Narcisscinema: Selfie Culture and the Moving Image

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NARCISSCINEMA: SELFIE CULTURE AND THE MOVING IMAGE

by

JENNY GUNN

Under the Direction of Alessandra Raengo, PhD

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines technologies of self-mediation and their impact on contemporary visual culture. Since the standard inclusion of the forward-facing camera on the iPhone 4 in 2010, self-mediation has become a widespread form of digital media engagement. Approaching digital self-mediation as a durational event, this dissertation focuses on narrative films, or what I deem “narcisscinema,” and other serial aesthetic practices. In order to address the range of practices possible through technologies of self-mediation, I mobilize the various aesthetic aids through which narcissism has been approached in critical theory. Following an introduction in chapter one, chapter two “The Pool: Narcissism and the Moving Image,” establishes the use value of cinema as a mapping tool that exposes the affective complexity of self-mediation. Chapter three, “The Mirror: Narcissism as Affective Form,” analyzes Darren
Aronfosky’s *Black Swan* (2010) as a poetics of narcissism, examining self-mediation as a disciplinary practice. Chapter four, “Play: Narcissism and Creative Invention,” reviews Deleuze’s reaffirmation of narcissism as a form of play, addressing forms of self-assertion that disrupt the faciality of contemporary selfie culture. Chapter five, “Allure: Narcissism and the Object,” extends this analysis further into a discussion of the incipient narcissism of western philosophy including the recent object-oriented philosophy. Here, I interpret object-oriented ontology as a philosophical form of self-mediation given its preoccupation with the human as object. While the first chapters consider contemporary films which reproduce the zeitgeist of contemporary digital culture by essentializing the mediated self as a white heteronormative female (thereby reproducing the ideal object of the gaze), the latter two chapters further develop a critical racial analysis of photo-sharing and social networking sites, arguing that digital visual culture underscores a formal notion of the subject that first emerged in Enlightenment aesthetic philosophy and always necessitates a problematic racial and gendered hierarchy. Finally, in the coda I examine Jenn Nkiru’s music video for Kamasi Washington’s “Hub Tones” (2018) as an alternative model of self-assertion which disrupts contemporary digital culture’s commerce in faces and its commodification of difference.

INDEX WORDS: Selfie, Selfies, Self-mediation, Narcissism, Narcisscinema, Faciality, Object-oriented philosophy, Post-web 2.0
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by

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NARCISSCINEMA: SELFIE CULTURE AND THE MOVING IMAGE

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1 INTRODUCTION

In a comical interlude on the invention of “videophony” in Infinite Jest (1996), David Foster Wallace eerily anticipates the innovation of digital technologies of self-mediation such as FaceTime. In just a few pages, Wallace recounts the initial popularity and success of “video-telephoning” as well as what ultimately leads to its demise and the return of “good old voice-only telephoning.”1 In short, Wallace envisions a “videophonic stress,” that accompanies the pressure to appear, and to appear to be attentive, when participating in a videophone call—pressures that do not accompany the more distracted listening state of traditional telephone use. As Wallace describes, videophonic stress is most acute for the image-conscious, whose anxieties are exacerbated by the ever-present reflection of their own faces during the course of a videophone call. The constant confrontation with one’s image during the videophone call leads to the condition of “VPD: Video-Physiognomic Dysphoria,” which as Wallace recounts, is solved in the consumer marketplace by the invention of various masking devices used to cover the faces of videophone users. The popularity of such masks and their effective compensation for the anxiety onset by VPD culminates in the development of “Transmittable Tableau aka TT”:

And behind these lens-cap dioramas and transmitted Tableaux, callers of course found that they were once again stresslessly invisible, unvainly makeup-free—since once again unseen . . . while on their screen, the attractive, intensely attentive face of the well-appointed celebrity on the other end’s Tableau reassured them that they were the objects of a concentrated attention they themselves did not have to exert. And of course, but these advantages were nothing other than the once-lost and now-appreciated advantages of good old Bell-era blind aural-only telephoning . . . 2

In this brief interlude in Infinite Jest, Wallace humorously envisions the demise of videophone technology and a return to the traditional audio telephone due to the increasing aids necessary for

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2 Ibid, 150.
the anxieties engendered by videophonic stress and the increasing pressure to appear and to interface. What was only a quasi-science fictional scenario at the time of Wallace’s writing, however, is now plainly recognizable as the de facto state of today’s selfie culture—a visual culture, which since 2010 and the invention of the forward-facing camera on the iPhone 4—has been saturated with a variety of photo and video technologies constantly reflecting back to us our own images. Today, Wallace’s futuristic vision of videophone technology seems if anything too optimistic when the return to audio-only telephone technology seems unlikely and no sufficient masking device is available to compensate for the demands of our own increasingly interfacial culture.

Little contemporary writing in digital media studies has attempted to affectively map the climate of this selfie culture as accurately and with as much nuance as Wallace’s fictional scenario. As Steven Shaviro argues in *Post-Cinematic Affect*, it is only through attention to affect that a sense of one’s place in the matrix of global capitalism can possibly be intuited.\(^3\) He explains, drawing on the work of his colleague Jonathan Flatley that:

> affective mapping seeks at the very least, to explore the contours of the prison we find ourselves in. This is a crucial task at any time; but all the more so today, when that prison has no outside, but is coterminous with the world as a whole . . . [affective maps] do not just passively trace or represent, but actively construct and perform, the social relations, flows and feelings that they are ostensibly ‘about.’\(^4\)

The neologism, affective mapping, while inspired by Frederic Jameson’s call for a non-representational and non-phenomenological diagram or, “cognitive map” of life under multinational capitalism also recognizes the similar priorities of Deleuze and Guattari and later Brian Massumi and their attention to affect as a transpersonal intensity that undergirds and

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\(^4\) Ibid, 6.
interconnects disparate elements.\(^5\) In an attempt to develop a critical media theory of digital self-mediation, this dissertation similarly insists that attention to affect is necessary.

In the popular press, the ramifications of digital self-mediation have been largely condensed around questions of the photographic format of the selfie, which has typically been treated as a minor novelty form of self-representation in the digital age (symptomatic of the narcissism of millennials) or on the other hand, proclaimed as a tool of a more democratic means of self-representation.\(^6\) But digital technologies of self-mediation have had a more profound impact on contemporary visual culture than has yet been recognized. Like Wallace’s parable of videophony in *Infinite Jest*, contemporary films such as *Unfriended* (Leo Gabriadze, 2014) or *Nerve* (Henry Joost & Ariel Schulman 2016) narrativize cautionary tales aimed at millennial morality, responsibility, and the effects of social media upon these, but these films also affectively map a selfie culture, that is to say, a visual culture that we increasingly experience alongside or as filtered through our own reflections. Whether speaking of Skype, FaceTime, or the selfie per se, in the visual culture of the selfie our experience is frequently mediated by a heightened state of self-awareness that is accompanied by particular affects, such as for example, fascination, suffocation, persecution, and paranoia. At the same time, these affects, as Shaviro’s concept of affective mapping emphasizes, convey the experience of the subject in the political economy of an increasingly digitized neoliberalism, where particularly a young millennial

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subject may feel compelled to participate in processes of social media and where the self’s appearance is the requisite proof of this participation.

The concept of selfie culture is intended to emphasize the significance of digital self-mediation as a phenomenon impacting a larger visual culture. It is not to be taken as a Benjaminian modernity thesis that the invention of the forward-facing camera, for example, technologically reconfigures modern subjectivity; a variety of media formats predating it, such as autobiography, diaries, and that which the photographic format of the selfie as a visual medium is most often linked to, self-portraiture and snap-shot photography, have historically made self-representation possible.\(^7\) The notion of a selfie culture, however, is intended to suggest the ways in which due to the capabilities of contemporary digital media such as the smartphone and the webcam, acts of self-representation have become more commonplace, more constant, and ultimately as a result, each individually less significant or conclusive. That is in part to say, that with the capabilities of contemporary digital media, self-mediation has become a mass practice.

In emphasizing self-mediation as mass practice, I take inspiration from Jodi Dean’s *Blog Theory*.\(^8\) As Dean rightly argues of blogs, it is when analyzed as lived practices of engagement that forms of digital mediation reveal their effects on contemporary subjective experience—effects that are often beneficial to capitalism—but that are not necessarily made visible when analysis remains too tethered to the specific content of a singular blog.\(^9\) Like Dean’s *Blog Theory* then, this dissertation insists that the development of a critical media theory of digital self-mediation necessitates an ontological attention to these practices as a larger mass phenomenon.

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\(^9\) Ibid, 40-41.
Media scholar Hannah Westley offers support for this approach in her repeated call for academic studies of selfies to attend to them as not only products but more importantly, as practices. In so doing, Westley draws attention to a term coined by Julie Rak, “automediality,” which is intended to refer to and encapsulate “both the products and process of mediating the self.” The necessity of attending to practice, however, may be more readily apparent in an analysis of blogging such as Dean’s, a medium that we more readily recognize as an activity or process, than it seems to be in analyses of the selfie per se, which despite its function as a format for social media postings, resembles a still photograph and is thus more readily viewed as a finished product. As Westley argues, however, any given selfie functions in a shifting sense of relation to so many others as they are continuously being uploaded, shared, and commented on. Selfies are thereby imbued with a certain kineticism or what is more commonly referred to as a virality. Narrating this relati onality, or fixing it into some sort of framework, is therefore necessarily tenuous.

