetition (“Toys and Play” 120).

The law of repetition that binds us to the rhythms of life is certainly that force, air, or environment that is at work here once more. We push for those concepts we value most, and we expose them more rhythmically to our world. We attempt to repress those low value concepts or otherwise devalue them as they come up. When everyone pushes their own rhythm, their own specific hierarchy, we collectively experience more of a cacophony of noise. The neoliberal period is one of dissonance. We appear to have lost our ability to link up, find similarity, and produce more harmonious rhythms and melodies. In Berlant’s terms, the new dominant rhythm is one of precarity that *The Matrix* fails to express. Our society has evolved to subsume and incorporate the opposition and no longer attempts to harmonize it. Dissonance *is* the goal. If we turn the camera and find aliens preying on mankind in *The Matrix*, they are still valuable. They are a powerful enemy to overcome. They are entertainment, and they occupy a slot in a system of value.

So the details in *The Matrix* might seem inconsequential in the moment, but they always add up to repetition, becoming a game of odds. What we perceive to be necessities of production are not necessities at all but attempts to bend the appearance of value in one way or the other for future exchanges. Whatever details persist as “good strategy” create their own rhythms that dictate what is normal for the historical moment. The logic of the “unbelievable” fictional worlds that we quickly laugh off yet continually and collectively resonate with is resonant precisely because we, too, produce chance to quickly rationalize our worldviews and reach gratification.

Imminence, in other words, draws up a concern of disconnected and strategically reconnected phenomenology in the casual moviegoer: “the specific content of the values

surrounding us is psychologized away and the realm to which they belong to sinks into limbo” (293). For Kracauer, “our abstractness deeply affects our relations to the body of ideology [and] impedes practically all direct efforts to revamp religion and establish a consensus of beliefs” (294). To answer his question of how we can move beyond a traditional collective belief system and continue to endorse science, he says “the remedy for the kind of abstractness which befalls minds under the impact of science is experience—the experience of things in their concreteness” (295, 296). Kracauer sought to reunite a phenomenology of film with a historical approach in *Theory of Film*, and this could be a useful frame to view my own work here. Movies, video games, apps, etc. also ‘systematically foreground their inherent tendencies’ as if they were ‘natural objects’ rather than historical ones” (Hansen, 260). Dominant logic dictates the way the toys look and the way the movies move, but the breaks *are* happening in Hollywood form. Whether we follow through with those experiential differences in a repetitive fashion will be the determining factor in whether we reach our personal threshold.

Thus, the break may open up potential to conceive in new ways, but this implies the pause alone is not enough. We must rhythmically desire to expose the code to form new habits that mimic the incessant affective rhythms of desire, in our objects and in ourselves. However, it is important to refer back to Hansen’s clear distinction between Benjamin’s notion of repetition and Freud’s notion of repetition as death drive. For Benjamin, “*innervation* broadly refers to a neurophysiological process that mediates between internal and external, psychic and motoric, human and machinic registers.” Using innervation and his notion of mimetic faculty “as an anthropologically grounded yet historically determined mode of adaptation and appropriation,” Benjamin proposes the optical unconscious. The optical unconscious is “a form of mimetic innervation specifically available to photography and film” (Hansen 133). In other words, there



is a continual back and forth between subject and world—rather than world into us with individual adaptation seen as a defensive or reactionary move. The cinema as a particularly mimetic, sensory object is proposed to have its own optical unconscious: “Benjamin, unlike Freud, understood innervation as a *two-way* process or transfer, that is, not only a conversion of mental, affective energy into somatic, motoric form, but also the possibility of reconverting, and recovering, split-off psychic energy through motoric stimulation.” A Benjaminian conception of mimetic faculty is empowering rather than defensive. Freud’s conception can be said to “protect at the price of paralyzing the organism, robbing it of its capacity of imagination, and therefore of active response” (Hansen 137). In this specifically Benjaminian sense, the solution must be as rhythmic, habitual, and transferable as dominant force itself. Our solution must attempt to remedy and reveal the one-sided habits/perceptions that contribute to the limitations of dominant logic. Dominant logic benefits—and its participants appear to benefit—from shutting out the two-sided perception of our interactions in favor of a one-sided focus on our own desire. This is where the Matrix fails.

### ***2.2.1 Supplementing Hollywood Breaks with Agency: Finding Rhythm in Lived Experience***

If my conclusion for *The Matrix* seems bleak, this is not my intention. Despite its own inability to evolve into a threshold in this circumstance, it implies the opposite is certainly possible, though difficult, for Hollywood form. What *The Matrix* proves is that even in those films that most strictly adhere to traditional narrative form, its contents do not seem to escape a sense of genuine pause and ambiguity. Films that desire the fantasy most can no longer keep the intrusive flows of the precarious affective situation walled out, and this is where we should rejoice. Though Hollywood form still possesses the power to obscure that break, there are

unintended desires bubbling up to the surface. If liberatory desire is latent in a desire for the old coherent fantasy situation itself, this means there are opportunities for Hollywood film to do something else. Commercial cinema can explore possibility in form, narrative ambiguity, aesthetics or all of the above and strategically hide affect beneath the narrative surface. In the meantime, commercial cinema still seems relatively bound up by its own limitations.

In commercial cinema, we know the feeling and experience we will receive the moment we enter the building, but we don't yet know the content or emotion. When affective potential is constrained, the liberation Kracauer found in chance has been predominantly wiped out and substituted for produced chance. Commercial cinema *can* afford to push desire beyond—if it doesn't appear to contradict a narrowly-defined standard for audience utility. Thus, it is an affective hierarchy and a norm—not a hard limit.

There are legitimate alternatives and options that make a genuine difference, even in an environment of flattened aesthetics and unbounded desire. In the same way, there are still breaks where we can question and conceive of something different in a movie that actively tries to keep uncontrolled potential out. For this, it takes agency. It takes producers who have already crossed their own personal threshold. *The Matrix* follows Baudrillard who argues “we are in a logic of simulation, which no longer has anything to do with a logic of facts and an order of reason” and does not attempt to propose a solution beyond a “superior ruse” or “imaginary science” (Baudrillard 16, 154). Whether or not that sentiment continues across the series or its print media remains to be seen. Perhaps the threshold could be achieved through *The Matrix* continuances, but this is accounting for spectator curiosity and rhythmic interest in political resistance, not the film's.

This ultimate pitfall is especially disappointing when the movie's very premise follows

the logic that technology has its own desires to impose upon humanity. *The Matrix* understands the sense of reversibility but instinctively views its intent as necessarily malicious. The success of *The Matrix* assuredly reflects something about what we collectively understand to be natural in our current historical situation. Our sense of “the natural way of things” is competition. We fear technology that might one day have a mind of its own due to the direction humanity has evolved. Yet we are not without agency; we create and work through our technology every time. As technology evolves, it only appears “naturally” against us if we are “naturally” pitted against each other.

For example, the success of Guillermo Del Toro in Hollywood would fit excellently within Constable’s idealistic reading of *The Matrix*. In *Pan’s Labyrinth* and, most recently, *The Shape of Water*, Guillermo Del Toro shows how ambiguity and philosophical complexities *can* be simplified into easily translatable popular media. This, however, requires a change in desire that *The Matrix* tries to suppress throughout the film. For Del Toro, he supplements his narrative with ambiguity in archetypes and events. His characters appear full and substantial, but they are not substantiated for spectator pleasure. Their qualities are often not handed over directly through dialogue or circumstance but instead implied, and resistance is regularly present in the experience or pre-subjective register. For instance, the camera might linger over a moment that shows the care that characters give when they wrap a bandage, and the captain compulsively checks his watch even when he is alone in his office. The background characters interact and move as if they have separate lives and off-screen intent. For instance, soldiers outside the Captain’s house are moving toward specific points, crossing directions and depths. They are not on-screen to simply be a crowd or imply a battalion. They are both simplified and immensely complex. They act like storybook archetypes, but they feel mysterious to us in many more senses

than we see on-screen.

As for affect, Del Toro's formal use of color to signify consistency and change progressively over his stories registers on the preconscious level even if it never becomes conscious. The government villain in *The Shape of Water* is drawn to green, anxiously chews on candy, and his injured fingers grow increasingly infected and discolored as the narrative progresses. At the same time, Del Toro is very explicit about deeper meaning in interviews and keeps his symbolism clear and accessible. In this way, Del Toro films can be felt and not immediately rationalized within commercial form yet maintain complexity in simplicity and do not attempt to evade the average spectator. His movies are perfect for "low culture" audiences in the way Constable had hoped for *The Matrix*. There is an altogether different mood to his stories that rupture the barrier between narrative and spectator yet make it through Hollywood limits.

Instead, *The Matrix* effectively remains a fragment despite moments that desire to connect to a world beyond. It keeps its scenes and spaces fragmented into separate boxes of content, each with their specific utility. To change the interaction, it cannot change *what* it desires but must change the *way* it desires. By changing the form, the process becomes like air, rhythmically present in every scene. We do not abandon uniqueness and individualism in this process, but we abandon competition. We ask for participation and exploration into our spectators—not by looking to old forms that attempt to shut spectators off—but by finding new ways to move.

### **2.3 Naked Lunch**

Now, I want to take focus on the stipulation of rhythm as counter-logic that wasn't pulled to the forefront in the chapter on *Demonlover*. What *The Matrix* reveals is why the question at the end of *Demonlover* is not enough; the threshold depends on all the continual build-up and

rhythm that came in the procedure throughout the movie. The question at the end asks us to dive back in and examine the procedure. Resistant cinema provides a sort of training grounds for new perceptual logic, then, which is not to say repetition of moments that reveal the two-way flow of desire is the end-game. Rhythm is not a remedy for dominant logic's perceptual norms in lived experience, but resistant cinema might saturate the spectator in a different air of normalcy long enough to instigate a crossing of the threshold by slowly changing what kinds of interactions one desires.

For this, *Naked Lunch* uses perceptual overturning as an impulsive and habitual revealing of the two-way flow in interactions. In this chapter, I will use *Naked Lunch* to track the postmodernist overturning of “revolutionary” moments. Revolutionary moments in *Naked Lunch* often act as continual subsumption of marginalized characters' versions of realism as the newest “best” explanation moving forward through the movie. Subsumption occurs both individually as our main character appears to “better” or “rectify” his own values with each updated rationality and collectively in historical movements as he moves from the more traditional setting of 50's New York to the foreign lands of Interzone. I will show, through rhythm, *Naked Lunch* becomes illuminating with a very digitally-minded perspective and can still line up with postmodern scholarship on our current political state. While each move he makes through the movie appears as progress, at the threshold we find our character is not moving historically through realism, modernism, and postmodernism but through different versions of postmodernism as his surroundings continually overturn. *Naked Lunch* shows eventual “liberation” from old values can now be conceived as a part of dominant logic's compulsion.

What is most interesting about *Naked Lunch* boils down to the unique way in which the internal unconscious of our protagonist *is* much of the visible external reality on screen. We are

introduced to Bill through the clunk of a metal object, his shadow on the door as he knocks, and his monotone voice as he plainly states, “exterminator.” We grasp a sense for Bill through his symptoms before we ever see Bill himself.

Bill lives in a version of New York in the 1950’s. This version, however, is crawling in bugs. Citizens employ exterminators to spray a substance called bug powder along the walls, but the thick layer of dusty powder is just a step up from living in infestation. It’s hardly ideal as a living situation and more of a temporary, symptomatic solution extended into a long-term repetitive process. At the same time, the bug powder is a highly addictive mind-altering substance that can be found in many of the buildings. Both the diner and the police office have traces of dust and, since it is systematically distributed, citizens and especially exterminators seem prone to addiction. His coworker casually suggests the habit is not unique. With bugs in the walls and addicts consuming the powder, infestation alters the precautions and liberties its citizens view as logical. His wife Joan suggests, for instance, that Bill cut the bug powder with baby laxative “like everyone else does” to get around its regulations. The police seem to believe controlling addiction is not a police problem but a moral issue despite its systematic distribution. Likewise, there is no indication of any efforts to look for or correct the source of the problem. Both infestation and addiction has instead been accepted as a fact of life. As Bill becomes increasingly addicted to the powder, he accidentally shoots his wife Joan in an attempt at William Tell.

After the trauma, Bill moves to Interzone and takes up writing where he falls into addiction with a new substance made from the black centipede. The black centipede is intended to counteract the effects of the powder, but his experiences only become more disjointed and correspond by just a thread of semblance. Each new event reveals some ridiculous unforeseeable

detail that changes the narrative. It is like the continual unfolding in *Demonlover*, but it openly substitutes a more fantastic, hallucinogenic storyline for the subtle, seemingly mundane details of international business that are only much later revealed to be a cover for something far more shocking and sadistic.

Nick Davis reads the film like this, as continual transfers of desire, but shows how this process in *Naked Lunch* takes on the more specific task of transmutation of sexuality rather than expansion or inclusion of previously bracketed sexualities. It “produc[es] new intervals and orientations of desire” where it might typically attempt to “extirpate every cliché or political sticking point around desire” (95, 99). He uses a scene in *Interzone* where a “sex blob” takes part in what feels like a sexual act but cannot be proven as such given our traditional definition and the details on-screen. The sex blob is a fleshy “body” comprised of an erection, a vaginal face, and a pair of buttocks. It acts as an alien participant in a fully clothed erotic scene between Bill and a precise look-alike of his dead wife Joan:

The ‘sex blob’ is less an amalgam of human organs than an instance of Deleuze and Guattari’s famous ‘body without organs,’ composed of ‘signs of desire that compose a signifying chain but that are not themselves signifying’... The sex-blob suggests a queer parody of the Deleuzian subject: neither a wellspring nor a container of ‘innate’ desires but a contingent byproduct of nonhuman or pre-personal movements and intensities... In this sense, the sex-blob is more like the skeletal, mumbling ‘forger’ Bill Lee and the necrophiliac subject-object-zombie Joan Frost than it is different from them... Treated as ‘literally’ by Cronenberg’s unflappable camera as Joan’s or Bill’s or Fadela’s body, the blob works in tandem with every signifier in the scene, conveying immanent forces that generate all of them but are encapsulated by none of them. (85-86)

For Davis, “*Naked Lunch* moves from one culturally pastiched and patently holographic environment to another, and then to another, rejecting any investment in the ‘real’ and manifesting desire as a productive, mutable energy in virtually any milieu, with no indigenous residents or naturalized citizens to be found anywhere” (104). The movie achieves perceptual instability through constant dissonance with scenes that undermine each other, relationships and identities that multiply and overlap, and Bill’s language that undermines itself in stuttering and contradictions (Davis 79, 80, 88). Even events, sounds, and images within a single scene undermine the other components, and the sound is frequently disproportional to the visual image. The first talking bug we meet asks Bill to rub bug powder on its lips, and the intensity of pleasure in its moans are not only disproportionate to the action but also incompatible with the talking asshole it calls its lips (Davis 86, 87) At the same time, this scene implies that the substance does not kill this talking mutation but, in fact, pleasures and sustains it despite what we’ve been led to believe. Spectators cannot clearly define a sense of certainty through any singular fragment—even within seemingly whole entities like the frame or a body. Davis therefore argues that we cannot say for sure anything is one way or another in *Naked Lunch*. Everything is defined by each portion’s equivalent mobility of desire with fluctuations in intensity. Everything is an assemblage of pieces and parts that should not cohere but do, including and especially the movie itself.

Davis sees each new occurrence as one that continually overtakes the last and therefore achieves a transmutation of sexuality into this more fluid, non-gendered state that, under the new drugs in Interzone, must adjust to the pressing stimuli and intensity of the moment, slipping away from strict definitions of sex and sexuality altogether:



The blob's arrival surely discombobulates more than it consolidates our view of Bill and Joan's bond. Ironically, Fabela's arrival works the same way... This plane of desire keeps adopting new, unstable centers of indetermination, doing so again when it produces Tom and Hafid's previously undisclosed couplehood—fleeting casting these two nuts, of all people, as ambassadors of 'actual' reality, until we recall the manifold reasons why they cannot occupy that role... The only mainstay across the film is the production of new desiring-flows and combinations. (Davis 85-86)

These are the same functions that performed a revealing of the "code" or the neoliberal, combative origins and incentives driving the individual fantasy in *Demonlover*. This does not necessarily mean *Naked Lunch* does not desire the glitch, and I will show these two functions are not mutually exclusive. A movie can desire the glitch and do something else with appropriate analysis.