This tenuousness is highlighted, for example, in Richard Prince’s 2014 series of “New Portraits,” in which Prince screen-grabbed Instagram photos, many of which are selfies, just after adding his comments so that they seem to represent the final word encapsulating their significance. These screen-grabbed images were then further congealed and literally reified by being screen-printed to large-scale canvases and sold for thousands of dollars. Yet the kineticism of these images was, in fact, never stilled—and if anything, only exacerbated by their inclusion in Prince’s exhibition and the large media attention and controversy it yielded. Prince thus

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11 Westley, “Reading the Self in Selfies.”  
reminds us that any sustained attention to the selfie as product, such as seems to be called for in the analysis of his “New Portraits” series, is only an obfuscation of a greater context of participation of the selfie in an ongoing process.

In addition to focusing on processes of automediality, and echoing Jodi Dean’s deprioritizing content analysis in the development of her critical media theory, this dissertation does not prioritize iconographic analysis of ontic selfie photographs or individual vlogging practices. It is indeed on the level of ontic analysis that claims such as art historian Derek Murray’s of the possibility of self-mediation as a form of representational agency for women and minorities are based, particularly given his focus on the iconography of the selfie format, which by definition highlights the individual’s autonomy in this new form of photographic production.13 While ontic practices of self-mediation and the assertion of agency they seem to offer are not without value to sociological, feminist, or art historical research, in developing a critical media theory, it is necessary to consider the ontological significance of self-mediation as a new mass practice of self-representation that is also a vehicle of capitalist revenue. Digital self-mediation should therefore be considered another example of what Jodi Dean refers to as a form of “communicative capitalism.” According to Dean, with the increasing proliferation of web 2.0 applications, notional democracy has been replaced by the lure of “communicative capitalism,” a self-involved, depoliticized, consumerist model of participation that is precisely aligned with a mode of reflexivity that I would argue is properly visualized in the selfie format:

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“Communicative capitalism is that economic-ideological form wherein reflexivity captures creativity and resistance as to enrich the few as it placates and diverts the many.”14 In other words, it is precisely, if perhaps paradoxically, the reflexivity of the selfie format that also functions as a mark of the participation that is necessary for the monetization of social media platforms. It seems then in the perhaps pessimistic view of this author that the representational agency ostensibly achieved through practices of automediality in social media spaces and through the selfie in particular can at best only be defined as what Lauren Berlant refers to as a “cruel optimism” in the political climate of neoliberalism. As Berlant explains cruel optimism describes a relation when an attachment to an object:

. . . ignites a sense of possibility [that] actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving; and, doubly, it is cruel insofar as the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or a world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming.15

Berlant’s concept of cruel optimism, although attentive to affective attachments, recalls Slavoj Žižek’s attention to ideology as “the ways our deeper commitments bind us to practices of domination.”16 Interestingly, in developing her critical media theory and drawing on Žižek, Dean is attentive to how first in blogging, and later in social media practices, it is precisely our expression of a commitment to ourselves, or the reflexivity of these online spaces, which binds us to exploitation under capitalism. While Dean does not connect her conclusions to this point, one can certainly extrapolate the emergence of the forward-facing camera as climactic within this landscape.

14 Dean, 4 see also Jodi Dean, Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).
16 Dean, 5; see also Slavoj Žižek, The Sublime Object of Ideology (London: Verso, 2009).
Drawing from the implications of Dean’s analysis as well as the tenor of the conversations surrounding the selfie in the popular media, it seems fair to suggest that the hyper-reflexivity of selfie culture, that is to say, narcissism, is the new frontier of capitalist exploitation.\(^1^7\) Writing in the late 1980s, Frederic Jameson anticipates the increased liquidity of finance capital and its ability to bypass the commodity relation in the formation of surplus value.\(^1^8\) In corollary with Jameson’s analysis of finance capital, it is clear than in today’s selfie culture the commodity relation to objects is now unnecessary to encourage processes of capitalist consumption. Instead, as Yasmin Ibrahim has similarly argued, through practices of automediality, the narcissistic lure of our own self-images are the products in which we repeatedly invest and with which digital media platforms are routinely occupied, thus creating profit for social media and photo-sharing sites.\(^1^9\)

Aligned with Dean and Westley’s emphasis on temporality, the psychoanalytic diagnostic of narcissism, which is frequently invoked but has yet to be adequately applied in discussions of digital self-mediation, is a dynamic and ongoing process, in short, a “drama” as described by Lacan.\(^2^0\) While born in the object of one’s own self-image as Lacan theorizes in the mirror stage

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essay, narcissism is not contained there but rather plays out in an ongoing dynamic of desire and rivalry between the image and the self that it establishes. As argues in psychoanalysis, it is within lived duration that the narcissistic relation is established and maintained. Given that like Rak’s concept of automediality, narcissism is itself a dynamic process, it would be a mistake to attempt to confine critical media analysis to the finished product of the selfie photograph, which would be akin to looking only at the mirror image and forgetting the subject it reflects. Since in this way, the finished product of the selfie photograph reifies the otherwise dynamic relation of narcissism, as was shown through the example of Richard Prince’s “New Portraits” series, it will be necessary to look elsewhere in the visual culture of the selfie to locate this. As this dissertation argues, the affects and aesthetics of digital self-mediation are better revealed in contemporary cinema. In opposition to the analysis of individual vlogs, selfie practices, or even of first-person cinema which similarly operates through direct address, narrative cinema offers a dialectical view of the affective experiences of self-mediation. When viewing for example someone’s vlog, we have access only to what the vlogger wants us to see and not to the affective complexity of what they experience during the process of self-mediation. Not coinciding with the self-mediating camera, the external and thus dialectical gaze of the cinematic apparatus in what I define as contemporary Narcisscinema exposes the affective or felt experience of this process. As a durational narrative form, cinema makes an affective mapping of digital self-mediation possible.

In so doing, Narcisscinema intersects with the related concept of post-cinema, which Shaviro has argued not only reiterates the affective experience of late capitalism but likewise of the digital technologies that fuel its acceleration. Responding to the aesthetic modes and

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21 Ibid.
22 Shaviro, *Post Cinematic Affect*. 
consumption practices of digital media, examples of post-cinema are increasingly modulated with frenetic editing patterns and post-continuity narrative structures. They may also mime the experience of other digital media such as multi-player games. As Shaviro explains, post-cinema breaks from the perspectival mode of passive viewing characteristic of classical cinema, instead replicating the surface scanning typical of the more interactive Internet experience. In short, proponents of post-cinema argue that after the digital turn, cinema turns away from the classical narrative mode, returning to the spectacular mode characteristic of early cinema, or what Gunning deems the cinema of attractions. But since post-cinema’s initial theorization, the experience of the web has profoundly changed. With the rise of the smartphone, the increasing capacity of cloud storage, increased Internet speeds, and the rise of social media and photo-sharing sites, online experience has become predominately image-based. With the demands of social media platforms such as Facebook to use verifiable identities for account names as well as the rise of technologies of digital self-mediation, it has thus inevitably become further tethered to the real or at least the photographic. In order to address this profound shift in the experience of digital networked media, I utilize the term “post-web 2.0.” Coined by author and web designer Darci DiNucci in 1999, the term web 2.0 addresses changes in the Internet around the new millennium that allowed for greater participation, user-generated content, and interoperability. While all of these characteristics still exist, the continued and uncritical use of the term web 2.0, now two decades old, does not adequately address the significant changes in the experience of online digital media since 2010. Like post-modernism in relation to modernism, the term post-

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23 On Post-Cinematic aesthetics, see also the edited collection available online, Shane Denson and Julia Leyda, eds. POST-CINEMA, accessed May 11, 2016, http://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/post-cinema/.
24 The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded (Film Culture in Transition) edited by Wanda Strauven: (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006).
web 2.0 admits of a continued affinity with the characteristics of web 2.0 but indicates, at the same time, a noteworthy shift in user experience. As opposed to post-cinema in the larger sense, Narcisscinema more insistently engages with the experience and affects of the post-web 2.0, and particularly the increasing demand for digital self-mediation as a mark of participation.

In both popular and academic appraisals of the significance of the selfie format, narcissism is frequently if only colloquially invoked. Such invocations, most frequent in the early 2010s when selfie-postings first emerged, typically belie an overblown anxiety concerning a crisis of interpersonal relationality in the millennial generation. Unfortunately, in such discussions, narcissism has been little examined as an aesthetic form even though it is the image of self-reflection that the selfie, and particularly the mirrored selfie, exhibit that is precisely the reason the format seems to inevitably point to questions of psychological narcissism. In other words, the folded image of self-contemplation since at least Ovid’s Narcissus powerfully suggests this diagnosis. Defined as a condition of self-absorption that rejects external relationality, narcissism inherently relies on aesthetic forms for its legibility. Further still, as described by both Ovid and later Lacan, the narcissistic self-relation depends on aesthetic mediation or emerges inherently therefrom. The recent visibility of self-mediation as a mass practice has only underscored what are now clearly visible as narcissism’s aesthetic properties. As a result, scholars such as Nicole Morse have admirably called for an attention to the careful aesthetic analysis of individual selfies and their wide variety of iterations and intentions. In a related effort, this dissertation analyzes how film aesthetics in contemporary Narcisscinema relay

26 The exception to this would be in properly psychological studies, where narcissism is understood in a modern scientific sense, see for example, Jessica L. McCain et al., “Personality and Selfies: Narcissism and the Dark Triad,” Computers in Human Behavior 64 (November 1, 2016): 126–33.
the experience of self-mediation as a variety of durational and affective self-relations. Following Derrida’s insistence that there is no ‘one’ narcissism, each chapter mobilizes the rich legacy of narcissism in critical theory to explore the variety of self-relations possible and more importantly, their affective complexities.28

Beyond narrative content, the concept of Narcisscinema is intent to address how film aesthetics remediate the subjective experience of self-mediation. Because of this, the filmic examples explored here tend towards the art cinema, where both form and content are equally mobilized towards this end. One of the primary aesthetic devices used to immerse the film audience in the experience of narcissistic self-relation or self-mediation is what Pasolini refers to as the free-indirect point-of-view shot. Attempting to articulate the aesthetic innovations of the modern art cinema, in his famous essay on the cinema of poetry, Pasolini addresses the possibility of free-indirect discourse in the cinema.29 As a literary device, free-indirect discourse occurs when the authorial voice takes on the language and emotions of a character. As Pasolini argues, sustaining this intermixture is more easily achieved in the literary work since the author can enter into a character’s internal emotional state. But it is only achieved with difficulty in the cinema, which is largely confined to external appearances and the use of gesture and facial expression to convey emotion. While Pasolini argues that the point-of-view shot is akin to direct speech, he theorizes the possibility of a free-indirect point-of-view shot, which he argues has become more common in the modern art film. Here, there is a sympathetic overlap and even ambiguity between the vision of the camera’s lens and the experience of the protagonist. The free-indirect point of view shot is, put otherwise, what Jean Mitry referred to as a “semi-

subjective” shot that thus problematizes the distinction between subjective and objective modes in the cinema and thereby also the truth-function and authority of the camera. Although Pasolini admits that the free-indirect point of view shot, “is simply the immersion of the filmmaker in the mind of his character . . . the adoption on the part of the filmmaker not only of the psychology of his character but also of his language,” for him it is also primarily of interest as a device the filmmaker exploits in order to express his own unique aesthetic vision that would have been otherwise considered esoteric by the standards of classical film storytelling. In other words, as Pasolini argues, modern art films such as Antonioni’s Red Desert (1964) frequently feature “sick” protagonists whose neurotic relationship to the world gives alibi to the director’s obsessive gaze, which in Antonioni’s case emerges as a preoccupation with “self-sufficient figurative beauty.”

Pasolini’s analysis already suggests a latent narcissism to the semi-subjective mode of the free-indirect point-of-view shot, given his emphasis on the director’s unique aesthetic vision: “The use of the ‘free-indirect point of view shot’ in the cinema of poetry . . . is pretextual. It serves to speak indirectly—through any narrative alibi—in the first person singular [my emphasis].” Pasolini himself perhaps repeats this directorial narcissism in his assessment of the significance of the free-indirect point of view shot in a manner that wholly overlooks the demanding and nuanced performances at the center of the art cinema, whose neurotic protagonists such as Red Desert’s Giulia (played by Monica Vitti) are most frequently female. Mitry’s theory of the semi-subjective, on the other hand, is quite attuned to the power of the free-

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31 Pasolini, 175.
32 Ibid, 179.
33 Pasolini, 185.
indirect mode as a form of character identification and its usefulness in establishing empathy with a character’s subjective experience that is sustainable beyond the simple point-of-view shot.\textsuperscript{34} In the semi-subjective mode, Mitry argues, the camera persists alongside the character, allowing the viewer greater access to the character’s emotional experience.\textsuperscript{35} Here the audience sees both the character and what the character sees. For Deleuze’s later theorization of free indirect images, Mitry’s observation regarding the camera’s persistence alongside the character’s is crucial; through these two together emerges the “split consciousness” of the free indirect mode which simultaneously undoes the authority of both the camera’s so-called objective gaze and that of the subject’s phenomenological experience. Instead, in the free-indirect image we experience these two in mutual encounter.\textsuperscript{36}

Given its ability to sustain character identification and empathy, it is perhaps not surprising that the free-indirect mode is a prominent stylistic device of contemporary Narcisscinema. The use of the free-indirect point of view shot allows the viewer to experience the subjective effects and affectivity of self-mediation or the narcissistic self-encounter in a manner that is typically foreclosed when the recording camera coincides with the self-mediating one as in vlogs or first-person cinema. Instead, what Deleuze deems the free-indirect mode’s capacity for \textit{being with} its characters—in reference to both Mitry’s prior use of the term in his discussion of the semi-subjective as well as Heidegger’s \textit{Mitsein}—its \textit{besidedness} grants the experience of self-mediation the space of a crucial critical distance, revealing affective realities often repressed in surface reflection.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{34} Mitry, \textit{The Aesthetics and Psychology of the Cinema}; Schwartz, “Typewriter: Free Indirect Discourse in Deleuze’s Cinema.”
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{36} Schwartz, 126-127; Gilles Deleuze, \textit{Cinema 1: The Movement-Image} (Minneapolis: Univ of Minnesota Press, 1986), 74.
\textsuperscript{37} Schwartz, 122; Deleuze, \textit{Cinema 1}, 71-75.
The semi-subjective’s quality of besidedness is evident in the focus of chapter one, Olivier Assayas’ *Personal Shopper* (2016). Setting up a rationale for the importance of cinema to a critical media theory of digital self-mediation, this chapter entitled, “The Pool: Narcissism and the Moving Image” returns to Ovid’s myth by way of Akira Lippit and examines the tension between self-reflection and the movement of proto-cinematic mediation in the reflecting pool.\(^{38}\) Lippit turns to Derrida’s disparate comments on cinema and his argument that cinema exhibits a “second-person” narcissism that moves the self towards the other and through which also one can come to know oneself as an other.\(^{39}\) Interestingly for a theory of digital self-mediation, Derrida’s film theory is as often concerned with the experience of being filmed as it is with film spectatorship. For Derrida, the cinematic construction of the self is always belated, a process through which one’s image returns to oneself as both a specter and an other (a second person, you). Spectrality is likewise a central concern of Assayas’ *Personal Shopper*, the story of protagonist, Maureen (Kristen Stewart) waiting in Paris for a sign from the ghost of her recently deceased twin, Lewis. But in *Personal Shopper*, spectrality is equally a characteristic claimed by the cinematic apparatus, and the film’s use of free-indirect discourse is set up in a dialectical relation to the immediacy of the smartphone, Maureen’s constant companion. Whereas Maureen’s smartphone locks her in a ‘pathological’ narcissism relating only to herself and other digital avatars, Assayas’ claims for cinema Derrida’s second person narcissism and thus the capability of interelationality, the bridging of the self to the other. Given its investment in the unique spectrality of the cinematic, *Personal Shopper*’s aesthetic style rejects the mantle of post-cinema exhibited in his earlier *Boarding Gate* (2007), which Shaviro identifies as exemplar in

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\(^{39}\) Ibid.
Post-Cinematic Affect. Returning to a more contemplative film style suggestive of the modern art cinema allows the space for Assayas’ dialectical analysis to unfold, while also suggesting that the increasing pervasiveness of digital media simulation escalates the alienated subjective experience characteristic of late modernism, in part through the smartphone’s enactment of individuating narcissistic feedback loops.

As in the modern art cinema, Assayas’ film, like the other examples of Narcisscinema examined herein, relies extensively on the intensive performance of an isolated female lead, Kristen Stewart, while also playing off her paratextual celebrity. Pasolini’s undermining of the significance of female performance in his description of free-indirect discourse in the art cinema reminds us of the thorny legacy of female objectification in the cinema. While as Mulvey herself admits, there were many overlooked implications in the theory of the male gaze, one of the most questionable if also longstanding may be the critical acceptance of the “problem” of female objectification at the expense of close textual analysis.40 In other words, when the objectification of women in the cinema is taken as a given fact, critical analysis often fails to examine the intricacies of female performance. Mitry’s notion of the semi-subjective mode, however, challenges us to further consider how subjective experience is conveyed through ostensibly objective shots according to the terms of classical identification. One of the central feminist investments in the emergence of digital technologies of self-mediation, particularly the forward-facing camera, has been in their seeming ability to disrupt the hegemony of female objectification. Hence, in addition to narcissism, early conversations surrounding the selfie format in the popular press frequently focused on the question of the male gaze and whether or

not the capability of self-mediation represents a disruption. It is of course circumspect that these two questions coincide: if as apparatus theory argued, classical Hollywood identification operates on a narcissistic framework that gratifies the male spectator and female objectification is crucial to its operations, then self-mediation for women represents a threat to male gratification in multiple ways. Although debated in the media ad nauseam whether or not the selfie takes back the gaze, such conversations yet overlook how they themselves are symptomatic of the ways in which women’s attempts at self-representation continue to be predetermined from the perspective of compulsory heterosexuality or in relation to male desire. Such an evident tautology reminds us, as Judith Butler insists, how the self-relation established in the mirror stage is inherently reflected through social constructions of gender difference and

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that processes of identification are never free from gender performance and the reification of a
gendered identity.  

These issues are examined in chapter two, “The Mirror: Narcissism as Affective Form.” Following Alexander Galloway’s insistence on the value of allegory and poetics to understanding the otherwise obscure operations of digital networks of information in the control society, this chapter considers Darren Aronofsky’s *Black Swan* (2010) as a poetics of selfie culture. Unlike *Personal Shopper*, *Black Swan* maintains less critical distance but more forcefully immerses us in the delusional experience of Nina’s toxic narcissism. In so doing, *Black Swan* challenges film theory’s approach to questions of narcissism solely in terms of spectator identification. Instead, following Eugenia Brinkema, I argue that *Black Swan* engenders narcissism as an aesthetic and affective form, modeling a vital future for psychoanalytic concepts to be reconsidered as formal film states. Aronofsky’s intensive examination of the mirror as a disciplinary tool in the ballet for the construction of bodies in conformity with ideals of compulsory heterosexuality alerts us to the risks endemic to technologies of digital self-mediation. The film’s attention to the psychological and physical damage that Nina undergoes to fulfill the image of the prima ballerina, culminating ultimately in her death in the film’s end, is explored in relation to the circulation of problematic gender ideals in contemporary selfie culture. More than this, *Black Swan* also exhibits how ideals of femininity are so often coupled with ideals of whiteness. This chapter explores how whiteness is coded in relation to the rigidity of the self in the narcissistic self-relation while blackness problematically metaphorizes (as it

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does elsewhere in digital culture) the mutability of digital extension. In Aronofsky’s film the
metaphoric capacities of blackness are figured through the digital morph, which allows for
Nina’s fantastical transformation into the black swan.