Similarly, not all movies with aliens represent an alien force specific to those desires of capital and desire the glitch or even the aesthetic of the glitch like in *The Matrix*. *Demonlover*, for instance, used an entirely different narrative tactic and still desired the glitch. What I am arguing is there is something specific about the imperceptible alien or non-human subject and a perceptual unveiling and concealing of new modes of thinking (whether through a drug, technology, some other conduit) that is apt for a critique on capitalism in the digital age—in the same way vampirism is often a notable archetype for a critique of the capitalist subject. Both the vampire and the scenario I have proposed assume a narrative perspective, but we must now assess whether those narratives follow through on that critique affectively in practice. When narrative is subsumed, we must incorporate the spectator to gauge whether those critiques remain oppositional in terms of affective genre and archetype.

Yet Nick Davis' essay is a great example of how tracking affective flows with its surface details will not reveal whether the movie desires the glitch on its own. The surface-level features of interest to the analyst must correspond with the desires of the film to uncover its expectations and motives. Understanding its expectations and taking the movie's direction over our own impulse is that first step I have outlined in my process. This is surveying the terms of the situation and revealing its assumptions for the way the world works as in Jameson's cognitive mapping which can best be used to fulfill an "Althusserian (and Lacanian) redefinition of ideology as 'the representation of the subject's *Imaginary* relationship to his or her Real conditions of existence" (*The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* 51). Uncovering the movie's motives is the second necessity to my process. We must ask what the film desires from *us* in the way that it gestures and how it interacts experientially. Finally, we put these together to discover what its actions desire in light of the presuppositions of its worldview. The analyst often desires to show how the film does something specific, selecting patterns and processes suitable to their own analysis. When their concerns don't line up with the film's, there are other valuable functions to be discovered, certainly, but we cannot assess whether the film desires the glitch.

Therefore, my question necessitates going beyond Davis' Deleuzian analysis and returning to Deleuze's Freudian roots. When we ask the essential question, "What does *Naked Lunch* desire?" it is practically begging us to relate the film to the Freudian unconscious. It is spilling with sexual signifiers in "wrong" places and "wrong" objects in sexual situations. There are moans from a talking typewriter, phallic appendages on the mugwumps, a giant birdcage containing a parasitic sexual union, and silicone skin and breasts that act like clothing and seamlessly mask Dr. Benway as Fadela. It is full of bodies that overlap and seem to contradict if we take them literally as same or separate subjects.

But these events are not wrong or contradictory if we read them with Freud: “In spite of their unwished for contents, all such dreams must be interpreted as wish-fulfillments,” just as Freud’s lack must instead be conceived in the positive as desire production for Deleuze-Guattari (Freud 178, Deleuze-Guattari 25). If we take its events figuratively, Tom Frost’s wife can be conceived by his unconscious as producing the same desire as his wife Joan in New York. Dr. Benway, too, can practice medicine back home then function as the housekeeper and factory manager Fadela. For Freud, “The unconscious is the true psychological reality; *in its innermost nature it is as much unknown to us as the reality of the external world, and it is as incompletely presented by the data of consciousness as is the external world by the communications of our sense organs*” (*The Interpretation of Dreams* 607).

Whereas Davis focuses on the overturning itself as I did in *Demonlover*, *Naked Lunch* asks us to solve the Rubik’s cube of Freudian stimuli. The aesthetic blurs, blues, and reflective structures that blend into one another in *Demonlover* are completely absent from a film like *Naked Lunch*. Its parts appear erratic, yet we must read them as a complete entity that is not random but calculated by coexisting desires latent in the unconscious (albeit shifting in intensity or value, based on their current level of importance). In this Rubik’s cube, there are red faces that look like other reds, but its colors are scrambled. Moreover, this cube’s sides are infinite and constantly reproducing new shades in addition to new reds. It becomes difficult to know where to start, much less why, if the terms of the game mean we will fail to line up the pieces into our desired image from the moment we begin to play. A literal interpretation will feel relatively easy at first like a side with only four colored squares. As its sides and shades continue to multiply, the process of detangling the shades will eventually consume all of our time and energy and confuse more than it untangles. We will find it takes more straining to fit something that so

radically evades our predetermined “right fit” into the image we desire. As we keep going, we can ultimately only see such a small fraction of the massive cube, and every new move only uncovers complications we couldn’t predict from the other end. It is only when we give up the idea that the same shades belong together that we can abandon the anxiety of experimentation in our quest for a specific view. Then, we can open ourselves up to play.

Once there is no version of the cube we feel we *must* see, the freedom of the process becomes the goal. Likewise, we can now follow the guidance of someone or something else. If we sit back and let the pieces flow, we allow another perspective to inform our logic momentarily. We watch how those on the other ends flip the sides, so we can infer what their version might look like and what colors they are aiming for. Then, we might incorporate what others can tell us, stacked upon the next, into a much larger knowledge base of what colors might be waiting our move on the other end. Views on the “right” or ideal combination might contradict, but both views consider at least a part of that reality from the viewpoints they can access on the growing cube. Views coexist simultaneously, pointing to something about their specific circumstances within the larger picture.

Following *Naked Lunch*’s Freudian perspective, we might genuinely learn something new about our externality rather than assuming we, of all people, could line up the right pieces if people would stop shuffling things around on other ends. Using *Naked Lunch*’s logic instead of our own, Fadela living in Interzone is really Dr. Benway from New York. For all intents and purposes, we take this as our truth. While it might seem ridiculous, perhaps it knows something we don’t. Let’s find out *why* and *how* it has come to this conclusion. By accepting each view and knowing it is based on a valid fragment—even if we do not agree with the conclusions based on that fragment—we can deduce a more accurate vision of the imperceptible sides. First, we must

learn how to interpret others' moves into an inferred sight-line.

Therefore, I will take all events in *Naked Lunch* as complementary rather than contradictory aspects of one coherent unconscious to work out its patterns and presuppositions. In this way, each aspect can make sense by stacking upon the last without negating the others. We add up the events and, like Freud, assume they are distorted versions of truth instead of accepting some and repressing the others. Through this method, I argue we can assess how rhythm produces a force that exposes the hidden code of a digital age and, more specifically, how *Naked Lunch* might act as an example of Cronenberg's digitally-infused, nineties mindset extending into a fifties period piece.

### **2.3.1 *Desire as Binary Code***

To understand whether *Naked Lunch* desires the glitch, it asks us to understand the events as a Freudian unconscious. What is always beyond this tentative map or key remains an outlier, a second question, "What does the non-human subject represent?" The non-human subjects in *Naked Lunch* all seem to want something different and morph into various forms inside equally numerous hosts. How might these all relate to one another? The answer, for *Naked Lunch*, is intertwined with the repressed and re-motivated libido. For Marcuse, we learn to parallel the desires of the societal structure through praise and punishment first through the family, then norms and idiosyncrasies as we move through society (Marcuse 32, 55). It is of the utmost importance, then, that we understand societal motivation and organization. Do we organize our principles around a human-centered logic of ethics? To assess *Naked Lunch*'s understanding of habits developed by that structure, we must deduce the numerous alien contributors that are inextricably linked to our own human unconscious.

This is not to say *Naked Lunch*'s capitalist critique is some sort of secret that must be

worked out, especially in the same breath I've introduced Davis' Deleuzian reading. Just as spectators are stuck in the unending cycle of aesthetically strange unconscious events in *Naked Lunch*, Deleuze and Guattari identify the Oedipal narrative as the source of Freud's own cyclical chains. *Anti-Oedipus* has already shown what is missing from the Freudian reading is an economic component, condemning Freud to his own theatric cycle grounded in the individual and Oedipal myth (Deleuze-Guattari 64,65). Just the same, numerous readings of *Naked Lunch* have made this connection and linked the story, novel or film, to its capitalist ties in various ways, including Davis in *The Desiring-Image*.

Daniel Tutt, for one, has already linked the literature to the Frankfurt School (although using Horkheimer and Adorno) and relates its "disjointed images" to an impressionist painting. Formally, the reader gains the autonomy to take their personal story and forge connections to the literature (n. pag.). Instead of attempting to limit the reader's control over the narrative, its form intentionally sets much of the narrative free for interpretation. *Naked Lunch* assumes a position that functionally emulates dialogue in a way, asking questions and expecting answers, instead of a narrative monologue given straight as the reader listens to its tales.

Timothy Yu ties the book to Fredric Jameson and calls it the original Orientalized postmodern city that appears at the historical moment of Jameson's "radical break," published right as the Cold War notably shifts its center from Europe to Asia. This moment is not only a time of heightened racialized peril but specifically one of transnational anxiety (Yu 48). The parallel between that historic moment and our own might allow the film *Naked Lunch*, much later, to seamlessly appropriate fears of quick connectivity and outsourced productivity in a digital age onto *Naked Lunch*'s 50's timeline. Therefore, I am not interested in whether *Naked Lunch* affectively addresses flows of capital once more. I am concerned with whether this 50's

historic film with no temporal or “realistic” claim to our present reality reveals the affective workings of a neoliberal, digitally mediated financial system and how it posits its terms and solutions. In the same way I have asserted the renewed relevance of The Frankfurt school, I am curious as to whether a period piece can also desire to resist and reveal the ease of aesthetic subsumption of a postmodern era.

As in *The Matrix*, *Naked Lunch*'s critical narrative is very much apparent, but it refutes the idea of any societal or collective dominant perception masking our perceptual clarity. Where *The Matrix* presumes reality can be achieved if we unplug from its influence and look from a new, outside view, Davis shows how *Naked Lunch* amplifies and multiplies perceptual confusion with new potentials in every moment. Davis uses the example of Bill killing his wife to demonstrate interpretive fragmenting. We don't know whether the shooting was an alibi for his homosexual impulses or territorializing the writer William Burroughs or doing something else; its motives fragment indefinitely. Through images and sounds that always imply “unpredictable alternatives” and “unseen potentials,” he shows that in *Naked Lunch*, there is no rational “originary world,” temporal reality, or objective perception to step outside *to* (77, 79).

In fact, Davis' own analysis sought to rectify the numerous “critics [who] accused Cronenberg of consolidating hidebound discourses of literary celebrity and market value, the very antonyms of *Kafka's* minor literature” (90). He saw these criticisms as that same surface-level analysis over terms and visible details that did not represent how *Naked Lunch* functioned as queer cinema. His distinction between the cinematic parts and how they function affectively for queer cinema is comparative to my own concerns about the politically resistant narrative.

In Davis' analysis of *Shortbus*, the movie exposes the viewer to parts, bodies, objects, and concepts that are usually exempt from visible depictions of sexuality. *Shortbus* expands

previous sexual formats into new combinations to create more inclusive definitions of sexuality (103). Expansion, here, marks connectivity into a system of value. Establishing and distributing more inclusive definitions of sexuality opens these depicted realms up to new associations and connotations and broad recognition that only eases the dominant mandate for affective exchange. Once marginalized and invisible sexualities can more easily develop rhythms of presence and absence within that binary-like combination of individual exposure (although he more creatively characterizes this as its “shifty sexual mosaics,” which I should absolutely adopt for future use...). *Shortbus* incorporates new images of sexuality, re-defining it and, thus, re-limiting it, setting new tentative rhythms of exposure for boundaries that constitute good and bad versions of it. Once marginalized sexualities gradually become equally rhizomatic and more frequently linked to dominant forces that have the hardest push and pull over value and its visible concepts.

Like Jameson’s virus, Davis emphasizes “the inseparability of rhizomatic and retrograde forces,” as if that connectivity were mostly digital malware (96). In dominant logic’s affective code, the code benefits those who successfully maintain and proliferate the virus, appearing like a helpful program, but its code also instructs to attack users who try to delete it. The virus of dominant logic has conflicting brands, and we cannot agree whether it is a “program” or “virus” at all. The circulation of the bug powder in *Naked Lunch*, for instance, is explicitly institutional and regulated. The process of extermination is a household service performed by trained specialists. They are strictly instructed not to ingest the bug powder and keep a narrow outlook toward the issue. Bill is assigned a bug problem and exterminates the contaminated area as it pops up. Bug powder, then, offers a valuable service. From a technical perspective, it kills the bugs in an infested world and pleurably alters perception from a cognitive one. Those who partake in the drug genuinely long for the bug powder, and those who do not must at least admit



its necessity with no alternative to living in dust in sight. Bug powder sustains itself through *willing*, if not wanting, hosts, creating a systemic network to ensure its survival.

Sexuality finds itself in the same boat. Following Freud, Marcuse likewise looks at the history of repressed libido noting, “regression assumes a progressive function.” Originally, it was “channeled into monogamic institutions” with “quantitative and qualitative restriction of sexuality... The primary content of sexuality is the ‘function of obtaining pleasure from zones of the body... The libido becomes concentrated in one part of the body, leaving most of the rest free for use as the instrument of labor’ (19, 41, 48). Marcuse then acknowledges liberation of the libido had since taken great strides but warns of our current trajectory. While “the rediscovered past yields critical standards tabooed by the present... the sexual relations themselves have become much more closely assimilated with social relations; sexual liberty is harmonized with profitable conformity” (19, 94). In other words, our environment becomes more inclusive to appear beneficial and rewarding once we no longer need strict moral controls in the form of external institutions and regulators. At the same time, the drugs are no longer systematically distributed by the exterminators but are passed through friends in Interzone. Tom and Joan Frost pass on a new drug for Bill to try, and he shares his stash with Joan as they write together.

To clarify, here I will add “profitable conformity” is conceived for Marcuse from fragmented lived experience. That conformity should not be mistaken for any broad, collective sense, and his verb selection of “harmonized” accompanies a section on individual rhythms that suggests this. Harmonizing, here, is scanning desirable peers for what is most profitable and aligning with those rhythms despite the overall dissonance it causes on a larger scale. Thus, harmonizing is not to be confused with the way I have mobilized the term in *The Matrix* chapter, as learning to find similarity despite aesthetic fragmentation. It is not nourishing humanist

individual desires or aiming to bring a contextualized, macro conception into small actions in personal experience. Marcuse is thinking forward in this instance, suggesting the self-centered tunnel vision that would become our standard.

In other words, bodies tend to move toward rhythms of association in flux with the self-determined “winners” and “losers” on the free market. We aim to connect our own node or position with those aspects associated with winners and disconnect it from any traits associated with the losers, and the definition of these depend on the individual. Meanwhile, dominant logic’s controls slowly move inwards, into the home and eventually the mind. In Bill’s transition to the meat of the black centipede, the talking bug “case officer” that once gave orders from the police station has found a place inside Bill’s new apartment. The bug’s militaristic dictations and missions can now be issued from the convenience of personal objects. In the coffee shop, Bill’s typewriter benefits him and attests to shared values. It says Bill is likely hearing voices that want similar desires as Tom and Joan, and he might be useful to them later. The objects of choice are the writers’ typewriter, the drugs, and liberal sexuality. Popularity with other creatives determines access, even if this is relative popularity within a niche social group. These are the connections Bill needs to associate himself with winning in Interzone.

By incorporating marginalized bodies and social groups, dominant logic gains access to adjust fluctuations in those niche, low pulse rhythms. Its logic can track and constrain their rhythms as it brings them into increased visibility or represses them further into the background. The affective market knows when and what grows in popularity by adding up connections. It knows what aspects to emphasize in each segment and what has lost profitable traction to repress out of visibility. Dominant logic directs the most resources toward the most desirable fantasies of the moment and penetrates those marginalized spaces with its own dominating system or logic

for organizing itself.

As we begin to incorporate libidinal expansion with the advancement of society, we associate our own affective productivity with libidinal gratification and self-worth: “This happiness, which takes place part-time during the few hours of leisure between the working days or working nights, but sometimes also during work, enables [the individual] to continue his performance, which in turn perpetuates his labor and that of the others. His erotic performance is brought in line with his societal performance” (Marcuse 46). But the libido is not actually gratified; it is only promised gratification through more channels, appearing as if its actuality is increasingly probable. This is our representation of the non-human other with its assholes, vaginas, and phallic parts. The non-human other always possesses an “erogenous zone,” taking a form indissolubly merged with sexual gratification although seemingly separate from it on the surface. The non-human other is not usually representative of literal sex (although it can be) but a suggestion towards productivity and progress towards affective goals. The alien definition of productivity and meaningful progression towards happiness might lie in sex, the writer’s typewriter, the corporate elite, or the newest products in a factory, depending on what dominant logic needs most in the given space and moment. Dominant logic is also in those things we attach to it, perhaps creativity, love, or connection. But the unconscious registers each attempted union with our medium of choice and whatever we might attach to it for what this really is—a bug or alien with genitals attached. In *Naked Lunch*, we only ever witness the non-human body satisfied in ejaculation. The human bodies must move on to the next medium and hope we finish there. Stuck in a cycle of ultimate pleasure without its release, we are run sore into a state of simultaneous pain.

In this way, dominant forces push to induce flexibility and exceptions, catering the

promise of libidinal satisfaction to every audience. Dominant logic *wants* as many concepts as possible included in the mix. It puts an asshole, phallus, or vagina on everything it can. Concepts on the margins are more slippery and can more easily escape some of dominant logic's direction, but they cannot continue to do so quite as effectively when they are more explicitly defined, and thus limited, in what becomes idyllic depictions and desire production to fulfill libidinal fantasies. Everything is branded as potentially sexy, gratifying and, ultimately, as the orgasm we crave—if we just do it the right way. Narrow definitions once provided names to excluded and repressed concepts, but now they only value and subsume.

Davis therefore concludes the dichotomy between tactics in *Shortbus*, widely acclaimed as a great stride for queer cinema, and *Naked Lunch* are fairly incomparable. He states:

*Naked Lunch* is not particularly diverse, overtly subordinating its brown-skinned characters to white expatriate leads and exposing even the Moroccan character Fadela as 'really' Benway. Since Cronenberg, however, makes no claim to inclusivity and prioritizes an open-ended ontology of desire over a democratic survey of extant types, the limits these two films impose around sexual 'community' ramify very differently. (101)

Here, I want to add its orienting around whiteness and maleness is more of a claim for revealing of the collective code. The concept of the white male is certainly the demographic most represented in Western media throughout history, even as its associations and values are now being complicated in their dominant rhythms. *Naked Lunch* is not meant to extend into more diverse realms or overturn stereotype. It is meant to reveal their more explicit nature hidden in the unconscious of a 50's white male as he uproots his domestic life.

For me, the sense of mockery seems straightforward. Its stereotype is both dramatic and consistent. Bill's bigoted accusation, "The chink short-changed me!" cuts to a nonspecific Asian

stereotype with an overtly racist accent who angrily shovels bug powder into his mouth. The film sports several brazen depictions of Arabic women in full body niqabs and does little to challenge queer stereotype in its literal representation.

But the embellishment is the hint that we are looking through a perceptual lens. The explanation is in the same Kafka contradiction that critics criticized, set up from the very beginning. Bill's wife Joan describes bug powder as a "Kafka" or "literary" high and uses it almost generically. It is a philosophical drug that seems to stir thought and give new perception to the world, making her experience feel "like a bug." Yet the irony here lies not in the term's specificity, referring to Gregor Samsa's transformation into a giant beetle. Joan vocalizes this bug-related reference plainly for the audience. Her explanation is immediately available in a world where nothing is ever immediate, and everything must be inferred. It therefore violates the rules of the movie's perceptual lens and gratifies our own immediate rationalization. The giant bugs in *Naked Lunch* are aesthetically comparable to that of *Metamorphosis*, yet the reference is more appropriate when we think of the circular, self-inflicted logic of bureaucracy in many of Kafka's tales. Ingesting bug powder provides both legitimate pleasure in the infested reality and a means to rationalize and defend it—without the bugs, there is no "liberatory" cognitive experience in the self-produced bug powder. Joan takes the most noteworthy feature of Kafka's famous tale as the strange image of the giant bug rather than the story's moral or purpose. This is the irony.

*Naked Lunch* is not making light of stereotype but revealing the irony of surface and image-based perception that do not assess what task those images perform. Is stereotype treated as a legitimate occurrence in a film or is it mocked as an outlandish perception? It is not coincidence that the traits of the Japanese partners in *Demonlover* are only hinted at and

subdued; whereas, the aggressive, stoic, cut-throat “masculine” business qualities clearly extend out to incorporate Diane, Karen, and Elise as European white women. *Demonlover*, however, was not aiming to reveal the psyche but conceal it. *Demonlover* shows unconscious desire only symptomatically in its subtle forms, and the Japanese partners’ minimization stereotyped them in a different capacity. Their marginalization makes them seem quiet, translated, and related to technological production rather than marketing and distribution like the loud, flashy American woman. The Japanese women are instead fetishized, even when it cannot be directly linked as such. The stereotyped perception of Kaori, the translator, as a meek Asian woman is in her treatment as an object. The camera responds to her as a tool, incorporating her in the frame only when she is translating. She inevitably ends up in the white business man’s bed at the end of the night after our only other exposure to Japanese women are dancers in the club who wear matching outfits and dance in perfect synchronization. Having barely said anything outside the meeting at all, consciously or not, it is only her submissive, generic qualities available to him and to audiences that we might find alluring. In the same way, the Japanese partners tie the East to the West. Our code rarely facilitates black or Arabic representatives, stereotyped, fetishized, or otherwise, toward these high-tech corporate dealings. *Demonlover* omits certain races to accurately reveal the tendencies of our own reality, and some bodies remain perceptually out of frame altogether.

The strategies are different, but racism is revealed in both. *Demonlover* shows how racism of the twenty-first century desires to subtly push racialized bodies to the margins in a way that seems coincidental and “natural,” decided in personal preferences and interactions. *Naked Lunch* uses the stereotypes in the unconscious of a white 50’s man to force us to confront that repressed collective unconscious, to use Jameson’s term. If we are tracking the state of the

political environment like Kracauer before us, it seems we have almost completely subsumed white women in our network of flexible connections that have been shown to not yet extend so regularly to other marginalized subjectivities—unless they are being used as a tool in the narrative. A story that desires the glitch *and* revolves around a Japanese perspective would reveal how the code must modify itself to account for Japanese culture and history at the perceptual center of the whole.

Likewise, when Cronenberg reveals the female trajectory, it is often read as misogyny. The critic Robin Wood writes, “*Shivers* systematically chronicles the breaking of every sexual-social taboo - promiscuity, lesbianism, homosexuality, age difference, finally incest - but each step is presented as merely one more addition to the accumulation of horrors... sexually aroused preying women are presented with a particular intensity of horror and disgust” (24). Addressing these criticisms, Allan MacInnis says the “female monstrous” in Cronenberg films are taken as one side of a binary while conveniently omitting his consistently complex, dialectic approach to such topics. He writes, “Left to choose between images that vacillate between attraction and repulsion, approval and disgust, beauty and ugliness, revolution and reaction, sympathy and horror, Wood tries to force Cronenberg to occupy only the latter half of each binary” (43). The monstrous Rose in Cronenberg’s *Rabid*, for instance, develops an opening in her armpit that hides a phallic stinger used to suck blood from her victims. This development “is not caused by her and is not an aspect of her nature, but her feeding is presented as no less instinctual, as if her armpit penis has formed along with all the knowledge she needs to use it correctly.” Like Bill who sometimes takes to the influence of his non-human typewriter and other times resists its direction, Rose might attempt to satisfy her cravings with animal blood but sometimes gives in instantaneously “without any hint of conscience, out of sheer predatory lust (McInnis 39). This is

not a misogynistic portrayal of women but a revealing of their subsumption. The crevice now hides a symbol of masculine aggression, acquiring the same “confidence” and “competitiveness” that acts as a newfound willingness to strategize and act on their strongest temptations without any thought to the desires of those around them.

This is further magnified by Cronenberg’s own male monstrosities who are often motivated by equally narrow-minded personal ambitions. They choose short-sighted principles over the collective good and, over the course of his career, degeneration increasingly targets the individual male body instead of society itself (McInnis 36, 38). Cinematically tracking the glitch, Cronenberg reveals the sinister sameness and utter selfishness we consider revolutionary. Using the white male as our standard for what liberation should entail is looking to a definition that was monstrously merged with a lust for capital in its inception and following it through its various re-definitions. As it allows new subjects and objects to touch its grotesque, vampiric body, we’d rather be anything other than its victim and jump at the chance to become an extension of its flesh. Equality is not enough. Equal to *what* matters.

Outside the diegesis, then, the tool *is* stereotype, creating rhythms of patterns that determine where specific bodies tend to exist and why. Dominant rhythms use subtle (or not so subtle) patterns of presence and absence to brand bodies towards distinct affective services. *Demonlover* does not challenge these stereotypes either but aims to reveal them and how the code works. Films of the glitch desire broader understanding and context as an imperative part of the solution to more targeted issues. The glitch shows marginalized subjects can be commonly associated with or away from different subjects, objects, areas, and events. They can be unconsciously expected to perform rigid and inflexible functions, like a tool, or otherwise tend out of frame altogether. Unconscious logic allows certain bodies to pass through certain areas



quickly like open hallways where they might face resistance or a straight-up closed door in others. For now, I will leave this here to expand upon in more depth in the next chapter.

It seems clear, however, that *Naked Lunch*, itself, is mocking the absurdity of our lens. It so unashamedly respects only Bill and other white men. The movie contrasts depictions of Bill with stereotype so blatantly and consistently. The bigoted views of marginalized characters gravitate around Bill's own conveniently cool self-perception as a short-spoken, mysterious, yet masculine noir stereotype and a self-inflicted one at that. We will absolutely characterize ourselves into generalities if it means satisfying libidinal desire. *Naked Lunch* does not try to conceal its lens but instead attempts to reveal it as an emphasized view of usually subtler connotations and manipulation:

The manipulation of consciousness which has occurred throughout the orbit of contemporary industrial civilization has been described in the various interpretations of totalitarian and 'popular cultures': co-ordination of the private and public existences, of spontaneous and required reactions. The promotion of thoughtless leisure activities, the triumph of anti-intellectual ideologies, exemplify the trend. This extension of controls to formerly free regions of consciousness and leisure permits a relaxation of sexual taboos. (Marcuse 94)

The constant undermining in the film shows none of these should be taken at face value as the sentiments of *Naked Lunch* itself. Instead, the relaxation of bigoted views towards repressive desublimation are inherently tied up with the expansion of libidinal control. Marginalized bodies become "erotic" to our unconscious if they are portrayed in our "right fit" definition of them and can always be rationalized into our definition through a different frame. They are not literally erotic in our conscious minds but translated into libidinal desire. The Japanese artists and

computer scientists appear to offer libidinal gratification as content producers; the phallus or vagina grows from their “creativity” or “intelligence” like it grew from the typewriter in the creative collaboration with Joan Frost. It need not be a negative association to have negative consequences in terms of the bigger picture. This is affective stereotype.

Jameson’s discussion on realism in *Signatures of the Visible* is helpful to consider how stereotype plays into a cycle of continual redefinitions in *Naked Lunch*, and other works under consideration here. He defines realism in terms of marginalized viewpoints newly coming into view. For Jameson, realism’s unstable nature can be ascribed to the “simultaneous, yet incompatible, aesthetic and epistemological claims” warring for a claim to truth (217). To solve its problem of conflicting views, he suggests we look to the way realism has functioned over the course of its various histories in the arts. Each cultural sector undergoes its own progression through three distinct stages. These are realism, modernism, and postmodernism, which do not necessarily progress at the same pace or time in history as other sectors of art and media (213). He links their pace culturally to social developments in which “the moment of realism can be grasped rather differently as the conquest of a kind of cultural, ideological, and narrative literacy by a new class or group” inferring that we have “two distinct forms of self-consciousness” (215, 215).

The idea that artwork’s truth content can be overturned signifies an “intensified awareness of the technical means or representational artifice in the work itself” (217). Realism *is* the voice of marginalized subjectivities rectifying the ideal image where “a restricted code manages to become elaborated or universal” (232). Moving a new view into the forefront as a version of “realism” is to broadly include the topic in mass dialogue, like the endless conversation in Marguerite Duras, which “strikes one segment of the audience as stylized and

another as ‘realistic’ or somehow ‘true to life’ (233). We can imagine how this divisive process repeats, fragmenting into modernism and even more so and more rapidly in postmodernism with its multiplicities of self-consciousness. He concludes, “we will therefore suggest that realism is to be grasped as a component in a vaster historical process that can be identified as none other than the *capitalist* (or the *bourgeois*) cultural revolution itself... power, culture, economic production, space, the psychic subject, the structure of groups, the Imaginary is systematically dismantled in order for a radically different one to be set in place” (226).

As for what happens after, “The function of any cultural revolution will be to invent the life habits of the new social world... realism and its specific narrative forms construct their new world by *programming* their readers; by training them in new habits and practices, which amount to whole new subject-positions in a new kind of space... Realism must also deprogram the illusory narratives and stereotypes of the older mode of production (226, 228, 229). As we should expect, film’s transition through the three stages occurs in a more rapid, condensed progression than that of literature due to speed and accessibility, overturning its own view (215). Likewise, in the age of Internet and smartphones, the arts and digital media are more accessible and rapidly disseminated than ever before. The capitalist cultural revolution must be staged anew much quicker to deprogram all the fragmented issues in each cultural sector and make visible once marginalized subjects, objects, and concepts where every individual view *is* marginalized, relatively speaking. Just as literature progresses at a different rate and point in history as film, each cultural sector is dealing with its own semi-collective rate and history. Each version of the real has issues that other versions no longer deal with. The whole, then, intentionally misfires to scout out what lies beyond its grasp and bring it inward in each sector. We come to desire the trauma, so we can overcome it. We want the bugs, so we can have people who kill them. We get

our high as exterminators, as individual heroes of a story that focuses on the newest round of bugs instead of “Where is the source and how do we solve infestation as a macro-level issue?”

To sum up, the complaint that the Kafka name drop in the movie’s inception is a legitimate play to market value feels very obtuse. It is knowingly used with a sense of irony by the film, which brings us back to a second question: Why are we keen to take the scenes in the domestic space, where Bill goes to work and hangs out with his friends in a local diner as *more* true than the rest of the film? We are quick to understand early portions of the film as clearer assertions by *Naked Lunch* when the disjointed moments really define the movie in terms of consistency. Those moments with his wife and his friends, like Davis notes, are just as ludicrous as taking Tom Frost and Hafid’s perspective as our basis of truth leading into the next scene. Accepting any rationality at face value allows us to quickly move on, but it pushes us further into a state of confusion as we advance through interactions with continually contradictory perspectives. *Naked Lunch* rejects prioritizing any one perspective of the externality and intentionally incorporates a wide-ranging selection of drastically contradictory accounts. Each perspective is presented as *equal* yet *equally* contradictory or “wrong” in one way or another. The movie intentionally multiplies its own contradictions to illuminate the state of our political environment.

What is affectively repressed, then, is the new realism on the margins of the political sphere, and our duty for the coming years is tracking whether these resistant affective genres can and will be subsumed. As marginalized genres, bodies, content become more clearly defined on the surface, they appear less enigmatic and shape the high-res appearance of our digital society. Marginalized characters may no longer trigger an impulsive fear to that which we don’t know, but they can be defined any way we see fit through patterns of exposure and rationalization.

Since spectators can avoid and emphasize patterns of exposure that portray marginalized bodies in one way or another, we are all permitted more sexual freedom as the controls become more inextricably linked to our own unconscious. In this way, “Imperial structures of extraction and control always accompany the desiring-machines in their travels to any ‘far-off territoriality’ or ‘new land’. Deterritorialization of desire, then, does not entail an emancipatory gesture or a vector of unrepression. Deterritorialization can even re-engage some of the same machineries of power that constrain desire in the first place” (Davis 94).

Thus, there is still one question on rhythms we have yet to address in *Naked Lunch*. How do we understand the distinction between rhythms of oppositional deterritorialization and those of subsumption? The clearest difference in *Naked Lunch* is Bill’s relationship with Kiki versus the sexual union between Kiki and Yves. My own distinction between “relationship” and “sexual union” should be telling. Bill’s relationship with Kiki takes on the most compassionate, as well as comfortable, representation for spectators. Kiki appears soft, beautiful, and gentle to Bill’s unconscious. As Bill stumbles through the streets, Kiki offers to help him repair his typewriter for a newer model, introducing him to the mugwump head. We can only assume the affective exchange has been continued, perpetuated in its flows, as we see Kiki emerge from Bill’s sheets in the morning. Though, we are not permitted to view this sort of genuinely mutual exchange.