*Black Swan*’s attention to gender’s racialized constructions challenges us to consider how
analyses of digital self-mediation which prioritize questions of female objectification often
repeat the mistakes inherent to Mulvey’s initial framing. As Aria Dean rightly insists,
essentializing gender difference in a manner that wholly overlooks crucial intersectional
differences, selfie feminism is white feminism, an uncritical repetition of the second-wave.46
Although a good deal of academic writing has since emerged to ameliorate these initial
problems, the close analysis of the visual culture of the selfie and Narcisscinema itself reveal
how often the quintessential subject of digital self-mediation is envisioned as a white, youthful,
and heterosexual female.47 The entrenchment of this construction achieved through its repetition
works in multiple ways to forge digital self-mediation as desirable: first, by encouraging young
women to participate in such acts and in so doing creating desirable images for exchange within
social networking and photo-sharing sites. Secondly, framing the quintessential subject of selfie
culture as a white female refuses an engagement with questions of racial difference, repressing
questions of the inaccessibility of transparent self-representation for minorities due to painful
legacies of racial objectification and commodification. Relatedly, as Black Studies scholars such
as Shawn Michelle Smith and David Marriott have argued, following the scholarship of Franz
Fanon, the self-relation and processes of identification that the psychoanalytic theory of
narcissism presume remain barred for the black subject due to the interference of the racial-

46 Aria Dean, “Closing the Loop,” *The New Inquiry* 50 (March 1, 2016).
47 See for example Grant Bollmer and Katherine Guiness, “Phenomenology for the Selfie,” *Cultural Politics* 13, no. 2 (July 2017): 156–76; Nicole Morse, “Selfie Aesthetics: Form, Performance, and Transfeminist Politics in Self-
Representational Art.”
epidermal schema.\textsuperscript{48} Although technologies of digital self-mediation rely on the lie that objectification can be overcome through subjective agency, chapter two concludes by exploring how difference remains exploited and fundamental in the attention economy of online photo-sharing sites.\textsuperscript{49}

The object of chapter three, Nicolas Winding Refn’s \textit{The Neon Demon} (2016) immanently critiques the circulation of the white female face in contemporary selfie culture and the exploitation of narcissism as a fuel for its trafficking in faces. According to Deleuze’s philosophy, the problem of the post-web 2.0 is identifiable in the reinvigoration of representation, or more specifically its intensification of faciality. Writing with Felix Guattari in \textit{A Thousand Plateaus}, Deleuze defines faciality as the operations of subjectification and signification that overcode the self.\textsuperscript{50} For Deleuze and Guattari the instrumentalizing of the face as a white wall/ black hole system increases in the Christian era, again in the representational era of early modernism, and intensifies as capitalism accelerates. The rise of technologies of digital self-mediation, the demand to participate through the representation of one’s face in networked social media, as well as the further monetization of the face therein, all represent a further intensification of faciality under neoliberalism. As I discuss, this process of intensification is made literal in \textit{The Neon Demon}, where the face of modeling ingenue, Jesse (Elle Fanning) is vigorously coveted for its beauty and thus capital value.


\textsuperscript{49} For more on the exploitation of race within digital media platforms see, Lauren Cramer, “‘Race at the Interface: Rendering Blackness on WorldStarHipHop.Com.’ Film Criticism 40, No. 2 (January 2016),” \textit{Film Criticism} 40, no. 2 (January 2016). Joy Buolamwini’s concerns for algorithmic bias and her concept of the “coded gaze,” addressing the writing of racial and gender bias into code itself, also intersect with these concerns, see Bloomberg Live, \textit{The Coded Gaze: Bias in Artificial Intelligence}, n.d., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eRUEVYndh9c.

Due to the inherent compromises of the face, Deleuze productively rejects psychoanalysis’ formulation of narcissism in the Imaginary. For Deleuze the mirror stage suggests more the initial operations of faciality than the emergence of self-relation. Instead, Deleuze argues that self-relation is only established through the aleatory play of the virtual object. In relations to external objects of contemplation, in other words, one will happen upon unexpected attachments that exceed rational explanation, indicating the play of the virtual object. Through such attachments, one comes to know oneself, a self that is not located in reflection as a sedimented global ego, but rather comprised of a haphazard assortment of larval egos determined through their external object relations. Deleuze’s radical definition of narcissism and its rejection of the face, challenges us to locate practices of asserting the self otherwise in social media and photo-sharing sites. Following Deleuze, this chapter entitled, “Play: Narcissism as Creative Invention,” closes by considering the Instagram profile of fashion designer Batsheva Hay which asserts her unique self through the creation of the Batsheva dress, reflective of her irrational attachment to the play of the virtual object in a vintage Laura Ashley dress pattern.

The problem of approaching digital self-mediation as a transparent i.e. universal form is discussed in chapter four, “Allure: Narcissism and the Object,” through an analysis of the recent object-oriented philosophy. Emerging in the same decade as technologies of digital self-mediation such as the forward-facing camera, object-oriented philosophy claims to reject human exceptionality and the correlation between thinking and being (what Quentin Meillasoux deems correlationism), and instead advances the concept of a flat ontology that approaches the human as merely one object among others. As I discuss, object-oriented philosophy’s preoccupation

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with the human as object is symptomatic of its zeitgeist, emerging in the context of a proliferation of technologies of digital self-mediation, which produce the self as an object of contemplation. More than this, object-oriented philosophy’s thesis that objects only limitedly interact—that real objects inevitably recede from one another—envisionso a world of pathologically narcissistic objects while Graham Harman’s concept of allure privileges the self-relations as quintessentially aesthetic. As in selfie culture, OOP constructs the human as a desirable object. In so doing, it necessarily suppresses histories of human objectification and commodification as Alessandra Raengo has argued, particularly the legacy of slavery, which as the literature of Afro-pessimism insists relegates the black subject to a paraontological status.53

In order to further address OOP’s central fallacy in approaching the human as a universal object, this chapter turns to an analysis of Jonathan Glazer’s Under the Skin (2013). Although critical analyses of the film often repeat the mistakes of OOP, approaching the film as a narrative concerning the human versus the alien, Under the Skin’s narrative of a black alien passing as a white woman exposes the persistence of what Alexander Weheliye deems racialized assemblages to be fundamentally human, exposing its violent hierarchies.54 In further developing the discussion, the chapter turns to Moten’s concept of the thingly which addresses the ways the objectifying gaze of the racial-epidermal schema fails to intend the black subject in a racist society. As Moten insists, the philosopher and artist Adrian Piper wields a “thingly” performance aesthetic that makes visible how racism marks one invisible while at the same time harnessing a


radical black aesthetics that exceeds the relational terms of phenomenology.\textsuperscript{55} Offering a model for disrupting selfie culture’s promise of transparent self-assertion, the chapter ends in considering Piper’s \textit{Food for the Spirit} (1971) as a proto-selfie practice that politically asserts her racial and gender identity, reclaiming objecthood. As a series of photographs taken while Piper read Kant’s \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}, the resoluteness of Piper’s gender and racial difference stand as reminders of how Kant’s teleological concept of the universal human relies on the persistent construction of a racial and gendered other as the less than human, of how only some retain the right to transparent self-assertion and always at the expense of others.

The persistence of such racial and gendered hierarchies, scholar David Lloyd deems the regime of representation.\textsuperscript{56} Given such a climate, Fred Moten advises the necessary relinquishment of our attachment to formal representation and the subject form altogether. Although Narcisscinema performs crucial labor in exposing the inherent compromises of representation for the self, the coda to the dissertation looks to British Nigerian filmmaker Jenn Nkiru’s \textit{Hub Tones} (2018) as an example of the politics of entanglement, \textit{the consent not to be a single being}, that Moten advises in his recent trilogy.\textsuperscript{57} As I argue, in \textit{Hub Tones}, the closed eyes of the central dancer, and the continual refusal of her look through this gesture, enact a fugitive cut within representation’s regime, affirming instead, cinema and the self as lived duration.


2 THE POOL: NARCISSISM AND THE MOVING IMAGE

While the innovation of the selfie format may make narcissism instantly legible as an aesthetic form, in fact as this dissertation argues, the theorization of narcissism has always relied on the aesthetic for its legibility. Since, as defined in Freudian psychoanalysis, the condition of narcissism inherently lacks external relation to the other, the proper explication of narcissism frequently relies on certain aesthetic figures, which mediate and make legible a psychological condition that as Freud describes, is otherwise diagnostically opaque.\(^1\) With recourse to the foundational text of narcissism, Ovid’s myth of *Narcissus and Echo* and the first of these aesthetic figures, the pool, this chapter explores narcissism’s fundamental relationship to the moving image. As this dissertation argues, the dynamic of narcissism necessarily relies on and emerges from a self-encounter, a reflection born from the temporality and affectivity of a moving image. Following Derrida’s statement that there is no ‘one’ narcissism, this chapter explores the dialectical tension between two forms of narcissism as a moving image: first, what Derrida defines as the surplus narcissism of cinema and secondly what, following Rosalind Krauss’ analysis of video, may be defined as the pathological narcissism of the forward-facing smartphone camera.\(^2\)