In contrast, every sexual encounter we have watched on-screen is vile in some way or another. Joan and Hank wiggle their bodies together on the couch like mindless zombies. Bill and Joan Frost don’t even undress as they shove their fingers into the typewriter’s organ-like opening and put its juices in each other’s mouths. With their eyes closed, they sometimes grope each other and other times grope the blob as it rapidly humps in between them. The combination of the three of them evokes such a profound state of pleasure that they don’t seem to mind how

it's done. However, the gross representation of the sex blob and the harsh sounds of the brass horns make our *sense of* the true act very clear, even when the depiction is not. Bill and Joan grope and grab and stick their fingers in different organs as demanding, excited, and harsh as the horns themselves. There is no patience in their motions but a demand to immediately "get mine."

The non-human body's slimy skin penetrates the barrier between spectator and screen. If we can feel the stickiness out here, Bill and Joan can certainly feel the difference between blob and skin as they grope in the diegesis implying the feeling is in no way imperceptible to them. The blob has been normalized as a part of pleasure itself. They feel the blob's presence but repress it as the usual, convincing themselves the eroticism is their own. The incentive for including the non-human body, then, is the speed of the fantasy in addition to amplified satisfaction. The sex-blob is not an inhibitor to libidinal gratification but a conductor that magnifies the signal and eases the speed of transfer.

However, Bill and Joan's union is nothing like the fondness and straightforwardness we get when we watch Bill with Kiki. Bill keeps Kiki in his bed and seems unfazed when he rolls over from the sheets in the morning. There are no scattered horns or disproportionate sounds. Bill lets Kiki nuzzle his back, puts his arm around him, and kisses his head, thanking him for the mugwump typewriter that inspires his best work. Their interaction is a plain, less intense, but more experiential moment. Our lens keeps focus on their interaction as interaction, instead of means to some unseen, addictive fantasy body that its participants desire more. At the same time, we simply cannot distinguish between love as an internal force or love as an external force any longer. Bill and Kiki still exchange information, social networking, access to the repair shop, and desirable traits—just like Bill and Joan. As abstractions are subsumed, exchange *is* relationship-building in a postmodern world, not separate from it. There is no other objective reality to step

outside to.

But the exchange between Kiki and Yves shows that there is still a difference between love and libidinal exchange, although their functions might overlap. When Bill and Kiki arrive at Yves mansion, we are permitted to see the parasitic and less consensual sexual encounter between Yves and Kiki on-screen. There is a pattern to the kinds of sexual encounters we do not have to infer—that the revealing code will allow us to view unabashedly as “one white expatriate (Bill) cynically sacrifices a brown-skinned ally (Kiki) to a second white expatriate (Yves) in the interest of capitalist accumulations: not just of money but of knowledge, pleasure, and semiconsenting bodies” (Davis 93). Bill trades Kiki’s youthful body, labor, and affection. With Yves’ centipede-like claws in Kiki’s face and blood dripping from the penetration, Kiki moans in what Davis points out is vaguely both pleasure and pain (86). The added value is capital, knowledge, and pleasure.

In the case of the relationship between Bill and Kiki, their excess value was given in exchanges without expectations or intent. With open potential, they slowly defined their relationship together. By flowing in this equitable two-way flow, the potential to change course, change minds, and divert those energies in a different definition remains open. There is potential to play with our own futures in this sense, and there is agency here.

This is not to say the relationship between Kiki and Yves was a one-sided process, but the forces pushing in both directions were widely inequitable. One exchange represents the comfort, ease, and respect for emotions found in consensual exchange, and the other is, frankly, coerced exchange. In coercion, excess value is a stipulation or expectation. In this sense, we could say we are incentivized to build as much social and material capital to increase our ability to coerce others. We aim to increase the probability that we will get our fantasy scenario. The

affective market is a game of probability, channeling resources to tip the odds in our favor by intending to take and giving only what is required to do so. Our real desire, exposed, is to grow into a more capable, connected, and financially well-off parasite like the giant centipede Yves. To face this truth would be to face the grossness of those alien bodies as inseparable from our own.

Our realism, then, tends towards quick, self-centered gratification as impulse. With this definition of impulse as rhythm, characters in *Naked Lunch* can be quickly convinced to give more than they are comfortable with, and the swift end result makes the uncomfortable exchange genuinely pleasurable. Like Bill and Joan or Kiki and Yves, physical discomfort becomes a *part* of libidinal gratification. Dominant rhythms incentivize and normalize our own coercion. We desire to hoard and strategically invest affective resources towards like-minded parties as if these were physical capital and investments. The affective market, likewise, demands innovation and expansion into relatively un-tread territories for best results. In this way, “Desire remains on the move, exploring new zones and routes, even as capitalist forces stay hot on its tail (and, most likely, outflank it entirely)” (Davis 95). The appearance of broad-ranging choice when *everything* is permitted is a method of comforting us that our views are legitimately chosen through individual agency. If everything is desirable in some capacity, everything and everyone appears to have a fighting chance on the affective market.

### ***2.3.2 Pausing the Impulse and Releasing the Binary: Developing a Habit of Resistance***

At this point, rhythmic resistance appears more tangible. Dominant logic sneaks into our perception through impulse. It attaches to factual observations as if it were also given. What we are really trying to do is notice the immediate impulse, question it, and produce a better form if necessary. We are trying to catch the quickness of our own auto-complete that we can now only



potentially recognize *by* its quickness and ease, not its content. Then we assess the validity of its content.

The parasitic tendency is what *Naked Lunch* aims to correlate with dominant logic. The film proposes how the code of dominant logic acts in its unconscious representation. Though *Naked Lunch* works tirelessly and continually to recalibrate our instincts, we are taunted near the end of the film. We instinctively want to take Bill's friends' perspectives as the authentic explanation—even after all the movie's work to de-program the dominant impulse. In this scene, Hank and Martin make their way to Interzone, and Bill's broken typewriter now appears as a bag of empty glass bottles and syringes. They speak of chapters in a novel Bill has been sending them, and we are eager to accept the unreality of the fantastic world we have seen prior. Spectators are incentivized to reject most of the film as pure fantasy to preserve our worldview in an instant. By taking their explanation, we feel internally resolved. The movie *feels* as if it clicks, and we are gratified. This is the impulse of dominant logic. Flooded with the relative strangeness of all the “progressive” and “new” ways of seeing the world, a world of bug powder is now a relief. In these times of change, bug powder looks closest to sanity. People like Bill are the sex-crazed junkies who thrive in a whole culture like Interzone. It makes Hank and Martin's dabbling with sex and drugs look like the idle experimentation of a rational world. We repress the fact that Hank and Martin rationalize the infested culture of 50's New York and take this as the grounding standpoint to view all else. The world of bug powder impulsively takes precedence despite all other objections and contradictions since. Our impulse is to create a hierarchy, a relative realism. We refuse to merge the seemingly conflicting perspectives of bug powder New York and the centipede-driven economy of Interzone into one whole that might make sense from each point of view. Our impulse is competition.

Though Hank and Martin's presence provides an explanation that looks more familiar to the rules of our own reality, this moment is fleeting and quickly whisked away once again into increasingly strange shenanigans. We must notice the quickness in which we gave up all this time and effort spent towards recalibration and, without a moment's notice, *Naked Lunch* pulls the old switcheroo to criticize our weak resolve. We are back in that hallucinogenic reality and realize Bill's friends' accounts do not actually explain the events; they merely allow us to justify them without any further questions. Our impulse, then, is to fear the unknown and desire the familiar, whatever content that may entail for us. It is to take immediate logic to get that feeling of closure, a sense that everything clicks. Resisting dominant logic means sitting with the discomfort of uncertainty, admitting our own limitations, and disavowing the world we want to be true.

Thus, the parasite's existence in *Naked Lunch* could be partitioned into three distinct phases of competition with increasingly unsettling images that we struggle to connect and close off to reach that gratifying feeling that it all clicks. It first moves from the relatively identifiable images of 50's New York under fantastic circumstances to the vagueness of Interzone as a non-location somewhere in Northern Africa with generalized, stereotyped citizens. Finally, it peaks at the mugwump factory where humans frantically suckle at mugwump phalluses for its jism completely unconcerned with their chains or location. These phases are essentially realism, modernism, and postmodernism, and we associate these with bug powder, black centipede, and mugwump jism respectively.

This view is slightly misguided, however. Again, we should never take events on-screen as the literal interpretation but its shadow. This is not a literal transition between realist, modernist, and postmodernist moments but a compulsive re-staging of it in Bill's unconscious.

They are all equally postmodernist views but taken as realism, modernism, and postmodernism. He re-creates a hierarchy of realism, modernism, and postmodernism for his life, and we track him through its stages as he and his perceptual society overturns, updates, and evolves, eventually settling in on the postmodern world as the truth when he faces the mugwump factory and decides to move to Annexia. Essentially, we might be cyclically re-living the trauma (Freud), cyclically re-living the violent separation of capitalism (Marcuse), or cyclically re-living realism's necessary death (Jameson), but there is a common code trapping us in the same affective cycle.

Likewise, Bill, Yves, and Kiki could be said to reside most comfortably in one of each of these stages. Bill is most familiar with bug powder and his beetle-like Clark Nova typewriter. The black centipede is most familiar to both Yves and *Naked Lunch's* feminine characters, indicating the beginning of subsumption for white queer and female identities within Bill's worldview. Finally, Kiki is most familiar with the mugwump, the subsumption of the once foreign "enemy." Kiki introduces Bill to the mugwump head, repairing his old typewriter for his most efficient and compatible model yet. The mugwump is created individually with Bill in mind, and its own flesh moves from inside the apartment to inside Bill's body as he now directly ingests its jism for the high. After realizing the mugwump tries to sacrifice Bill (the older generation) to the more powerful Yves' updated sentimentalities, he renounces its influence and goes back to his Clark Nova. He only escapes Yves' parasitic grasp by sacrificing the youth to this new financial powerhouse.

But Bill narrowly avoids this trap and instead powers on toward revelation. Bill first transforms some of his bigoted, binary-like views towards that of understanding by giving up the habits of extermination and moving toward the habits of a writer. At the threshold, however, Bill

finds that it is all one and the same operation with the same management no matter how many times they appear to update and change for the times. Fabela can don Eastern or Western traditional dress, masculine or feminine looks. Whatever cultural aesthetic she chooses is always exchangeable. Her look is more and less valuable in some scenes than they are in others, and the world seems to auto-sort and reward the most useful people in each space and repress others out of the picture. Likewise, the mugwump factory “indicates a boon in a multinational drug-trafficking racket, hooking old and new markets on costly, cutting-edge product” (Davis 93). It is the non-place and non-moment where all aesthetics and functions come together as one and the same total operation.

How does a 90’s period piece desire the glitch of a digital age? By reducing subjective determinations to pleasure or non-pleasure, each phase of systematically distributed drugs, rebellion can be contained within a dominant perspective no matter the viewpoint. Returning home from work, Bill inevitably finds his friends high with his wife. Hank is fucking Joan on the sofa, and the unaffected slow wiggling of Hank on top of Joan is hardly erotic. She explains, “Hank’s on bug powder, he doesn’t come. I’m on bug powder, I don’t need to cum.” If the high is present, any pleasure normally found in the object or act becomes unnecessary. When pleasure becomes an all-encompassing feeling, there can also be no real distinction between actions—just pleasure or non-pleasure. Changing the feeling through the act itself becomes impossible. Any meaning attributed to the sex is produced by sensations originating in the drug and the brain rather than variations in the reality.

The question now is how to link the more literal interpretation of pleasure and non-pleasure as binary code to the expanded sense of the word as the unseen and strategically repressed. For me, pleasure can best be linked to truth content in the postmodern situation

through Jean-François Lyotard. In tracing the origins of knowledge, he notices there is one point of consensus in each investigation: “the preeminence of narrative form in the formulation of traditional knowledge.” At the same time, he makes an interesting correlation between “bad” knowledge or “one who doesn’t [know]” and foreigners and children (19). This is especially relevant to our previous discussion on child-like play, the foreign-ness in *Naked Lunch*, and the necessary shift in perspective from one of rigidity to one of openness and ambiguity. To let the child or the foreigner guide our logic momentarily is a willingness to inhabit the unknown rather than command it.

Lyotard links the narrative *as* knowledge to our conception of code as presence and absence saying, “The knowledge transmitted by these narrations... determines in a single stroke what one must say in order to be heard, what one must listen to in order to speak, and what role one must play (on the scene of diegetic reality) to be the object of a narrative.” The idea of diegesis in lived experience specifically evokes a feeling of the seen and the repressed, the encouraged or the pleasurable. Lyotard confirms, “Senses are deceptive, and their range and powers of discrimination are limited. This is where technology comes in... They follow a principle, and it is the principle of optimal performance: maximizing output and minimizing input. Technology is therefore a game pertaining not to the true, the just, or the beautiful, etc., but to efficiency: a technical ‘move’ is ‘good’ when it does better and/or expends less energy than another” (44)

The efficient explanation also appears as the “good” or “pleasurable” explanation. On the other hand, a perception of non-pleasure and extensive labor diminishes value in the image. The combinations of ones and zeroes that make up the code, in this instance, can now be reflected materially in a period piece. If one racks up patterns of pleasure with given stimuli, we add a one

to our code. If we are not satisfied, we add a zero. Perhaps we add multiple to account for additional intensity. After adding up fluctuations in pleasure, each moment might be a high-ranking value judgment, a low-ranking one, or anywhere infinitely in-between in our mental projection. Thus, the unseen fantasy image or strategy can instruct toward high-ranking value-judgments and away from low-ranking ones based on patterns of interpretation.

Between pleasure and non-pleasure, the subject in *Naked Lunch* is often conflicted between two dualities in its various forms. These are impulse and guilt, drugs and business, spirituality and rationality. In Freudian terms, we might consider this the repressed human instinct (pleasure principle) and the delayed gratification of order in society (reality principle) (Marcuse 13). These conflicting views are represented externally by Bill's writer friends Hank and Martin. Hank says, "to rewrite is to betray artistic impulse, censor your honest primitive real thoughts... to rethink the flow and the rhythm and the tumbling out of the words is a betrayal, and it's a sin," simultaneously conflating the artistic with a new sort of spirituality. Martin responds, "I don't appreciate your Catholic interpretation of my compulsive necessity to rewrite every single word a hundred times. Guilt is the key—not sin. Guilt in not writing the best that I can. Guilt of not considering everything from every possible angle," equating efficiency and productivity with quality instead of Hank's raw unbounded expression. This places the artist in between the binary of creator or producer, internally motivated by his creative drive, principles, or "morality" or externally motivated by audience demands and social norms.

Through quick successive breaks of bug powder addiction, the trauma of killing his wife, and the new hallucinations brought on by the black centipede, Bill is saturated in a new norm for existence before he ever reaches the threshold. Bill begins to resist dominant impulses in his sensorium before he ever understands or connects dominant logic in its various forms. But Bill

eventually does find the factory and uncover the source of all the bugs and parasites, and the binary between creator and producer is broken. The “progressive” and “raw” views of the creators in *Interzone* stem from the same logic as the compulsive guilt of the efficient and “machinic” producer, although they appear in forms perfectly suited for their own tastes. Ultimately, *Naked Lunch* shows the way to distinguish between the “objective” external world and the “fictional” individual unconscious is to stop taking these dualities as separate in the first place. The external world is functionally inseparable from a collective pool of laboring towards an unseen fiction, all striving to fulfill unconscious desire.

To change flows, then, our conscious minds don’t appear to have much say in such a world. This is, of course, unless we work to change the sensorium guiding impulse. We must develop a strategy to promote indeterminacy. Instead of defining value in terms of good or bad visible traits, we might define personal value in terms of function. We leave an empty space for anything that acts *to do this*, returning a sense of stability to ourselves and our world and allowing room for the visibly “new” to potentially fill those spaces and the morphing “old” to grow out of them.

Desiring the glitch could be re-framed from a psychoanalytic standpoint with *Naked Lunch*, but it would track the same underlying process as *Demonlover*. What its ambiguous rhythm ensures is that the only thing we can afford to consistently desire is to uncover some of the confusion it maps. For Davis, *Naked Lunch* delimits and transmutes queer desire, but this can be re-framed too. For my own purposes, Davis’ queer reading of the film has essentially determined that queer desire in *Naked Lunch* does, in fact, escape subsumption and resist definitions of dominant logic. It depicts a queer cinema that is beyond a literal depiction of queerness and shows us that there are senses and feelings in between the lines of our given tools

of expression—written, cinematic, or otherwise. Whatever the interpretation, *Naked Lunch* rhythmically teaches us to want to reveal or leave it be, but subsequently reveals a mode of resistance if we choose to link up its patterns.

For my own interpretation, the conscious realm must be inferred from the Freudian unconscious, but I haven't provided that explicit interpretation to keep focus on affect. However, I think a quick read-through of my explicit interpretation will help clarify some points. Once we know *Naked Lunch* desires the glitch, its interpretation becomes prescriptive in addition to resistant. In this view, the homoeroticism of Burroughs' story translated through Cronenberg's eyes now emits a distinct air of historical repression in addition to Bill's individual repression.

*Naked Lunch* first separates traditional gender roles of male and female into an antagonistic stance, which vaguely mimics the happy young heterosexual couple at a time just post World War II. The heterosexual couple is first positioned to compete with one another to fulfill contradictory fantasy scenarios. Bill is ridiculed by his friends and all-male work force and eventually takes his decreased productivity out on Joan. Joan, in turn, gets high and screws Bill's artist friend because she's bored. Bill is gratified by advancement in the workplace and Joan by attention in the domestic space. The supposedly "natural" heterosexual union is simultaneously positioned to subvert one another's gratification during their union. Bill and Joan are later revealed to be unconscious agents, for the beetles and the centipedes respectively, trained to kill one another. To effectively "kill" or debilitate each other could be seen from the view of workplace versus domestic gratification. The heterosexual woman, in this sense, is trying to modernize the man towards more liberal sensibilities. She would effectively "kill" the man's perceptual masculinity and his ability to advance through the ranks of the traditional workforce in 50's New York.



In the “modern” stage, Tom and Joan Frost represent the liberal heterosexual couple with updated sensibilities. Tom Frost telepathically admits to unconsciously killing his wife, though he insists not intentionally or consciously. Tom is post-bug powder and already on board with the “feminine” black centipede, yet we witness the same problem once more. Tom and Joan are married, but Tom finds libidinal gratification in his employee and lover Hafid while Joan finds it in her housemaid Fadela. The men still tend toward homoerotic gratification, and Joan still runs back to Fadela and her coven when she is attracted to a man.

As for Kiki and Yves, their relationship should likewise be read as a distortion. Bill made an impression on Yves during their dinner. They are likeminded, both progressive and experienced white male expatriates. Kiki and Yves’ sadistic union is representative of Bill bowing out of corporate production and passing it on to the next generation. He introduces the forward-thinking, youthful Kiki to Yves and ushers in the next generation of international, racialized, mugwump-savvy workforce. Because of the “progressive minded” old guys, in other words, we seem to move forward within the same system. Likewise, Dr. Benway ushers in Fadela and the black centipede, and Fadela (both woman and foreigner) ushers in drugs from the mugwump.

It is only after the fact that Bill realizes the violent effect of his deal with Yves. Bill believed the gig was a good opportunity, intended to be seized upon himself. Passing up the job and recommending Kiki hints at a new kind of nepotism where affective exchange is about social connections. Whereas jobs were once passed down through the family, the family can now extend to all networked nodes to find the candidate of the most value, through likeminded popularity. From this view, the exchange with Yves was not an act of betrayal but a sacrifice of his own opportunity. In his unconscious, Bill sternly tells Kiki to network with Yves as an act of

fatherly direction. The drugs of the mugwump provide a fantasy image that is so precise and persuasive and, following the voice of the mugwump, Bill mistook his push into the corporate workforce as a gift of love. The cycle of aggression rolls on through its course: Kiki understands Yves first violent exchange as the cultural norm, and we can infer the aggression will turn over again and again until Kiki eventually proliferates the cycle as the next version of Yves. After the violent exchange, Bill promptly abandons the mugwump typewriter who reports to the same controller as the old. At least with the Clark Nova, the fantasy image is not so pristine or compelling as the highly addictive mugwump jism. Though creative spaces were once a safe haven for queer, racialized, and female bodies, the straight white expatriates simply move abroad for liberal thrills, constraining even these spaces with desirable production and popularity contests.

In our final scene, *Naked Lunch* ends with a warning: the rhythm of the threshold will not release you from the cycle; it will only reveal and resist the code. We can and must do it again in each new fragment. As Bill heads to Annexia, the road is isolated and barren, and its cold, rural entrance contrasts against the bustling urban space of Interzone. We see guards in strict formation marching down the side of the road, and two stop him and ask for his papers. Bill tells them he is a writer of reports intending to report on life in Annexia and its citizens. To prove it, they demand he write something. To this, Bill turns around and smiles at Joan sad but lovingly. He tells her we're almost there, and it's time for their William Tell routine. He shoots her all over again, and the guards let him pass.

In order to reveal the code in the new fragment, Bill must kill his old desire. For Annexia's culture to accept him and usher him through their gates, he must appear to look desirable by its definitions. Annexia looks like a conservative state, and the wild sex parties and

penchant for drugs that allowed Bill to accrue affective capital in Interzone won't work for him here. In other words, *Naked Lunch* asserts strategically revealing and concealing is not an issue in itself but a necessity of our environment. We tend to strategically reveal and conceal aggressively when we unconsciously view the world as an affective competition. If we are acting cooperatively, however, we still have to "kill" some of our old passions and revive them in new forms to get by in different fragments. This time, the hope is that Joan's reincarnation will be less of a zombie of the old, used for Bill's whims, and appear more plainly in his unconscious as the subject/object reproducing the affect of Joan on the surface. In other words, Bill *is* a homosexual. From the beginning, his wife represented the passion for strangeness and creativity Bill abandoned at the age of ten. Joan was stimulating for him libidinally—just not sexually. In *Annexia*, Bill unconsciously lets her go. Bill can now recognize her intellect, open-mindedness, and sense for adventure in his writing—clearly for what it is.

Kafka's love for the parable that "gesture[s] toward something larger than, or invisible to, himself" and "dissolves the moment we understand it" might be the formal parallel in terms of *Naked Lunch*'s relationship to the spectator. For Hofmann, the parable's "gesture would not be beyond language if it could be defined. *We lose in parable* the moment we pin things down to an accessible meaning" (Hofmann xvii) In the same way, we technically *lose* when we give up our logic—but only by its terms. However, the logic of *Naked Lunch* believes the world is not a competition but a splitting of perspectives all objectively false. It illuminates Jameson's postmodern conception of a political unconscious that must always be cognitively mapped. Once we take up *Naked Lunch* and operate by its terms, there is no longer any win/lose dichotomy to lose. We only lose when we hold on to the binary. The world does not desire to sort itself into hierarchies of relative realism; humanity does.

By reciprocating energy to meet the movie's labor in a mutual dialogue, we cannot help but forge a resistant conversation. Even if we target our conversation to a specific focus like Davis, resistance is the topic *Naked Lunch* keeps bringing up, in terms of queerness or any other perceptual center. Just as Jameson prescribes, *Naked Lunch* does not posit the unconscious as illusion or any less real. It simply shows the objectively false world as this new truth (*Signatures of the Visible* 224).

More specifically, the movie prescribes a conception of our unconscious that is now entirely fused with the non-human bodies who operate in our world. We fully rely on the non-human other's benefits and extensions of our own human capabilities to have perception in this world at all. Like the code, we are trying to assess whether its non-human form underneath is beautiful. Do the non-human bodies extend the beneficial capacity of humankind or are the aliens acting as "case officers," taking commands from an unseen "commander" and leeching off our bodily labor power? Does our relationship to the non-human body take the form of a mutual symbiosis or a parasitic demand answering to an unseen logic? Clark Nova puts it best when he says, "all agents defect, and all resisters sell out. That's the sad truth, Bill. And a writer? A writer lives the sad truth like anyone else. The only difference is, he files a report on it."

Like Kracauer, we can only document and track the state of the political environment and hope to reveal some of its truth. For *Naked Lunch*, a bug or alien creature acts as a placeholder to relieve the actual subject or object from blame, and actions no longer appear to originate in the acting subjects/objects themselves. Through the searing temptation of addiction, characters are willing to carry out non-human desires for a pleasurable fix. Through the unconscious, *Naked Lunch* finds a way to represent an invisible force while maintaining its accuracy—the way it can jump into every subject, object, and mutate within the same body in new situations. We cannot

convince anyone the aliens are real, lest we seem as crazy as *Naked Lunch*. Even if we can never *see* the controller, we can keep tabs on him through the cinema. Once we cross the threshold, it is merely our duty to continually file a report on it.

## 2.4 John Dies at the End

With the glitch now thoroughly mapped, a final gap is left open. While the surface appears subordinate to affect in the previous chapters, the image is anything but. In *Demonlover*, I took a moment to explain the surface is not impotent in that it is always the medium by which we receive access at all. For *Demonlover*, our view “naturally” pushed Japanese contacts into passive roles yet brought in the American partner as a lively, active character in the narrative. From a macro-conception, marginalization has mostly appeared as a process of maximizing value based on the affective market’s supply and demand. If we follow one character’s view through the narrative, however, the surface is all we see. The image determines our sensorium’s rhythms, and the sensorium is the means in which we inhabit dominant logic or the glitch.

This chapter seeks to rectify the view that the surface is not concurrently powerful through the same repetition and rhythm of affect influencing logic in *Naked Lunch*. Using *John Dies at the End*, I intend to delineate the visual counterpart to the chance encounter in which we mobilize the chance encounter and the “exception” to produce the desirable image or rationalize our current worldview. Likewise, patterns of affect give traction to the surface. Regularly produced images seem deceptively clear while their incentives and inevitable consequences remain intentionally blurred. To emphasize a popular view is to marginalize others, and what views appear *more* true and *more* important on the surface are powerful in their own right. In this chapter, I intend to move focus from dominant logic to address the authority in hierarchies on the surface and their unfortunate effects on marginalized bodies.

*John Dies at the End* fits within Shaviro's definition of films that are "beyond criticism." He labels films like *Southland Tales* and *Gamer* as fast, cheap, and sleazy exploitation movies unafraid to seem stupid. Because of their extremisms, they trace the world we live in before theory has yet to catch up (93). Shaviro describes *Southland Tales* as so:

Every character in the movie seems to be frantically engaged in exhibitionistic display, outlandish performance, and ardent networking for the purpose of self-promotion... The reign of universal transparency, with its incessant circulation of sounds and images, and its 'participatory' media ecology in which everyone keeps tabs on everyone else, does not need to be imposed from above. Rather, in the post-cinematic media regime, it 'emerges,' or 'self-organizes,' spontaneously from below. The greatest success of what Michel Foucault calls *governmentality* comes about, not when a certain type of behavior is forcibly imposed upon people, but when people can be 'incentivized' to impose this behavior willingly upon one another, and upon themselves (Shaviro 69)

*Southland Tales* illuminates the whole as a system of recurring logic. In *John Dies at the End*, however, we have our main character Dave as a central point to latch onto. He provides us with both literal and interpretive stability. He rationalizes and frames the image at the same time it is produced around him. Like the digital image, the cinematic frame always instantly updates to best suit Dave's code in the moment.

The movie opens with David Wong sitting in a Chinese restaurant. As the waitress passes by, he lists out exactly how many grains of rice are on the plate and where it was grown. He says he's not a genius or a psychic; it's just side-effects of the soy sauce. "The sauce" is a new drug circulating around town that allows Dave to deduce the unknowable. It opens the mind to unseen connections, attaching stimuli in the present to other times and place, including and especially

those that are, as of yet, only mere potentialities. Next, we hear someone calling his name as the camera focuses across the table. First, it's a blurry body double. Then, the camera focuses on a different man altogether in the same outfit. Although the camera flipped to an empty seat only moments before, the smiling journalist appears to have been sitting there for some time. The man introduces himself as Arnie who has agreed to hear Dave's story. Dave informs Arnie he changed his name to Wong after discovering it's the most common surname in the world. Between the dramatic Americanized East Asian décor in the restaurant, the stereotype of blending in, and the connotation of the intellectual drug "soy sauce" that opens up new connections in the brain, we've stepped into a racialized theme right from the get-go.

*John Dies at the End* does not desire the glitch but aims to reveal the terms for the marginalized subject in lived experience. Like *Under the Skin*; it aims to reveal a more fragmented issue. Unlike *Under the Skin*, it is not resistant, but I will return to this. What is key is the movie's constant self-awareness combined with its complete disregard for any rules, including the rules of resistance. *John Dies at the End* is only concerned with stabilizing Dave at the center of the narrative. Like *Gamer*, it is brazen and straightforward but smart enough to know what it's doing and constantly points at that fact. But whereas *Gamer* takes multiple perspectives and shifts from one area and storyline to the next, *John Dies at the End* keeps us centered to reveal the necessary and ludicrous rationalization it takes to do so. There is a high price to pay on the surface for inflexible logic in a postmodern world.

This is what makes *John Dies at the End* the perfect movie to assess the pull and push of dominant flows on marginalized bodies. It confidently addresses the rules other subjectivities must abide by to exist within a narrative where the white male returns as this newly subversive and "inclusive" hero of the resistance. Our movies are no longer scared to share the story when

everything on the margins can always be rationalized relative to our current perceptual center. Dominant logic ensures those on the margins can be used advantageously as long as they fall within a system of value—whatever value that may be. Dave now graciously shares his story with a “diverse” team who are always limited (even in their diversity) by how they are most useful to the hero and to their respective audiences in that moment. When marginalized characters lose focus, they appear to exist only to serve someone else’s progression through the narrative space. Like *The Matrix*, we know characters will be useful because they made it in the movie, because they are given any focus at all, but different characters are increasingly marginalized when rhythms of exposure perceive them to be increasingly unavailable or use-less. Addressing the marginalized subject, then, is addressing the cost of holding tight to one central point of stability in a world of relativity. When every view can be rationalized within our worldview, what and who must we sacrifice? How far are we willing to reach into ludicrous rationality in order to stabilize Dave at the center of the movie?

This, however, pulls yet another question into view: How is this film any different from *The Matrix* with its stereotype, spectacle, and tentative binary between on or off the soy sauce? For *John Dies at the End*, spectacle and stereotype are the great equalizers that allow us to potentially recognize difference. The movie’s formal characteristics bring subjects to the same weight as objects and intentionally makes everything seem as if they were made from paper. While its narrative actors (subjects and objects) appear light and easily manipulated with the newest affective current, *John Dies at the End* prioritizes the environment and the frame for the image to reveal how the affective breeze noticeably changes *in response* to different images. It strategically mobilizes Claymation and animation to bring out the tension between the parts and the whole and how meaning might deliberately change where different kinds of bodies are



concerned. Additionally, *John Dies at the End* strategically mobilizes different sonic tactics for different characters to bring attention to differences in the world's push and pull.

*John Dies at the End* sorts out patterns for its spectators in ways we might notice. The movie centers the “hero” by any means necessary to prove a fact about the heroic individual: anyone who consistently re-invents the image to position the self at the center cannot maintain perceptual heroism except by continually sacrificing other people. Using a literally Dave-centered frame for easily manipulated characters, *John Dies at the End* asserts the perceptual hero is incompatible with traditional definitions for what is heroic. Unlike *The Matrix*, the movie does not act *to* rationalize dominant logic but attempts to make the surface, the medium of rationality and its images, hyper-visible.

Shaviro's distinction between the filmic space and the game space as a function of identification is most useful here. Where the film subject is supposed to represent a “problem with identification,” the game's shot is intended to minimize difference. For Shaviro, the film space is now intended to emulate the identification of the game space, becoming “increasingly indistinguishable from [it]” (94, 102) Like *Gamer*, *John Dies at the End* does not glitch—only because it does not resist dominant logic in addition to revealing it. Both *Gamer* and *John Dies at the End* attempt to block off spectator perception of cinema's two-way flow to prioritize narrative, and both are flattened as “edgy” films. They envision destitute circumstances for the newly subversive white man and depict his eventual triumph over our societal controller. Their self-reflexivity, even, maintains no claim on resistance. Neither film can potentially act as a threshold for the average moviegoer, though their terms can still be charted by the cinematically literate.

Shaviro, however, does not make such a bold claim about *Gamer*, but he does stress its

unrivaled capacity to track it. The movie's audacity is that very thing that allows it to best reveal the way our dominant logic works:

It's an audacious movie; and one that, in the service of this audacity, isn't afraid to risk seeming ridiculous or stupid... 'a futuristic vomitorium of bosoms and bullets'. But this description needs to be read as praise rather than opprobrium. For *Gamer* is one of those rare films that truly dares to be 'as radical as reality itself.' Precisely because of its exaggerations and funhouse distortions, it says more about the world we actually live in today than nearly any other recent American film that I have seen. *Gamer* remains a few steps ahead of any possible critical reflection that one might try to apply to it. (Shaviro 93)

What I mean when I say the characters are flattened like paper, to put it in this sense, is that aesthetically our characters intentionally look like NPC's in a game where "the sim-actor directly produces moods, feelings, and experiences as commodities, rather than mediating such subjective, impalpable states through the production of physical goods." Unlike the coincidentally empty potentials in *The Matrix*, *John Dies at the End* may not resist dominant logic, but it absolutely reveals it. Its formal and sonic strategies are dramatic, consistent, and *intentional* instead of a productive necessity to complete *The Matrix*'s myth. In *John Dies at the End*, characters are like bad imitations of stereotypes who are "not just selling the use of his or her 'labor-power' for a certain number of hours... [but] also selling his or her 'life' itself as a commodity" (Shaviro 97).