2.1 No ‘One’ Narcissism: Cinema, the Smartphone, and Self-Mediation

The most well-known discourse on the relation between narcissism and the moving image was formulated in the grand apparatus theory of film spectatorship formulated by Jean-Louis Baudry, Christian Metz, and Laura Mulvey.\(^3\) With recourse to Lacanian psychoanalysis,


apparatus theory uses the logic of the mirror stage and the dynamic of narcissism to explain the pleasure of mainstream cinema as well as unconscious processes of cinematic identification.⁴ While the psychoanalytic theory of narcissism will be explored in greater detail in chapter two, it suffices to say here that the relation of narcissism to the cinematic is more fundamental or, one could say of the image, than apparatus theory’s ideological critique recognized. While apparatus theory was quick to cynically determine that the pleasures of cinematic narcissism address and reward us as individual consumers, for Jacques Derrida much differently, the moving image unleashes a “surplus narcissism” that moves us towards the other.⁵ Similarly, for Gilles Deleuze, the liquid (moving) image from which narcissism first emerges in Ovid’s pool, possesses the potential to overcome the limits of the molar and our singular phenomenology, and thus is a synecdoche for the radical potentiality of the cinema itself.⁶

In narcissism’s earliest iteration in Ovid’s Metamorphoses, the figure of the pool—the moving image surface from which Narcissus’ reflection emerges—proves central to the emergence of his singular, strange frenzy, a frenzy that is properly cinematic.⁷ As Akira Lippit argues: “Narcissus’ confusion, not only of himself but of the moving image for a body, establishes the condition of possibility for the advent of cinema.”⁸ In other words, in Ovid’s myth, the primal scene for the theory of narcissism, love of self and love of cinema (image and movement) are mutually imbricated. Indeed, as Ovid describes, Narcissus’ attraction to the pool itself precedes his literal fixation on, and obsession with, his own self-image:

There was a pool where waters, silver like, were gleaming bright. Its borders had no slime . . . rich grass ringed its edge and hedges served to shield it from the sun.

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⁶ Lippit, 54; Deleuze, Cinema I: The Movement-Image.
⁸ Lippit, 53.
It’s here that weary from the heat, the chase, drawn by the beauty of the pool, Narcissus lies.⁹

As Akira Lippit explicates, by way of Derrida, the myth of Echo and Narcissus prefigures the twentieth century reproductive technologies of sound and image, or the phono and photograph, and the pool, the silver screen. In *Cinema without Reflection*, Lippit collects the various strands of Jacques Derrida’s theory of cinema from what is otherwise a disparate and fragmented discourse. As Lippit asserts, Derrida’s theory of cinema mostly occurs immanently alongside or at least in response to his appearances on film, for example, in Ken McMullen’s 1983 film, *Ghost Dance*, which Lippit considers at length.¹⁰ As a public intellectual, Derrida’s relationship to cinema and his attempt to theorize it are already rather idiosyncratic, given their grounding in the experience of appearing on film. As such, and as Lippit intuits, Derrida’s theory of film often seems closer to Barthes’ *Camera Lucida* and his ruminations on the experience of being photographed than to the approach of most canonical film theorists.¹¹ In his late interview with *Cahiers du cinéma*, Derrida describes the experience of cinema spectatorship as profoundly self-shattering, a unique opportunity to supersede the limits of one’s own phenomenology and ego and isolates the miracle of projection as what made the most profound impression on him as a young man.¹² And yet, he defines the experience of being filmed as profoundly narcissistic.¹³

While the narcissism of film spectatorship is for apparatus theory grounds for ideological critique, for Derrida the coincident emergence of the dynamic of narcissism with the possibility

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⁹ Ovid and J. C. McKeown, 93.
¹⁰ Lippit, 8.
¹³ As Lippit states, Derrida’s theory of cinema occurs in passing and often immanently alongside his experience of being filmed: “At its end is always Derrida himself, a theory of cinema, embodied, autobiographical, and narcissistic,” see Lippit, 21.
of reproductive technologies of sound and image as recounted in Ovid’s myth, bequeaths a model of a “surplus narcissism,” or a movement through narcissism towards the other as well as a unique, cinematic system of belief.\textsuperscript{14} For Derrida then, narcissism is not inherently negative, rather he insists that there is no ‘one’ narcissism but a spectrum of generosity within narcissism since as argued by psychoanalysis, narcissism is a foundational ground that allows for the emergence of love for the other. It is in the image of this constitutive form of narcissism that Derrida defines the cinema.\textsuperscript{15}

The narcissistic experience of appearing on film is for Derrida tied up in the experience of moving from a perceiving subject (I) to being caught by the apparatus as a perceived object (you). Like Narcissus we are caught up in a dynamic of split identification but unlike Narcissus, who hoards his image for himself, through the cinematic apparatus, our image is ultimately reproduced in order to be given over to and shared with the other.\textsuperscript{16} As a “phantom machine,” the cinematic apparatus reproduces an image of us for the other, and crucially if also dangerously given the possibilities of synchronization, this is an image of belief, or what Metz famously describes as “a fetish that can be loved” that risks become confused for the missing thing itself, a simulacrum.\textsuperscript{17} For Derrida, the unique belief system of the cinema requires us to love what we see but in recognition that it is only a phantomic return of a vanished real not a full re-presentation of it. Indeed, as Derrida argues, the phantom may mark the dead’s return but only via a supplementary material form; in the cinema’s case, the phantom appears via a celluloid body. As we shall see the differences in temporality are crucial here: while the surplus narcissism of the cinema retroactively produces the phantom-I-becoming-you, the pathological narcissism

\textsuperscript{14} Lippit, 43-44; Bacque, de Jousse and Kamuf, 27.
\textsuperscript{16} Lippit, 43-44.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, 53.
that Ovid describes emerges from the reflecting pool’s illusion of simultaneity, or what Derrida refers to as the live-effect.

As Lippit explains, for Derrida, the process of being filmed, of being an I becoming you, is inherently akin to the apparatus of narcissism and its establishment of an alienated, phantom ego, or in Derrida’s summation, “cinema plus psychoanalysis equals a science of phantoms.”18

This is to say in part that like the dynamic of narcissism, cinema is an apparatus in which we appear in order to relate. Similarly, for Deleuze, the liquid image of perception offers the possibility of transcending the isolation of the monadic subject: but even more radically, the potential of escaping the trappings of the egoic social subject altogether. To revisit the myth of Narcissus in view of Deleuze’s conception of the liquid image of perception encourages greater attention to the inherent tensions that Ovid presents us with in the scene: between the subject and the nonhuman, the molar and the molecular, the rational and the affective. While the movement of the pool functions as the ground for the reproduction of Narcissus’ image, the drama of the scenario is largely forged in the inability to attend to the ontology of the movement itself apart from the lure of the self-same. As Deleuze explicates, however, this is an unfortunate oversight since the liquid image of perception carries the possibility of “objectivity, equilibrium, justice,” and the overcoming of territorialized, earth-bound perception, that is, the limits of a singular phenomenology:

What the French school found in water was the promise of another state of perception: a more than human perception, a perception not tailored to solids, which no longer had the solid as object, as condition, as milieu. A more delicate and vaster perception, a molecular perception, peculiar to a ‘cine-eye.’19

18 Lippit, 21.
19 Deleuze, Cinema I, 89.
Tragically, Narcissus’ belated attention to the movement of liquidity itself in the figure of the tear, which briefly distorts and obscures his reflected image from view, comes only on the cusp of his death. As Lippit suggests, it is the liquid materiality of the tear that tears Narcissus from his delusional fixation on his simulacrum towards recognition of the reflection as an image provided by the liquidity of the pool.\textsuperscript{20} From the perspective of either Derrida or Deleuze, it is not the pool’s reproduction of the selfsame but its reproduction of movement as such and \textit{in excess} of the perceiving subject which makes it cinematic. As Deleuze further states, the liquid image possesses “a greater possibility of communicating an irreversible duration to movements, independently of their figurative characters, a more certain power of extracting movement from the thing moved.”\textsuperscript{21} Following Deleuze’s concept of the liquid image, it seems that the material emergence of Narcissus’ liquid tear stems less from the desire for the self-same but rather in mourning for the “irreversible duration” that thereby escaped him: that is, for the passage of movement (and time) itself.

Derrida’s conviction that cinema promises a “surplus narcissism” that ultimately moves to the other, or Deleuze’s that the liquid image of the kino-eye breaks free from mundane and territorialized phenomenological limits both seem clearly distinguished from the narcissism of the apparatus of the forward-facing camera, which much more forcibly insists on the primacy of the self-relation and not coincidentally the temporality of instantaneity. Instead, the ontology of the forward-facing camera seems much closer to the medium of video, which art historian and theorist, Rosalind Krauss deemed to be fundamentally narcissistic but in a manner that is a good deal less generous than the surplus narcissism Derrida grants to cinema. The crucial difference of these narcissisms rests in their opposed temporalities—cinema’s retroactive temporality as

\textsuperscript{20} Lippit, 56.
\textsuperscript{21} Deleuze, \textit{Cinema I}, 48.
opposed to video’s simultaneity. Going so far as to identify the medium of video as narcissism, Krauss argues that video is defined by the condition of simultaneous reception and projection. Unlike previous forms of artistic media such as painting, sculpture, and film, which require the artist to mediate through an external, objective form, video’s instantaneity resists being defined in terms of its machinery and instead “urges towards the psychological model” of narcissism. As Krauss observes, this is evident in the preoccupation of early video art with the artist’s own image and body: if the question of medium specificity remains relevant to video art, then as Krauss insists, the medium of video is in fact the subject. Here, it is important to note the historicity of Krauss’ assessment as an art historian examining the innovations of video art in the context of modernism and its overarching preoccupation with the question of medium specificity and aesthetic formalism. As a medium, video is exciting to Krauss since the possibility for simultaneity in recording and projecting, that is video’s utter transparency, lays bare the artistic self-preoccupation that always already undergirded the modernist project. While simultaneous projecting and recording are but one mode of a diverse array of video practices, nevertheless Krauss’ assessments of early video art practices as narcissistic prove prescient for the recent innovation of the forward-facing smartphone camera. Describing pivotal works of video art such as Vito Acconci’s *Centers* (1971) or Richard Serra and Nancy Holt’s *Boomerang* (1974), Krauss argues that the “feedback coil of video” produces a pathologically narcissistic subject cut off from history in the “prison of a collapsed present.” As Krauss states, “self-encapsulation—the body or psyche as its own surround—is everywhere to be found in the corpus of video art.”