For example, we are rhythmically exposed to John as the second most present character. John is a straight white male who looks and acts much like Dave. His personality and physical expression is eccentric comparatively, but humorously so. John's existence doesn't need to be

rationalized to Dave; it's just a personality. As we move farther out in terms of screen time and importance, white women and black men are not so "rational." The women that take focus in Dave's lens are always conventionally attractive. Any distinct physical characteristics are either minimized to not get in the way of their physical prowess or dramatically emphasized to differentiate, depending on whether and how the woman is valuable to Dave. The black men, in contrast, seem to obstruct Dave. The ridiculously stereotyped Rastafarian drug dealer initially challenges his worldview. The Christian cop constantly intervenes and madly attempts to rationalize the narrative events within his religion in the process. The one Asian character is particularly boring and doesn't command our attention in any meaningful way unless he's the butt of a joke. He serves his function as the disposable poor soul who protects the main characters from possession when an alien hive mind looks for its newest host. He is then promptly killed off to destroy the hive. The magnitude of perceptual flattening increases the further out characters are (in terms of frequency) in relation to Dave. If we do not need to fill in details, produce exceptions, and substantiate an archetype to frequently fit into our worldview, we won't.

Dave and John are "spiritualist exorcists" who have developed a bit of notoriety in subcultural forums on the Internet. To convince Arnie to hear him out, John predicts the exact amount of coins in his pocket, their dates, and the order of heads and tails he'd get if he flipped the nickel ten times. Arnie still seems hesitant. Dave brings up his dream where his mom was chasing him through the forest and lashing him with a whip of knotted penises. At this point, Arnie shifts in his seat uncomfortably. By now, we know this moment all too well. This is the break, the first moment Arnie cannot rationalize. But immediately Dave begins his story, literally cutting away from Arnie's break to show us his own.

In the flashback, John is on stage as the front man in a punk band, and the audience is made up of kids with tattoos, piercings, and tattered jeans dancing around or grabbing beer from one of the kegs. Like the gothic night club in *The Matrix*, we feel relatively centered. It tentatively defines Dave and John's subculture, the rules and values of their chosen reality, and what terms we should expect as we follow them through the film. Unlike *The Matrix*, *John Dies at the End* suggests a schizoid externality that only takes clear perceptual focus for those on the sauce. There is no real and un-real, but there is high and sober. Sobriety, however, does not imply that externality is invisible; it is simply only accessible through strange symptoms on the margins of their perception. As John says, "You don't choose the soy sauce. The sauce chooses you!" There is a difference between those who can use the soy sauce to bend the rules of our supposed reality and those who are either left to its whims. Those on the margins are left to follow direction from others who *can* perceive the potential available in each moment. As the chosen ones, Dave and John are always subjectively determining which potential timeline is "best" at every turn. It should not shock us that Dave, John, and the love interest Amy are the only ones who make it out alive.

This brings us to two strategies that might be employed to make tendencies in our subjective codes visible, one of which I've already addressed. We are unlikely to notice the patterns of dominant logic unless we increase its patterns to a heightened state or minimize them to the point where we might notice our own expectations. Both have their drawbacks. In the first case, as with David Cronenberg, making dominant logic hyper-visible is more likely to motivate mass audiences to pick up the film but runs the risk of alienating marginalized audiences and valuable progressive allies who assess the surface without function. In the second, we run the risk of lack of interest, which is likely to limit its ability to motivate spectators to look further in.

The first option, however, runs a second risk: its affective pace might run too slow. This movie will likely sacrifice the marginalized subject along with the narrative. Of course, we could say perhaps the second option runs the risk of overturning too fast, but it just becomes more niche than resistant. Moving closer to dominant logic, the slow, niche film doesn't expose us to any stereotype that is not already naturalized. Unfortunately, *John Dies at the End* falls into this additional pitfall of turning over too slow while sporting brazen stereotype. Because the movie cannot be easily *felt* to be something altogether different in that pre-subjective register, it moves stereotype further into the depths *and* rationalizes its antics as a joke to most of its audiences. To resist, the movie must clearly ask us to look inside, and we must be the ones who actively rejects its offer. If that question is too ambiguous or up for debate, the spectator can move on with its stereotype in-tact.

Like *Gamer*, *John Dies at the End* is an excellent example due to its intelligence about postmodern subjects and space, and it is incredibly smart in its articulation of neoliberal forces on marginalized bodies. White women and black men take the clearest focus. By interacting with the two main characters most often, they acquire a larger selection for roles they might play to become visible in the white male narrative. While the movie takes a special interest in the black male subjectivity, there are traces of other subjectivities, and we can track vague limits for East Asian and disabled subjectivities blurred further out along its margins. The margins simultaneously disclose which people increasingly lose focus as we move outward from a narrative of resistance that centers around the utility of two ordinary white men from the U.S. Who does he rhythmically come in contact most often? Who must he rationalize more clearly in every new circumstance to maintain the heroic perceptual lens?

### 2.4.1 “Useful Women” and Afro-Necrophilia

Beginning his story, Dave grabs a beer and heads toward the black drug dealer named Robert Marley who is performing magic tricks beside a tree. Robert wears his hair in dreadlocks beneath a Jamaican beanie and speaks with a fake Jamaican accent. Initially, Robert’s getup seems ridiculous, and his spiritual rhetoric seems shallow and laughable. Dave scoffs at him and attempts to leave. Through quick disavowal, he attempts to repress and discourage proliferation of Robert’s image. At first, we parallel Dave’s attitude in the audience. The stereotype *is* meant to be laughable. It’s too perfect to be taken seriously. It escapes naturalization but sits with us as a joke. Robert Marley appears to exist on the surface as humor.

Robert finally gets Dave’s attention when he pulls the same trick we saw with Arnie—he knows Dave’s dreams. Likewise, Robert piques *our* interest just prior. The music changes to a deeper tone. This gesture tells us the movie is about to reveal something important to the narrative. We are incentivized to change our attitude from a relationship of ridicule to one of close attention. Robert, then, grabs Dave’s (and our) attention not through dreams, *per se*, but by making himself relevant to our desires in a way that should be unavailable to him. He penetrates the comfort of the perceptual wall that usually separates us from him. To reframe logic from the perspective of the image: the desirable image for the subject, in the most general sense, is one who can best infer desires and bring them to the surface. The subject who can consistently tap into repressed desire without showing it is rewarded with time, focus, deeper interaction, and frequent affective exchange.

In his interpretation, Robert asks Dave how his dream set up a detonator a full thirty seconds before a real lightning crash. How did his mind construct the exact past he would need for the events of the future? Robert questions Dave’s unconscious lens as Deleuzian desire-

production. At the same time, he questions the cinema as ours and challenges its lens. Just as thunder is only the after-effect of lightning that was already there, the symptoms of soy-sauce are termed “after-effects.” After effects do not open the mind but chart “chance” production already latent beneath the surface: “You don’t choose the soy sauce. The soy sauce chooses you.” What follows, I omitted earlier, “If it can’t use you, it kills you.” By orienting the cinema around the concept of “fantasy,” cinema can use its characters as if they were impotent. It can draw up images of our unseen, but latent, desires to more frequently keep focus and affectively exchange. At the same time, the image of “fantasy” allows the cinema to perceptually distance itself from any real-world accountability.

Following Bill Brown, what is underacknowledged in postmodernity is “the confusion of object and subject, animate and inert... as modernity’s artificial distinction between persons and things.” He reminds us the way we traditionally view objects should move beyond economic theory, which has long been accepted in anthropology. Our view of the object is a problem of “methodological fetishism,” a focus on the object instead of its social function and a system of exchange. Following Kopytoff, he shows slavery is an example of “extramercantile” theory where an object is only a commodity during transaction but becomes individualized after and leads to a very distinct “concrete life” beyond systems of exchange and develops its own biography (177, 181). The minstrel show, for instance, animates stereotype while objects de-animate it and ground it to reality. Afterwards, those same props grew in popularity; they represented white solidarity, fetishes, as a form of “symbolic slavery” (186).

Brown looks at the way Spike Lee’s *Bamboozled* “rehearses the ways in which capitalism continually offers up examples of sudden rises and falls, of the animation of things and the deanimation of humans” (197). He is interested in the black collectible in two regards. First, the

black collectible is uncanny in the Freudian sense, which is the making familiar of something that has been repressed. Next, the collectible is uncanny in the Jentschian sense, which is the feeling that either an animate object is not alive, or an inanimate object becomes animate. He concludes with a theory of the American uncanny as historical ambiguity or “the incapacity to differentiate between the present from the past, despite history, because despite change over time, there’s been no change.” It is a symptom of “our reluctance to think seriously about things that result from repressed apprehension” (207). The American uncanny is a fundamental confusion between the subject and the object combined with an inability to differentiate between moments in history. This is exactly what *John Dies at the End* brings to the table. It depicts our inability to distinguish between subjective relationships, objective functions, and even our own time-lines in our individual lived experience.

For instance, every image we see is calculated in relation to Dave. To separate Dave from the confusion in the world and keep him in clear focus as the object in the center, everything else appears as a corny, dramatized version of the world revolving around the needs of his journey in each moment. Simply by filling the narrative slot of “protagonist,” Davis is then “naturally” placed as our sanity and ground. When he and John are the “chosen ones” who can link up time and space, we must hold their hand and trust their interpretation for the image—or be left in the world with no apparent means for rationality. From their view, cops’ mustaches rip themselves from skin and fly off into the air like bats. To rationalize Dave clearly as the hero in this moment, the cop’s image must be seen to attack *him* to put Dave on the defense and move the story forward. Their lens reveals the postmodern inability to distinguish between subject, object, and moments in history *as* the price of holding tight to a perceptual center.

We can establish perceptual rules for the image by once again drawing our line between



alike points and mapping the pleasure and repressed non-pleasure of our perceptual lens. For women, we only have two characters that receive focus: Amy and Shelly. Amy is an amputee whose fake hand looks like a stiff silicone mannequin part that is too large for her body. We meet Shelly as Dave explains their profession. Her boyfriend is supposedly harassing her, but he's been dead for two months. As she describes the incident, she pulls her hair to the side to reveal the tiniest bandage the size of a nickel and suggests he has hit her on the temple. The damage can be entirely covered simply by releasing her hair. For women, physical attractiveness, according to Dave, is the rule that allows the feminine image to take focus in Dave's story. Both Amy and Shelly appear to have long straight brown hair and similar facial features. If Amy is physically disabled, then that disability must not interfere with his version of physical attractiveness. If Shelly is physically abused, then that wound cannot be drastic or noticeable. Amy, while disabled, is clearly susceptible to a higher-ranking value judgment. Amy can develop a frequent rhythm of appearance throughout a Dave-centered adventure only if she remains particularly useful or valuable to that narrative. Once her disability serves its purpose in the adventure, Amy still makes it out alive. Amy, then, operates first and foremost as a love interest.

The image for a romantic partner is conceived in positive attributes as an affective alliance. To fill the role of an interest, in other words, the subject must appear to potentially extend their reach. If Amy meets Dave's criteria, her amputated hand can only be added value. When the camera only allows women Dave desires to take focus, the disability is not a contradiction. Thus, her disability is valuable to Dave's progression because she takes focus and continues to take focus at all. As they presumably approach the threshold, the door is presented as a phantasmal "ghost knob" that only Amy can open by removing her fake hand and using her

phantom limb. Her disability is now not only acceptable but also reveals a part of the code once inaccessible to Dave. The limb allows access to that invisible something that abled bodies cannot open without them. It is inspiration porn allegorized. Dave does not initially desire the disability but the attractive woman attached. He must rationalize her disability, so he can take pleasure in the conventionally attractive yet now desirably “different” woman he already wanted. He conveniently stumbles onto a deeper, more impactful treasure later on.

To rebrand disability as libidinally gratifying to the general public, then, we have to start with imagery that is already close to dominant logic’s original definition then network our way out from there. We use gradual associations as nodes to re-define beauty. In this way, we choose to relocate her libidinal value to her invisible qualities, to what the conventionally attractive disabled girl can do that other attractive women can’t. When we take away the conventionally attractive component, the disabled body can retain associations without the original connection. At the same time, we reset our value hierarchy for disability with new quantities. Re-branding, in other words, is the narrative threshold without the affective break underneath. Likewise, *John Dies at the End* is just as politically inert as *The Matrix*, but it illustrates its version of the postmodern situation with very different nodes of value.

By granting Amy’s disability value, she can access a combination of overall value that abled bodies will never know. Eventually, we rhythmically begin to define the image of physical disability as internal value. We necessarily re-limit and re-marginalize other nodes in relation to disabled bodies, therefore re-limiting areas and interactions disabled bodies are permitted to easily pass through. By associating disability positively with endurance, inspiration, and abstract qualities, they become valuable not in themselves and not *including* their body. The body is repressed from their own libidinal value. Their existence is rationalized to still feel libidinally

useful to *us* in those moments that *we* need it (i.e. when a disabled person emerges into the image from the code). Disabled subjects' value exists mostly for abled bodies to defend disability who can now both assuage guilt for libidinal exclusion and live in a perceptual illusion of equilibrium. The justification goes: value is simply balanced out and heightened *elsewhere*. Disabled bodies can now appear to have the same fighting chance within a specific frame in the affective market. We attach a libidinal affect to the disabled image—not for disabled subjects who need not produce a fictional, abstract rationalization for their disability or existence—but for us.

Conversely, Shelly is an example of contradiction; she refuses the nodal associations pre-assigned to her by Dave and John. Instead of a reward in terms of added value, she is punished by subtracted value. Shelly possesses all the necessary traits to make it on-screen and into our view, so she must appear potentially valuable in some way. Once John and Dave get to Shelly's house and inspect the basement, John says she looks like their friend Amber. Dave stops him and says Amber is tall, blonde, top-heavy" to which John replies, "yeah, she's cute as hell." For Dave, Shelly is short with dark hair and blue eyes. They give each other a knowing look and turn to see Shelly on the stairs who falls apart into a pile of snakes. Her image is the ideal each have projected onto her, and the pile of snakes is no less of an idealized image. Because John and Dave control the terms of our perceptual lens, she must now appear as the villain.

For context, Dave and John are not innocently helping Shelly in the middle of the night. Dave begrudgingly got out of bed to hear out her case, and John was insistent because she was cute. This is not a motivation derived from their habits and cannot be attributed to a stable sense of identity. Their action is motivated by momentary value, by an opportunity for personal gain. The guys are thus motivated by a one-off stimulus that we can identify as the "chance" encounter, immediately devoid of chance the minute we decide to incorporate it into our

narrative as an event at all. Thus, the image of the chance encounter appears as an opportunity. When Shelly disappoints, the image of the serpent covers the trauma and pain they would have to face if she remained intact as an abused girl in need. The lens sacrifices Shelly's innocent appearance for the boys' when our heroes are the parasites hoping to coerce return. At this moment, their options are realization or rationalization. To avoid tarnishing their unwavering slot as "hero," her body is instantly rationalized as a pile of snakes. To think otherwise is to abandon our narrative center.

If everyone insists on a stable perceptual lens, we are all gratified as heroes. But there is a cost to the image. We lose facts, and we lose marginalized people, whoever they might be relative to our perceptual center. To raise someone beyond their flawed, human capacity and bring even their faults into value at the level of heroism, we must sacrifice something else. In this instance, we lose Shelly who never had any intention to trade her body for their help. Our heroes first forcibly merged Shelly with their own idea of perfection and saw it as a gift. They likewise constructed their own appearance as genuinely good guys to offer in exchange. To trade plainly and expose the desire latent in their code would contradict the image of "helpful" or "friend." We see now why we cannot change the value in the image to resist. To change the image, we constrain someone new. We must desire to operate based on function, to act humanely. If we allow our relationships to form ambiguously, we encourage mutual participation in defining that relationship. The image and logic are never separate; they go hand in hand.

Likewise, the fictive quality of the narrative and its characters are viewed as separate from the spectator to stabilize our perception as "unaffected" or "in control." We tend to draw a clear distinction between movie and self as if they are isolated images. In the American uncanny, however, there is an underacknowledged confusion between subjects, objects, and timelines in

postmodernity. When we refuse to realign our perceptual center to somewhere in-between in our interactions, the movies will always appear unstable and erratic in comparison. Thus, we perceive each new image in commercial cinema as “different” despite their affective sameness.

To center one chosen thing as a closed-off entity appears as a necessity for stability, but we lose accuracy the further out other images lie in the margins of perception. Perception acts like the cinema on the sauce: If Dave and John can pick up on those low tones that direct them *how* to look before the image, they get the desirable image every time. Every character will be rationalized as an ally or an enemy. Every object will be useful or detrimental. If someone/thing makes it into our story, they will always be important to progress the narrative in some capacity. Like the chance encounter, our incapability to manage clear distinctions between subjects, objects, traits, and concepts in the image can strategically mask intent. Robert Marley, for one, has a Rastafarian persona that feels separate from Robert the person. But where Robert’s outfit looks like a costume and his accent feels intentionally dramatized, John’s punk rock aesthetic and sarcastic quips blend in as an inseparable piece *of* subjectivity. Robert’s impressionable teen persona appears separate, as a choice, and the difference between a choice and a trait is where we allocate blame. If the aesthetic seems self-inflicted, we need look no further to blame external issues on his image. That image knowingly provokes trouble. It has implications we learn that “rightfully” demand attention, justified *by* the image and *our* associations we’ve produced for that image. Dominant logic is insidious and self-serving, but the image has power itself.

In this way, Robert’s image can appear as if it is detached and separate from dominant culture not produced in it. The image is seen to be produced somewhere below, allowed to exist, as long as it does not contradict the popular public narrative. Images lower in popularity are thus susceptible to the rules and values at a higher point in the hierarchy in public spaces. Lower-class

images can be detached to fit the needs of someone or something we value more, and higher-class images are valuable across many spaces. If a persona seems more rooted in the body as personality, like John's, spectators can extend our reach in any direction we need to explain its origin. We can shift blame towards another source, from parents to the school environment until it fragments indefinitely and dissipates from any attachments to a clear and rhythmic explanatory image over time. The power in the image is strategic. The perceptual distance between image and their attachments allows some images to be justified more flexibly until any attachments we might attempt to apply to them dissolve.

But the image of greatest importance, in this comparison, is not a Rastafarian persona against a punk rock persona. Both are equally low-class, low-income subcultures, made especially visible by the trashy mall and trailer park scenes in *John Dies at the End*. Unlike the camouflage-like invisibility afforded to the business class workers in *Demonlover*, neither Robert nor John's persona would hold up well across spaces. Here, we must address a dominant image of whiteness where white bodies receive more substantiation, resulting in a perceptual closeness between their image and their subjectivity. Here, I am using Sarah Ahmed's terminology of orientation, toward-ness, and habits. What I have been framing in terms of probability and efficiency for dominant logic (total value output/total value input) might be conceived spatially for the image in terms of distance, reach, and orientation. Following Ahmed, "the world extends the form of some bodies more than others, and such bodies in turn feel at home in this world" (129). Whiteness has more potential for affective coercion because it has rhythmic accessible reach to many resources across many spaces. John ranks up points in what he seems able to offer or extend reach more easily relative to Dave's needs, and the distance between his persona and his subjectivity is comparatively short in our lens—even if the distance between John and his

punk persona is incredibly distanced in other corporate frames. But Ahmed also phrases reach in terms of habit, impulse, and what is natural, “we might be used to thinking of bodies as ‘having’ habits... We could even describe whiteness as a bad habit: as a series of actions that are repeated, forgotten, and that allow some bodies to take up space by restricting the mobility of others,” represented perfectly by our film (129).

There is a moment that seems to contradict the rule of whiteness ranking higher than persona. When the trailer trash “wigger” kid with the saggy pants and the backwards cap is possessed by the swarm of alien bugs, he retains his distinct mannerisms. Justin slouches in his chair and holds the gun off to the side like we’d see in a gang movie. He uses all kinds of slang, spouting off “yo” almost every chance he gets to a point where it is just obnoxiously fake. In this instance, the white male body can move lower in hierarchy, beneath persona. Justin’s mannerisms are now performance not personality. He has been infested by aliens, yes, but more so by black mannerisms which dominate even his new alien hive-mind. Justin tries the same soy sauce but is not chosen to command it. Instead, it hatches from Robert’s body and takes up residence in Justin’s fresh body who, likewise, wears his personality as a costume, so it can be blamed on blackness too. Justin’s persona can now be branded as a fake, constructed abnormality where punk rock and performed femininity may be justified as culture. This way, the white body is punished for blackness, and the black body is rewarded for whiteness. To bring this into the real world, Ahmed notices “organizations tend to recruit in their own image, [and] those who can inherit the ‘character’ of the organization by returning its image with a reflection that reflects back that image, providing what we would call a ‘good likeness.’ It is not just that there is a desire for whiteness that leads to white bodies getting in; rather, whiteness is what the institution is orientated ‘around,’ so that even bodies that might not appear white still have to inhabit

‘whiteness’ if they are to get ‘in’” (134).

For Ahmed, “Bodies are shaped by what they tend toward and that the repetition of that ‘tending toward’ produces certain tendencies... The body is ‘habitual’ not only in the sense that it performs actions repeatedly, but also in the sense that when it performs such actions *it does not command attention*” (129, 130) Thus, we see a contradiction within the movie’s own logic as well. If we are seeing the right fit, the desirable image for narrative focus, the stereotype shouldn’t stand out. It should not command attention, and it should not be pointed at to preserve the dominant view. Like *The Matrix*, stereotype should be naturalized when it *must* receive focus for the narrative we want to tell and should otherwise remain in the margins or out of frame in the code. The standard view of ‘whiteness’ in the audience that sits at the top of the hierarchy means we *can* employ subcultural logic—as long as it does not cross or contradict the view of whiteness as the hero. The image must somehow evade the discomfort whiteness cannot sit in. For serious movies like *Selma* or *Malcolm X*, any discomfort has a comforting effect. It produces a new idea, that we are the heroes in this time by watching it, and we, personally, would have been one of the good guys in that time.

*John Dies at the End* uses humor to pass through a standard for whiteness in spectatorship. If white audiences (whether literally white or not) cannot face the trauma that dominant whiteness is not the hero, then this movie lets whiteness be the hero. It also shows how the world must crash and burn around Dave to make the heroic stipulation always appear to be true. *John Dies at the End* hides its assertions behind the mask of a joke. Now, we see what the movie might be doing. The movie gives dominant logic to the audiences as if in a lover’s spat. It proclaims, “Fine!” when it is anything but, and it begins throwing its own dramatized images at spectators faster than we should be able to handle. The audience can identify with the hero. They



can have the hero and all the pretense that comes with it, but the hero is not heroic. To construct him that way, the rest of the world must look ridiculous by comparison. Dave not only sacrifices the people around him but with such brutality. *This* should be incompatible with a guy who is portrayed as the hero, but it is the one thing that isn't. His continual explosions and sacrifices abide by the terms at the highest level of the hierarchy. *John Dies at the End* decides that if the audience can rationalize that, they're lost to anywhere the current takes them anyways.

#### 2.4.2 *The New Spirituality*

While Dave appears to act as a stable center, he really acts more like a tether or anchor for the issues of marginalized subjectivities that always seem to escape dominant logic when we face them head on. When the soy sauce first takes hold of Dave, he calls a priest and asks him how anyone knows if they are mentally ill, and the priest asks him to come in, to which Dave gets defensive and blames others. The priest then answers: "They'll never know. You can't diagnose yourself with the same organ that has the disease just like you can't see your own eyeball. The rest of the world just seems to go crazy around you." His wisdom is true for both perception and the cinematic lens: "Whiteness is only invisible for those who inhabit it, or for those who get so used to its inhabitation that they learn not to see it, even when they are not it (Ahmed 133). As the sauce enters Dave's system, the priest then gives a warning to us, a distorted, demonic "Nothing you're seeing is real." So while it seems like the rest of the world is crazy, we somehow repress the fact that the only stable factor *is* Dave. We attribute that insanity to them and sanity to him due to the immediacy of his perception. If at first all the stereotypes and explosions seem self-produced or justifiably provoked by alien infestations, we must eventually realize the only thing that stays the same as everyone else falls apart around him is Dave. But this does not change the reality of the image. Shelly genuinely acts like a pile of

snakes when we view her. While we cannot rid ourselves of that initial exposure, we can learn to be skeptical about the way things appear and scout out contradictions in the image. We can usually only do this in retrospect, after the breaks, until we develop a new habitual logic of interpretation.

Let us move our logic into a narrative perspective, then. For us to even see a woman in *John Dies at the End*, the woman must be attractive (potential to fill *our* desires and expectations for the love interest role; relative to Dave's center but still our demands) or otherwise serve a specific connotative purpose within the narrative (relative to the narrative's center; an old woman is not meant to be Dave's love interest; a lesbian is not meant to be Dave's love interest; they must do something else). Relative utility determines the rules of dominant logic's lens, and a stable self-perception as good, or at least right, is the one image we will not cross. Our very perceptual world can burn if it means we are the sane, chosen ones who can see it.

Thus, the apocalyptic world in *John Dies at End* is exactly the world we desire. There is a messiah-esque quality about it. Our new God always has a plan or a reason, and we give ourselves a sort of twisted, masochistic pleasure when we transform our pain into value. Pain is a lesson, a new trait, or the cost of defeating an evil-doer in the world. The evils that take focus are projections of our own desires, even if that "positive" or right correlation is negative. In reality, the evil in the world works *through* innocent bodies, objects, and concepts. Dominant logic gives us the appearance of never-ending comfort that we are the hero in the apocalypse and the promise of future return as a reward for our endurance. The image of pain, then, becomes an integral part of the hero's adventure. We cannot overcome our trials without evil, and there is more opportunity for triumph with more pain. Heroes become anti-heroes in a destitute world, and we know they will always emerge victorious or escape in the last moment to fight another

day. Our dominant frame for the image has already worked out heroic-like preservation before the event ever occurs. For instance, if our lens believes homosexuality is a sin, the lesbian still has the potential to make it in Dave's narrative, but her positive inclusion must now mean a negative "correct" image. The right fit, the idealized view, can be the enemy—as long as it is clearly defined with her associations intact for us. Women, queer, racialized, disabled, and marginalized subjects in general can all have their own version of that God where they are the chosen ones. If pain only sanctions our faith, then we will never feel pain again. We desire sin to prove ourselves right, and the right image acquires more importance than the healthy image. Through dominant logic, we are the all-knowing prophet who will always fight for good (as we define it) and cannot make a wrong prediction.

However, it is the black man who is regularly associated with a blind, devout faith in *John Dies at the End*. Every black character seems to have an invisible religion that takes precedent over contextual logic in the "real world." For Robert, it was his spiritual voodoo. Now, we meet the religious cop Detective Lawrence "Morgan Freeman" Appleton. As the detective approaches Justin's house with gasoline to burn it down, his dramatic excessive monologue is direct insight into the new spirituality that guides our reality:

I'm an old school Catholic. I believe in Hell. I believe that it's more than just murderers and rapists down there. I believe in demons and worms, vile shit in the grease trap of the Universe. And the more I think about it, the more I think that it's not just some place down there. Oh no, that it's right here with us. We just can't perceive it. It's kinda like the country music radio station. It's out there in the air, even if you don't tune into it. Everybody's got a ghost story, U.F.O. or Bigfoot story- no. You know what I think? I think stuff is both real and not real at the same time. And I think that, somehow, through

chemistry or magic or voodoo, that Jamaican son of a bitch, he tuned into it, into Hell itself. Through that, he opened a door. He *became* the door. And me? I intend to close it.

Predictably living up to Dave's nickname, Detective Appleton gives this dramatic Morgan Freeman type monologue. Given the context, it's also the sanest explanation we've heard yet. He doesn't disavow the aliens in our perception. He adds them to what he already knows. Detective Appleton rationalizes that both perceptions can be true as his previous version fragments into the next. Because both perceptions exist, they must be equally dealt with. Detective Appleton pours gasoline across the floor to kill the parasitic aliens before they spread, and Dave slowly backs away looking at him like he's some religious nut. Much later, the hive would infect Detective Appleton, and Dave would burn the hive-mind by dragging Fred's newly infected body into a car and blowing it up with a shotgun. Amy, in this scene, not only urges Dave on but gives audiences an entirely different sense of relativity. She clings onto Dave's arm like he's a courageous hero. Where Amy makes Dave's image appear courageous, Dave makes Detective Appleton's look crazy.

When questioning Dave earlier at the station, the detective says he's just trying to save lives. He's not going to get Dave or his friends in trouble, but he's concerned someone is selling poison. The detective is trying to reduce the image of pain and forge images of teamwork and comradery. Dave, in contrast, tends to multiply images antagonism. Dave often rationalizes anything that impedes him as evil and magnifies images of pain. By focusing clearly on *his* image of meaningful progress, he appears to have no time for cooperation since the evils of the apocalypse are always threatening and always on the move. At the same time, he must create more evils to justify his quick leave and inattention to the needs of others. Through the apocalypse, all of Dave's imagery and creations are justified. He can rationally remain unwilling

to attend to the desires of others unless it appears like an opportunity to save the world. In other words, Dave does produce images of cooperation but strategically so. He produces images of cooperation when the situation appears to connect him closer toward his or his affective alliance's desire (to which he expects future return), like the situation with Shelly.

What Dave's god-like rationalization can't do is escape images he's painted for us in the past. Earlier, Detective Appleton's dialogue in the station didn't pose an issue. It didn't yet appear to contradict the heroic center. Now, Dave's logic folds in on itself, and he can only produce more to rationalize it. Dave binds lunacy to the "excess" concept of religion and produces relativity to skew perception, hoping we've forgotten any contradictions amidst all the action and chaos. The detective tries to stop the infestation in the same way as Dave, but he tries to do it without killing anyone. One solution is framed as ludicrous and the other seems like a badass explosion. No one subject appears to have any substance except by using the bodies of others, and Dave's stability is the biggest construction of all. Dave's heroic image is so fragile that it must be constantly propped up by everyone and everything around him.

It is precisely because the black male frequently pops up in Dave's reality that the image of blackness must have such a presumed flexibility about it. Dave must have the means to make exceptions to keep himself in control of the black narrative. As spectators, we are vulnerable to this. The only thing we know for certain in the apocalypse is that these two protagonists so graciously explain it for us at every step. They offer us instant relief when there are so many problems to untangle throughout the film. Dave and John can be conceived as our affective alliance, so what desire are we fulfilling for them in exchange? In exchange for their interpretive work, we must necessarily be willing to sacrifice images in our own logic that contradict theirs. For one narrative image to prevail and take precedence, all others must be less true. In exchange

for quick understanding, our perspective can only exist if it doesn't contradict the flying mustaches, girls who turn into snakes, and the pervasive antagonism of blackness.

This is the relationship of spectatorship to the cinematic image. We expect the narrative to labor, and we expect to receive. We repress the idea that we are giving anything other than money as cost. There is an affective cost that escapes focus and lives invisibly on the margins of our perception. Likewise, if the camera turns its head and makes a subjective determination to linger, it is scouting for valuable traits. The camera is giving away its definition for the desirable image and under what circumstances in the process. The lens produces the erratic, manipulated world. Our friend in one moment might turn into a pile of snakes in the next and vice versa. If we keep a tight zoom and focus narrowly on those aspects that seem most useful to our narrative, we might be disappointed if we cognitively "zoom out" or "turn the camera." When we habitually infer what is beyond the image relayed through the frame, we might see the ideal woman, but it's not a romantic context. We realize we are constantly presuming some logical next scene instead of leaving the future open.