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22 Krauss, 50–64.
23 Ibid, 50–51.
26 Ibid, 53.
light of this critique, the cultural significance of the selfie seems less due to any particular aesthetic innovation but rather as the logical product of commodifying and mass-marketing the medium of video as narcissistic form via the forward-facing smartphone camera designed to project and receive one image simultaneously, the self. The forward-facing camera thus further commodifies the liveness of video. Although fetishized as its ontological essence, Jane Feuer has argued liveness was always only one potential form of a variety of video practices. The forward-facing camera, on the other hand, and its intended function for live self-mediation and interaction through a variety of digital media forms such as FaceTime and Skype, more forcefully packages video as a form of immediacy.27

Akin to Krauss’ analysis of the feedback coil of video, Derrida’s discourse on being filmed for television most notably formulated in his televised interviews with Bernard Stiegler published as Echographies of Television is alert to a sense of claustrophobia and an unavoidable sense of self-reflexivity.28 Much differently that the belated temporality of the cinema, it is the instantaneity of the live television scenario that causes such an exacerbated self-awareness. Even more than in cinematic production, where there is also a financial interest in time, the live television scenario places a high bounty on time; none, as Derrida insists, can be wasted.29 The demands of live television are thus particularly tasking for the philosopher, whose profession is inherently of the word not of the image and likewise inherently takes and demands time. And yet, Derrida insists on remarking on the affects of appearing on television and the importance of analyzing the live television scenario for philosophy.30

29 Ibid, 70.
The “live effect” of television is seen by Derrida as a crucial development in not only the media but also for ontology, or what he refers to as hauntology in reference to the ongoing imbrication of différence, techné, and experience.\textsuperscript{31} Derrida’s attention to the ideological significance of the “live effect” is perhaps even more relevant within today’s digital media culture. No longer merely a potential mode of television production, liveness is the promise of smartphone mediation. Similarly, albeit as a somewhat idiosyncratic approach for media theory, Derrida’s detailed analysis of the experience of appearing on television, as described in *Echographies*, speaks to the need for a similar unpacking of the affects of self-mediation via the smartphone as well as an analysis of its own iteration of the “live effect” and of instantaneity.

In *Echographies of Television*, Derrida repeatedly insists on breaking the flow of the televised interview in order to remark on the experience of being televised. As he argues, the affects of this experience are a crucial component of televisual culture but which are per force put under erasure by the rhetoric of the “live effect” which strives to deliver the appearance of access to an unfiltered content.\textsuperscript{32} As Derrida’s remarks elucidate, however, one is constantly caught up in a process of filtration through the extreme sense of self-awareness that appearing on television creates. Remarking on his own affective experience during a live televised interview, Derrida points to the many self-effacing frames, or artifactual processes, of the live effect of television.\textsuperscript{33} Throughout his interview with Stiegler, Derrida describes the televisual scenario variously as, “artificial, breached, falsified, warped, and seductive” while he describes the experience of being televised as one of “constraint, paralysis and arrest.”\textsuperscript{34} Perhaps most


\textsuperscript{33} Derrida “Artifactualities”, 3-5.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid, 32.
significantly, appearing on the televisual apparatus for Derrida transforms one’s relationship to one’s own body, disrupting the seamless possession of one’s own phenomenology and leading to the uncanny “desire to reappropriate oneself.”\textsuperscript{35} What is of crucial significance to Derrida is how the affective experience that he so clearly elucidates to Stiegler is utterly suppressed by the live broadcast itself. This is one additional insidious dimension of the live effect, its suppression of affective realities.

To a reader in the age of post-web 2.0 smartphone media, Derrida’s choice of modifiers may also seem apt descriptions of the self-conscious experience of appearing on the forward-facing camera. Derrida insists that an adequate media philosophy of television must be attentive to the self-reflexivity it engenders, which requires elaborating on its affective dimensions such as Derrida does with Stiegler. But it seems that contemporary media theory has failed to take adequate note of the affective complexities of selfie culture, resulting from the innovation of the forward-facing smartphone camera and how they may complicate or even contradict live appearances. That is, media theory has yet to address the dynamic and hence complex nature of self-mediation. Concerned primarily with the analysis of the finished product of the selfie photograph and its symptomatic relation to a narcissistic Millennial subject, the forward-facing camera has been overlooked as a narcissistic media form that fulfills Krauss’ assessment of early practices of video art.

But how does the narcissism of the forward-facing camera relate to the more generous form of a narcissism ‘adrift’ that Derrida attaches to the cinema? It would seem that we have two distinct models of the relation of narcissism to the moving image: the surplus narcissism of cinema and what we might refer to as the pathological narcissism of video. While the ontology

\textsuperscript{35} Derrida and Stiegler, 58.
of the forward-facing camera is indeed more akin to the latter, this dissertation argues that precisely due to its enhanced spectrality, that is, its delayed temporality and the intentionality of its retroactive construction, we should turn to the cinema in our attempt to map the affective parameters of today’s selfie culture. As Derrida persuades us, the surplus narcissism of the cinema renders the I as you, or the self as other, in a manner that proves productive for a critical media theory of the selfie.

As Derrida asserts in “Artifactualities,” “it is often untimely approaches to what is called actuality that are the most ‘concerned’ with the present . . . There is an anachronistic way of treating actuality that does not necessarily miss what is most present today;” this capability Derrida deems “the just disadjustment of the anachrony” and in this case, cinema is the anachrony.\(^\text{36}\) Akin to Alexander Galloway’s turn to old media such as the television series 24 as an allegory of networked culture and the control society, or Jodi Dean’s insistence on the necessity of the book to a critical media theory of the blog, this dissertation insists that the duration of cinema, its address to the other, as well as its retroaction are excellent tools for affectively mapping narcissism’s aesthetic feedback loop and the experience of instantaneity endemic to selfie culture.\(^\text{37}\) As Steven Shaviro asserts in Post-Cinematic Affect, films are “machines for generating affect”\(^\text{38}\). Indeed, following Shaviro, this dissertation insists that the affects and aesthetics of selfie culture are best revealed in contemporary films that capture what Julie Rak defines as “automediality,” that is, the practices and processes of mediating the self.\(^\text{39}\)

In so doing, contemporary films restore to visibility the temporality of the self-encounter which precedes the production of any selfie per se: the moving image that is likewise, and as Ovid

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\(^\text{37}\) Dean, Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive; Galloway, The Interface Effect.
\(^\text{38}\) Shaviro, Post Cinematic Affect, 6-7; Flatley, Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism.
\(^\text{39}\) Rak, “Life Writing versus Automedia: The Sims 3 Game as a Life Lab.”
describes, the pre-condition to the emergence of the affects of narcissism but which has thus far been overlooked in theories of this emergent media form.

Olivier Assayas’ Personal Shopper (2016) is a crucial object to consider in this task: as a contemporary film that revolves around Maureen’s (Kristen Stewart’s) hyper-mediated subjectivity as filtered through various digital screens, and particularly her constant companion, the iPhone, but which also ruminates on its own ontology as cinema—its opposed temporality and long durée as a literal phantom machine such as Derrida deems it. Over the course of the film, and in a quest to reconnect with the spirit of her deceased twin brother Lewis, and also to her faith in spectrality more generally speaking, Maureen moves from a condition of pathological narcissism and isolation, relating only to digital avatars encountered on her smartphone, to a relation with the cinematic apparatus itself and thereby her restoration to the other and to the phantom. Assayas’ Personal Shopper thus unveils a dialectic theory of cinema’s relation to the smartphone apparatus that echoes Derrida’s discourses on spectrality and the increasing instantaneity of new media forms from television to digital media as opposed to the phantom machine of cinema. For Derrida the live effect of these later “artifactual” media forms is dangerous in its simulacral nature and more importantly in its attempt to foreclose the spectrality of différance. As Derrida makes plain, however, the danger of mediated instantaneity is not just one among others but rather of ontological significance, a question of the future or its foreclosure, and thus ultimately a question of justice.