We can then deduce that the cinematic image, like dominant logic, is also cyclically re-living its own traumatic break. Accidents in production that occur on-screen must also be desirable, or they would have been repressed from the final cut. Commercial cinema is therefore incentivized to repeatedly produce the image of the chance encounter within a frame or environment in which it is impossible to manifest that image. The image in cinema is re-living the loss of that which it desperately needs to rationalize its own propositions as the real. The image is always a constructed *sense of* certainty in lieu of revealing the objectively false world of desire-production. *John Dies at the End* pokes fun at this in a few ways. At one point, their team is held hostage in the back of a van and, coming to, John casually says, "That's right 'cause

Fred's still alive..." as he tries to assess the current point in the chosen time-line. In another moment, Dave is surprised he can still hear John after his phone is destroyed, and John instructs Dave to buy a bratwurst and put it up to his ear. Dave can still hear John through the hot dog, suggesting the telepathic link connecting their conversation is produced through the sauce in the mind and has little to do with the experiential interaction with the object itself.

In terms of the image, I therefore argue Berlant's cruel optimism takes the form of neoliberal faith in a new God. The new spirituality is one where the individual is prophet and prophecy all at once. Every character is deluded by their own versions of scripture, whether it be stoner culture or Christianity, and any image confirms our faith. Those in relative control of the image like Dave and John will always pick the timeline that keeps them alive, and they will always pick the version that paints them in the best light. So, we're here at the threshold, and we have our formula to understand marginalization in the image. If the breaks on the way to the threshold are often marginalized bodies, the margins must be rhythmically sacrificed as a sort of ritual until the subjective center can finally see.

As Dave and John enter the alien world, a spokesman in a suit and a painted mask introduces himself and his hoard of select citizens. All of the citizens wear masks, most are topless in cloth wrappings (except a few officials who wear business suits), and all of them are visibly white. They enter a church where Dave and John's likeness are already printed on tapestries that adorn each side of the centered altar. Presumably, the difference between Dave's world and the alien one is one event that fragmented the timelines. In Dave's world, a man named Cyrus Rooney died at 17 while trying to breed a bull and a Clydesdale. In theirs, he continued to prosper and developed technology and biology fused into one body. Cyrus Rooney created insectile flying machines that look strikingly similar to old images of fighter planes

projected on black and white film stock. He then created the first “primitive thinking machine” in 1902. When Rooney died in 1926, the thinking machine became sentient and named itself Korrok. It began to exhibit its own desires and emotions and continued Dr. Rooney’s work. Korrok eventually “conformed all living nature to urge on the advancement of mankind” and killed “those who resist progress” through what we see on the screen as a graphic animated sequence. Our spokesman notes they intentionally used a format “that we find more familiar.” What we consider familiar is also a format that associated with humor, childishness, and a prominent history of racism. The spokesman strategically uses the cartoon form to humorously comfort his intended audience, minimize the violence, and frame the genocide as “re-education.” This is the collective version of what we have experienced with Dave this whole time.

Korrok, likewise, sacrifices marginalized bodies to his god-like rule. He is fed the world’s greatest thinkers, writers, teachers, and philosophers and absorbs their knowledge, who are all only “unimportant” in terms of Korrok’s desire for centralized rather than collective control. When we humanely shift logic in terms of collective desire, we impulsively know those citizens should be allowed to live. Dave and John then enter Korrok’s lair and ask the thinking machine what he wants. The giant fleshy mass with one eye says in a distinctly low, black male voice-over “not big black cocks, so we don’t have that in common” as Dave shouts back “get out of my head!” Here, the ultimate monstrosity is still implied through blackness but masked by a digital costume. The digital monster only serves the same function stereotype has performed this whole time. Dominance and control appears to come together as one neatly-contained entity past the threshold, but it doesn’t show us anything we haven’t seen before.

The alien society intends to feed Dave and John to Korrok, so he can access the gateway and subsume even that. But if we haven’t really crossed the threshold, neither Dave nor the



spectators can provide that knowledge. It is a battle of probability to see who wins—the newly subversive white male or the evil alien overlord trying to take away agency we haven't had the whole movie. The spokesman proclaims not even our greatest minds could equal even one node of Korrok's web, yet we instinctively know Korrok can't win against the heroic image. There is something that takes precedence over an all knowing, all powerful thinking machine in the narrative, and it's the thinking machine out here. In the next moment, Dave, John, and the dog blow up Korrok in a dramatic exit packed with punches, a flamethrower, and a nailed-up baseball bat to his giant eye. We can somehow rationalize his ultimate defeat through the chance that they underestimated the dog who would blow the place to smithereens. This is usually unbelievable—unless the corny explanation is the desirable image justified as fiction. If the alien logic guiding our world wants to appear dead and gone, then it must stage the appearance of its own destruction.

Korrok is therefore a produced logic to explain the noise that is yet to come. Until this point, we have been able to equate Dave's relationship at the center with the cinematic perceptual center. While this scene posits Dave's threshold, his first break only cut in to cover up Arnie's. Arnie's story is instead dispersed in small cinematic breaks through Dave's tale over the course of the film. What we've seen *most frequently* is not what we should be taking as the main point of the narrative. The cinematic space is not a hierarchy, and what is repressed can tell us just as much about the image as the image itself.

Dave's story, then, acts as the detonator to explain the sound of the threshold that is yet to come. We know the narrative succeeds in masking the genuine threshold (allegorically speaking) because Dave's narrative takes such a pristine, crystal clear focus. The build-up produces the familiar image, and the familiar makes the repressed seem un-real, deviant, un-truth. Dave's

narrative exists to logically rationalize the threshold before it ever occurs.

What we failed to notice earlier is that audiences do not link up with Dave cinematically. For Dave, we always get dramatic indication before he feels and before he knows the action. For Arnie, all his scenes are shot with diegetic sound until he's affected in the breaks. Leading up to Dave's dream, for instance, we are cued in before the visual image ever occurs. Arnie, on the other hand, sits in non-diegetic sound when Dave is pulling the coin trick. Only when Dave moves on to his dreams does the sound cue in, and the frame slowly zooms in on Arnie's face. Arnie reverts to the habit of old logic in the next break, and he has rationalized the coins as sleight of hand and repressed the dream. John now takes him outside and the beads hanging from the door clack naturally. Revealing an empty cage in the back of his jeep, there is still no cinematic gesture telling us to be wary—but we know anyways. Arnie shows us cinematic logic is now produced in our minds. We no longer need its push or indication to feel what's coming.

To convince Arnie to continue with his tale, Dave asks Arnie what's in the cage, and it first appears empty. He then instructs Arnie to first look off to the side and pay attention to the corner of his vision without moving his head and slowly turn his eyes to look at the alien creature. Our sound kicks in as he jumps back. Arnie responds not to predetermined logic but to sensory experience. Dave remarks it usually takes people much longer to see it and Arnie must have an open mind. The margins are the key. The movie paints the icon of the black man forcefully in the margins. He is loud, aggressive, asking us to look at how we've killed him in all his various forms and reincarnations. He is showing us his already dead body from the corner of our eye as we strain to keep focus in the other direction. *John Dies at the End* is trying to make it easy for us to slowly look at the margins when it is quick and easy to focus on Dave. Yet the minute you look at the alien or unfamiliar image straight on, it disappears. When you slowly let

your focus drift from the center to the corner of your vision, we might see the repressed when a standard for whiteness proclaims there is nothing in the box.

In this instance, Dave is the one who is objectified. He is used as a tool to show the cost of pulling Dave into the forefront when Arnie is the real hero. If we focus on Arnie too fast or right from the beginning, however, he is already effectively dead. Arnie would never reach audiences if Dave knew Arnie's story from the beginning. Whereas Dave opens by making a completely sick joke about his mom, Arnie gets serious and says he thought Dave wanted to tell the truth. Dave excuses it and says he just does that when he's nervous. It boils down to a casual rationalization for why his antics are no big deal. We seem to gain spectacle and humor, but we lose the cinematic substance. From the beginning, Dave is a liar and Arnie wants the truth. We've always seen John as the raunchy, sexist eccentric, yet Dave is the one who laughs at it, supports it, and rationalizes it in his story. Dave is the one who gives it value, who spreads it, and receives even more in return. If John is the sexist, Dave can laugh at it without being held responsible. John's image is the scapegoat, and Dave doesn't have to face the trauma of incorporating it into his identity when he tells the story. Dave is by no means a hero.

Arnie eventually believes his story, and Dave tells him there are people who don't want this out. They plan to get the mind-altering substance to a lab as physical proof, and Arnie assures him he can take any backlash. He recalls police brutality at a college riot where he was shoved to the ground in a violent racially-charged assault, and Arnie says he knew what he's been doing the job for ever since. At this moment, Dave starts to laugh, asking him to describe himself and says, "'Cause to me you're not black, arnie. To me you're a sloppy white guy in a rumpled corduroy with a tape recorder.'" Outside at Arnie's car, they open the trunk, and Arnie yells, "You did this to me! You killed me!" explicitly. Dave tells him to look at the mangled body.

He's been dead for days and says someone must have known he contacted Dave and took him out. Arnie begins to weep, telling us of his kids and his vacation to Atlantic City coming up. Using this fake, digitally produced sound, Arnie pops out of existence into thin air with the pop of a bubble. As soon as he does, the sad creepy music changes to an angelic, heroic tone. Dave can be the hero once more.

If we allow Arnie to exist as an intelligent, truthful, and truly resistant black man *as function* yet white man *as image*, we might catch a glimpse of him before he must be rationalized away. Dave cannot go back and re-write earlier scenes. He already allowed the non-threatening aspects of Arnie in his story when the threatening ones hadn't yet come out. Dave can now only produce more. To plausibly make Arnie dead in the moment he needs without doing the deed himself, Arnie can only already be dead. Arnie attempts to violate a hefty rule by walking on-screen with his real body at all, but the narrative still needs to use him first. It skirts the rules by playing to them.

While Dave does reach that moment where it all comes together as one unified entity, all the people who provided him access immediately disappeared. If they aren't perceptually wiped clean from the adventure, Dave can't look like he made it to the threshold by himself with his buddy John and his girlfriend-to-be Amy. Even then, Dave's final crossing of the threshold is only accessible *through* Amy, and she must open the final door for him. His girlfriend is a disabled woman, and this fact finally lets him see the alternate dimension. Regardless, he and John cross through and defeat the ultimate evil without her. They return to claim her as prize instead. If she doesn't cross, she doesn't appear to directly aid in its defeat. She can be transformed into his reward for such open-mindedness.

Whether it's the white male or some other subject, dominant logic seeks to allocate the

most affective capital towards ourselves while sapping it from others, and this has direct consequences for surface and image. Dominant logic always wants to paint the self in the most valuable light, and it will always result in a ranking system based on the utility of those with most power to control the lens. Accuracy, facts, and context will always be at stake. Difference is not in the aesthetic or the value of the image itself, but affect works through the image until the collective surface no longer needs an individual's value to do a systematic job. Difference proposes its own nonexistence within the individualized frames, slipping away the moment we attempt to look it head on and dispersing into all the exceptions mobilized for other "useful" purposes. Real difference can hide beneath a monster who has staged its own death.

### 3 CONCLUSIONS

As for the Gorgon Medusa in its newest form, there are a few points I'd like to bring out now in quick succession. Comparing our findings in *The Matrix*, *Naked Lunch*, and *John Dies at the End*, one major theme is dispersion. In each, narrative progression appears to move through different places, people, and things, but there is no apparent link or pattern between these as systematically dominating stimuli. Instead, there is only what Berlant has identified as systematically dominating flows of affect that remain cyclical and stagnating. There are, however, distinctions to be made between how the films here strategically employ affect.

Here, we might build on Kracauer's realism. For Kracauer, the sensory, experimental nature of film was eventually glossed over and repressed to do narrative's work as "sensationalism" but, as Hansen notes, "Kracauer can hardly be said to advocate narrative abstinence; he recognizes, and acknowledges, the phenomenal multiplicity and necessity of storytelling, of structures organizing time and space, affect, thought, and action" (Kracauer 57, Hansen 275). Where traditional Hollywood narrative may have dominated post World War II film, we no longer see such a stark discrepancy between bodily, sensory experiences in art film and commercial cinema. We feel the alien planted in Neo's bellybutton and violently sucked out of his skin in the same slimy, tactile capacity as the sex blob in *Naked Lunch*. Neo reluctantly scoops a bland-looking mush from his bowl, and we can practically smell the perfectly cooked steak that Ciphur eats in his deal with Agent Smith.

These two scenes in *The Matrix* could be compared to the ambiguity of Mugwump jism in *Naked Lunch*. Like Ciphur's steak, characters in *Naked Lunch* feel the alien skin as intense and orgasmic. For spectators, the aliens register more like Neo's mush. Where the narrative says one thing in *Naked Lunch*, the visuals and audio-track intentionally contradict the narrative. Unlike

*The Matrix*, *Naked Lunch* challenges our impulse to confirm the fantasy narrative as truth. Dominant logic thrives on the impulse to affirm the personal narrative, and *John Dies at the End* shows how, over time, dominant logic repeats itself and transfers power to the image. With rhythmic exposure, we no longer need the low tones to tensely respond before Arnie is shocked in the narrative. We begin to take the image itself as justification for our response, illustrating the problem of the surface in *The Matrix*.

For Kracauer, “Films may represent an indefinite number of material phenomena... in such a way that their forms, movements, and light values jell into comprehensible rhythmical patterns. The tendency thus to defy content in favor of rhythm [prevails]” (68). Films are not just fiction or an object in the world but a condensed reproduction of “the flow of life” (71). The cinema can create correlations quickly on its own; it has the power to bring dispersed experiences close together in quick succession. Cinema can manipulate consciousness or illuminate it, redeeming its necessary distortions: “films may follow the chain of causes and effects responsible for some event. This route, too, marks an attempt to suggest the continuum of physical reality or at least a continuum largely involving it... The pictorial analysis leads into the thicket of a bygone psychophysical world, implicating a succession of affect-laden surroundings and objects. Emphasis on the unfolding of causal interrelationship seems to call for a reversal of the course which narratives devoted to the ‘unfolding of destinies’ are usually taking” (65, 66).

As we’ve learned from Marcuse, we may genuinely expand the mediums for libidinal gratification but affective constraints remain. If we are to reconnect consciousness and rediscover our libidinal past, contrary to Shaviro, *Naked Lunch* asserts we should no longer seek to expand our limits into unbounded desire but link up the surface so bodies and objects might overlap. Expansion now maximizes those quick, narrow-minded exchanges and only works in

favor of a system of value and exchange. Shaviro knows this, however, and proposes perhaps we need to run the system through. At some point, misfiring symptoms must become so rapid and spectacular that they can no longer be rationalized and repressed (135). By running itself through, dominant logic should make itself visible.

The question which began my analysis might move back into play at this point. In modernity's move to the urban center, norms hadn't yet jelled into a standard logic of being. If expansion into the digital space under neoliberalism provides a historical opening to divert patterns of being once more, how do we track and resist the state of the political environment in commercial cinema once narrative is subsumed? Shaviro rightfully contends that revealing the neoliberal environment is the end-goal for a break with dominant logic. But where *Gamer* and *John Dies at the End* would reveal the affective workings under neoliberalism, they would not make the cut for the glitch.

Resistant cinema must not only desire to reveal neoliberalism as a total moving system but also proliferate resistance by illuminating the two-way flow of affective interconnectivity. The glitch is transferable between affect-laden cinema and subjects because it is an affective genre exemplified here in cinematic form. In the same way, Deleuze and Guattari could be said to glitch where Freud reveals a psychoanalytic fragment. Both are equally necessary to flesh out the multitude of patterns within various fragments of our postmodern world, but the former intends to reveal and resist the political state where Freudian theory does not. The glitch, in cinema, solves the problem of political resistance once narrative is subsumed. I find there is still such thing as politically resistant cinema in the broader affective genre of the glitch.

Thus, while our narrative surface may change, there are still ways to interpret cinematic functions through affective means. We can likewise chart how films that desire the glitch line up



and divert to remain diverse. *Naked Lunch*, for instance, desires the glitch but also transmutes queer desire. *Demonlover*'s pessimistic stance on our capacity to resist looks very different from the more optimistic take of *Naked Lunch*. Like Del Toro's work, films of the glitch may belong to the art world *or* the commercial sphere, though there are strong affective flows limiting the glitch in commercial cinema.

The task at hand is therefore not a commercial versus art film aesthetic dichotomy but one where we must continually perform the affective work—and lots of work remains. To presume our discussion of commercial cinema and art cinema is done because we have previously done the work in film studies does not do us any favors here. It is time to return to classic aesthetic distinctions and build upon narrative parallels to affect in the digital age. It is also time to look back to Kracauer's concerns on how to best illuminate our political environment and take up the task as a rhythmic, continual practice. I hope my work here will reinvigorate some of this discussion as I move forward to chart the glitch, a cinema of affective resistance.

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