40 “Cinema thus allows one to cultivate what could be called ‘grafts’ of spectrality; it inscribes traces of ghosts on a general framework, the projected film, which is itself a ghost,” Derrida as quoted in Baecque, Jousse and Kamuf, 27-28.
42 Ibid, 12, 21; Derrida, Specters of Marx, 220.
2.2 Alone Together: The Urban Subject and Smartphone Mediation

As previously described in the introduction, a defining characteristic of Narcisscinema is the intensive investment in one central (and often female character) whose subjective experience is conveyed to audiences through the frequent stylistic use of the free indirect point of view shot. The free indirect mode is a particularly appropriate film aesthetic for the representation of narcissism since as Deleuze has argued, it grants film the appearance of a self-consciousness.\(^\text{43}\)

These characteristics are certainly present in \textit{Personal Shopper}, of which Assayas has stated that without Kristen Stewart, the film would not have been made. Assayas’ film just previous to \textit{Personal Shopper} was \textit{Clouds of Sils Maria} (2014), also starring Stewart in a nearly as intensive psychological drama that co-starred Juliet Binoche. While \textit{Clouds of Sils Maria} explores the co-dependent relationship of actress Maria Enders (Binoche) to her personal assistant Valentine (Stewart), in \textit{Personal Shopper}, this interest in the intersubjective dynamic is given over to a singular fixation on the subjectivity of a character similar to Valentine, the personal shopper to a famous film actress, Kyra (Nora von Waldstatten). The character of Kyra, the actress, is largely absent from the diegesis of the film; as Maureen states, Kyra, as a famous actress, is too busy and also too well known to shop for herself, so Maureen performs these tasks for her: selecting, borrowing, and purchasing designer clothes and jewelry for Kyra, and in assessing her selections at times even standing in for her. It is thus clear early on in the film that as a body double for her employer, Maureen is herself already a type of specter. Similarly, she is bereft over the death of her twin brother at twenty-seven whose absence she experiences like a phantom limb. Since her brother, Lewis, was a spiritual medium, Maureen tests her own mediumistic abilities, spending long overnights in isolation at his former home, a nineteenth century dilapidated mansion on the

\(^{43}\) Deleuze, \textit{Cinema I}, 74-75.
outskirts of Paris, waiting for his visitation. Within the premise of Assayas’ film then, as a
medium and a double, Maureen is herself of no interest, but of course, the qualities of her
character are set in tension with Kristen Stewart’s paratextual fame as the star of The Twilight
saga, and her glamorous status as a Hollywood actress, model, and brand ambassador to Chanel.
Stewart thus holds a certain visual interest for audiences by virtue of her celebrity, and especially
given her own desire to shy away from media attention after the invasive experience of being a
teen icon during the Twilight films, the film’s intensive scrutiny of Stewart gives Assayas’ film
both a built-in appeal and the provocation of voyeurism. As we shall see in subsequent chapters,
other examples of contemporary Narcisscinema are often similarly held by female actors with
paratextual status as fashion and celebrity icons with high social media visibility such as Natalie
Portman, Elle Fanning, and Scarlett Johansson, underscoring a knowing engagement with
contemporary selfie culture, and the new intimacy with celebrity that it offers.

Recalling the French New Wave’s incisive portrayal of the contemporary through its
attention to pop culture, and most notably Hollywood cinema itself, Assayas’ Personal Shopper
stands as one of the first in the art cinema to seriously engage the question of the contemporary
with attention to the pervasiveness of digital media through the use of smartphone technology. In
so doing, the film unavoidably ruminates on the ontology of the cinema in such a cultural
environment. Echoing Derrida’s assessment of the cinema as a phantom machine, the filmic
apparatus asserts itself as the space of the possibility of the specter, or of Lewis’ return, whereas
the smartphone or digital media device is diagnosed as only a phantasmatic pretender. In various
interviews, Assayas has attested to his interest in the social and subjective effects of global,
networked communication technologies as well as his surprise as to the dearth of films which
address this topic and instead obfuscate the predominating presence of technology in
contemporary life. He likewise has clearly indicated a hierarchical preference for the cinema, insisting on its necessity in such a saturated, media landscape:

I don’t think of cinema as just another image. To me, cinema is the one stable, solid element in a world of fluctuating images. Cinema is the one image that has the capacity of capturing other images and that also has the capacity to think about the status of different images.\(^{44}\)

At least in the case of *Personal Shopper*, cinema’s capability for the comparative analysis of media forms that Assayas describes seems largely achieved through the use of the free-indirect mode; in particular, this aesthetic achieves what Deleuze describes as a form of *mitsein* or “being with” the character that unavoidably also makes the camera’s presence felt. Put otherwise, the free-indirect mode is inherently dialectical. The use of the free-indirect mode allows Assayas’ film to coextensively assert the ontology of the cinematic apparatus alongside that of the smartphone in a way that fully iterates our earlier differentiation of a cinematic or surplus narcissism from the pathological narcissism of digital self-mediation. While the surplus narcissism of the cinema will ultimately provide Maureen with what Derrida refers to in his discourse on spectrality as her “proper and singular inheritance” as Lewis’ sister, the smartphone encounters or text conversations with an anonymous interlocutor, which Maureen is eager to misrecognize as visitations from Lewis, maliciously lure her through an attempt to stimulate her more pathological and autoerotic, narcissistic desire.\(^{45}\) As Assayas has emphasized, cinema is the collective medium par excellence and thus restores Maureen to intersubjective relationality; when, in the film’s final shot, Maureen faces the cinematic apparatus itself, she also breaks free from the isolation of her narcissism.\(^{46}\)

\(^{44}\) Olivier Assayas as quoted in Daniel Eagan, “Haute Ghost Couture,” *Film Journal International* 120, no. 3 (March 2017): 20–22.

\(^{45}\) Derrida, *Specters of Marx*.

\(^{46}\) Eagan, 20-22,
Undoubtedly tied to his much earlier theory of différance, Derrida’s discourse on spectrality begins with a plenary address evaluating the legacy of Karl Marx and Marxism after the fall of the Berlin Wall, later published as *Specters of Marx*.\(^4^7\) As Derrida argues, a fatality of Marxist doctrine was born out of Marx’s desire to eradicate spectrality in favor of the promise of immediate fulfillment through unalienated labor. Derrida defines Marx’s mistake as his identification of capital specifically as the modern harbinger of the spectrality earlier defined by religion. In opposition to Marx, and as the neologism “hauntology” aims to suggest, for Derrida the spectrality of différance, or the trace, is never specific but rather an endemic component of experience that results from our inherently technological nature.\(^4^8\) To convey the labor of spectrality, Derrida makes frequent reference to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and its famous proclamation that “the time is out of joint”—to convey the unavoidable and ongoing splitting of the present towards the past and the future.\(^4^9\) The totalitarian turn of the Communist party is thus portrayed by Derrida not as an incidental but rather as an unavoidable consequence of any attempt to wholly exorcise spectrality or alienation in favor of the fantasy of a pure, unmediated presence.\(^5^0\)

As a result, and as he will later further articulate in *Echographies of Television*, for Derrida, the promise of immediacy is inherently suspect and ideological. Hence Derrida’s turn to an analysis of television and the “live effect”, which by the 1990s is the most successful contemporary iteration of the promise of immediacy since the rise of Marxism. As a primarily capitalist media form, the irony of capital’s successful appropriation and commodification of

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\(^4^7\) Derrida, *Specters of Marx*.

\(^4^8\) Ibid, 94.


\(^5^0\) Derrida describes the totalitarian turn of communism as “a reaction of panic-ridden fear against the ghost in general,” see *Specters of Marx*, 130.
immediacy for profit through television (he speaks more specifically of the live, global broadcast of the fall of the Berlin Wall) is not lost on Derrida but is inherently related to capitalism’s further entrenchment in the latter years of the twentieth century. As a result, and as Derrida insists in his conversation with Stiegler for *Echographies*, watching television is not merely a distraction or vice: while it is also that, for Derrida, attending to television and its ideological and ontological significance is a paramount task for philosophy in the late twentieth century.\(^{51}\) As the diminutive and frivolous moniker of the selfie already suggests, we are similarly goaded in the twenty-first century to overlook the significance of new media forms and their further instantiation of immediacy— to view them as beneath the attention of philosophy. But this is precisely why we must attend to their capital and ontological significance. Following Deleuze’s identification of cinema as a form of philosophy, and as the narrative preoccupations of *Personal Shopper* attest, cinema is one discourse where this crucial philosophical labor is already underway, and where the remediation of our uses of the smartphone is already producing significant theoretical insight.

In a 2015 special issue of *Discourse* devoted to Derrida and the cinema and to the publication of the first English translation of Derrida’s 2001 interview with the editors of *Cahiers du cinéma*, “Cinema and Its Ghosts,” co-editors James Cahill and Tim Holland frame the issue as a sort of séance: “a conjuring of Derrida in and for cinema and cinema in and for thinking in Derrida’s wake.”\(^{52}\) In his *Cahiers* interview, Derrida presses on the relation between cinema and psychoanalysis through the concept of the séance.\(^{53}\) As Cahill and Holland describe, for Derrida, both psychoanalysis and the cinema “address a similar urge, compulsion, or drive: a

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\(^{53}\) Baecque, Kamuf, and de Jousse, 27.
necessary meeting or session with ghosts, a time to sit with them, as they reappear and speak through projection and a medium.”⁵⁴ Referring to Cahill and Holland’s enumeration of the various French and English-language meanings of the term séance, it becomes clear that across all usages from the length of a psychoanalytic session, to a portrait sitting, or a meeting with a spiritualist medium, the term séance and Derrida’s application of it in relation to the cinema certainly no less, presses on and attends to duration.⁵⁵ Similarly, this dissertation attempts to attend to the duration of the narcissistic encounter via smartphone mediation, arguing that critical analysis has failed to attend to this adequately. It is precisely this question of duration in the era of digital smartphone mediation, however, that preoccupies Assayas’ *Personal Shopper* and which is set in dialectical tension with cinematic duration; not coincidentally the film is highly engaged with the question of mediation with the dead and the possibilities of the séance. Via Maureen’s fascination with historical forms of spiritualism and particularly the spiritualist artist, Hilma af Klint, *Personal Shopper* explores the connection between promises of mediation and the possibility of contact with the supernatural. While the film recalls how the emergence of a variety of new media forms in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries such as photography, telephony, electricity and the cinema saw a coincident rise in practices of spiritualism and attempted contacts with the dead and other spirits, Assayas has insisted in an interview regarding *Personal Shopper* that the increasing instantaneity of digital, networked technologies may have more insidiously manipulated our sense of the past and the dead, making anything seemingly retrievable, collapsing the past and the future in an ongoing present-tense.⁵⁶ As such, and as was previously suggested, *Personal Shopper* seems to reiterate Derrida’s

⁵⁴ Cahill and Holland, 7.
⁵⁵ Ibid, 6.
investment in cinema’s avowed spectrality and his skepticism of the more instantaneous “live effect” of newer media forms beginning with television.

*Personal Shopper* thus restages the dialectical tension that is already mobilized in the myth of “Narcissus and Echo,” which as Lippit argues, was a privileged narrative in Derrida’s oeuvre, between the instantaneous appearance of Narcissus’ reflection and the durational spectrality signified by Echo’s distorted repetitions.57 While such distortions are also visible in the moving image of the pool itself, Narcissus overlooks them in favor of his mirrored reflection until the falling of his tear obliterates the reflection and redirects his attention to the fact of the pool and of mediation itself. As Lippit argues, the tear thus sets Narcissus’ desire “adrift” and towards the surplus narcissism characteristic of Echo:

The dialectic of desire in the myth of Echo and Narcissus is . . . the recognition of the irreducible alterity of a subjectivity found in you. A subjectivity I find in you, my subjectivity lost and found (regained and redeemed) in you. This is the logic of narcissism that exceeds the closed economy of a blinding and deafening subjectivity.58

The character arc of Maureen in *Personal Shopper* retraces that of Narcissus, but as opposed to the dialectical tension between the image and voice, this tension is here figured through the dialectic of the pathological narcissism of the digital smartphone and the surplus narcissism of the cinema. And yet as Derrida’s discourse on spectrality illustrates, these figurations each ruminate on a still more primordial tension between the fantasy of pure presence, or instantaneity, and the reality of différance.

The narrative of *Personal Shopper* takes place nearly three months since the death of Maureen’s twin brother, Lewis. As Maureen eventually recounts to Ingo (Lars Eidinger), who will later be revealed as Kyra’s murderer and Maureen’s anonymous interlocutor in a series of

57 Lippit, 35.
58 Ibid, 60.
escalating smartphone text exchanges, she is waiting in Paris for a sign from Lewis from the afterlife. As a medium, Lewis—who died of a rare heart malformation in the left ventricle which Maureen also has—held faith in the ability to contact the dead and thus in his own ability to communicate with Maureen from the afterlife. As Maureen recounts, they had made an oath that whoever died first would send a sign after their death. Maureen is waiting for that sign although she is both unsure of its reality and likewise impatient for its arrival. In the early portions of the film’s narrative, in which we witness her late, overnight stays in Lewis’ former home, Maureen at first seems confident of the sign’s arrival, but it quickly becomes clear that she is anxious and impatient. Although in Specters of Marx, Derrida warns that the arrival of the specter cannot be anticipated, Maureen’s actions—staying in Paris and sleeping nights at his former home, her interest in researching former spiritual mediums including Victor Hugo and Swedish painter, Hilma af Klint—seek to precipitate Lewis’ sign, to prepare for it.59

While on the one hand Maureen’s reliance on her smartphone for all communication and entertainment is entirely commonplace and thus incidental to a contemporary narrative such as Personal Shopper’s, on the other hand, it becomes clear over the course of the film that Maureen’s subjective experience is in large part formed by her reliance on the iPhone, and perhaps most importantly, so is her sense of impatience for the arrival of the specter. As a film focused on an isolated female protagonist aimlessly existing in a modern European metropolis, Personal Shopper can seem to recall a film such as Antonioni’s L’Eclisse (1962). While L’Eclisse similarly ruminates on modernization, technology, the globalization of capitalism and their effects on subjective experience, despite its pessimism, wandering the streets of Antonioni’s Rome still holds the possibility of the encounter and of an intersubjective relation, whereas these

59 Derrida, Specters of Marx, 11 and 211-212.
seem entirely foreclosed in Assayas’ twenty-first century Paris. While Maureen also roams the streets of Paris, her wanderings occur on a scooter and are usually bound to appointments at the various couture shops in which she borrows or buys clothing, shoes, and accessories for Kyra’s public appearances. Similarly, although the diegesis depicts Maureen in many public places—shopping centers, the train station, cafes, on public transportation—she is always enclosed in the cocoon that her smartphone and headphones provide her. Only engaging with others when necessary and for rudimentary exchanges, Maureen otherwise engages only with her phone: watching YouTube documentaries or streaming tv movies, FaceTiming with a long-distance boyfriend, and later texting with an anonymous caller. Social relations within the contemporary urban metropolis are thus represented in Personal Shopper as a state of co-existence but not interaction, a general condition of being alone together, and digital smartphone technology is very much targeted as the cause of this qualitative change. While Maureen waits on the specter’s visitation, she herself already lives like one. Indeed, Assayas has argued that the film is largely about loneliness and invisibility.60

Writing in 2010 on Assayas’ Boarding Gate (2007) starring Asia Argento, Steven Shaviro similarly notes the use of free indirect discourse there and relates the film to Antonioni’s Red Desert (1964).61 Unlike Monica Vitti’s Giuliana, however, Shaviro notes that Argento’s Sandra has no time for any indulgence in modernist anomic due to the greater encroachments of a now fully globalized capitalism and the more widespread condition of economic precarity.62 But it seems that a decade later, Assayas’ cinematic style registers another significant social change. While Shaviro contrasts Antonioni’s ‘obsessive framing’ with Boarding Gate’s “restless

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60 Macaulay, “The Terror of the TEXT.”
61 Shaviro, 61-62.
62 Ibid.
camera movements, reframings, and refocusings,” essentially an “obsessive deframing,” in
*Personal Shopper*, composed framings have returned as have long takes and a generally more
contemplative cinematic style reminiscent of Antonioni’s. The evolution of Assayas’ style over
the last decade and the return to a cinema of alienation once typified by Antonioni affectively
conveys the effects of smartphone use on subjective experience and urban life, which in the
decade that followed the publication of Shaviro’s *Post-Cinematic Affect*, have been altered in a
way that could not then be fully anticipated (the forward-facing camera, for example only
became standard in 2010 beginning with the iPhone 4 the same year as its publication). While
Shaviro’s *Post-Cinematic Affect* is alert to the difficulty of cognitively mapping the global
system of late capitalism, thus turning attention instead to affect as a cartographical tool, in the
years since, smartphone technology has introduced perhaps a more insidious compensation for
the decentered experience of the world order of global capitalism as Shaviro describes it: through
the subject-effect engendered by image-based post-web 2.0 technologies.

Due to greater technical innovations, in the era of social media and selfie culture, the
subject can now appear and interact as herself across networked media. This is a fundamental
shift in the experience of networked culture that cannot be underscored enough. For example, in
analogy to *Boarding Gate*’s chaotic aesthetic style, Shaviro points to Vivian Sobchack’s 2004
description of networked media: “the electronic is phenomenologically experienced not as a
discrete, intentional, body-centered mediation and projection in space but rather as a
simultaneous, dispersed, and insubstantial transmission across a network or web that is
constituted spatially more as a materially flimsy latticework of nodal points than as a stable

63 Shaviro, 62.
ground of embodied experience.” But this might no longer seems an accurate assessment of post-web 2.0 network culture, which is dominated by the visual and given the development of social network applications where one is increasingly mandated to participate as oneself. Similarly, while Shaviro describes the multiple global locations of Boarding Gate as disconnected “any-space whatever,” the various European locations referenced in Personal Shopper including Paris, London, Milan, and Berlin seems to homogenously flow into one another by virtue of their shared status as global fashion capitals. Conveyed through the film’s use of long takes and its contemplative style, Maureen, an American, experiences Europe in a continuous flow as long as she has her smartphone available as an anchor. Relatedly, Assayas has indicated his move to international films as opposed to exclusively French was made to better convey the homogenizing effect of global capitalism and more specifically its networked communication media.

Shaviro’s attention to affect and the use of subjective emotion as a form of orientation in such a global system is incredibly prescient of smartphone technology and social media’s commodification of narcissism as a form of engagement:

In the world of Boarding Gate, therefore, it is intrinsically impossible to answer the question: ‘what is actually going on?’ Rather, the questions one must ask are: ‘what is going to happen to me now?’ and ‘what (if anything) can I do about it?’ These questions are unavoidably narrow in scope, as they refer only to ‘me’ and my immediate prospects—not to the ‘global world system’ as a whole. . .. Boarding Gate thus describes a world so fragmented and dispersed that there seems to be no way to get beyond one’s own limited perspective as an isolated individual. At the same time, the film reveals the ‘individual’ itself to be an exceedingly precarious construct.

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66 Shaviro, 52-53.
It is only in the final sentence that we might be tempted to disagree with Shaviro, and due to the smartphone’s ensuing commodification of a subject effect, which now provides the illusion of orientation across what Shaviro rightly describes as an increasingly fractured if also networked global capitalist culture. Perhaps more significantly given Shaviro’s focus on affect as a cartographical tool, it is clear in *Personal Shopper* as opposed to the earlier *Boarding Gate*, that the smartphone’s commodification of narcissism as a form of engagement innovatively makes the cognitive dissonance that Shaviro describes—our inability to map the global system—*feel good*. In so doing, the subject-effect of the post web 2.0 smartphone recalls what Lauren Berlant refers to as a “cruel optimism” in the political climate of neoliberalism. The use of free-indirect discourse in both the earlier *Boarding Gate* and *Personal Shopper* seems likewise to redouble the question of the subject-effect as a form of compensation. In his review of theories of free-indirect discourse and their cinematic adaptations, Louis-Georges Schwartz discusses Valentin Nikolaevich Voloshinov’s assessment that free-indirect discourse’s widespread adaptation in nineteenth-century literature registers the subjective alienation typical of bourgeois capitalism:

> [Voloshinov] argues that its spread eroded the declamatory word and replaces the assertion of fact with the reporting of opinion: ‘The generalization of the figure prevents a rational analysis of real conditions of existence, producing atomized, alienated subjects, as opposed to the collective subjects of the declamatory, responsible word.’

From this viewpoint, a natural through-line becomes clear between the subjectification of the free-indirect mode and recent digital technologies of the self, such as the smartphone. Further still, Voloshinov also argues that the free-indirect mode, in which the author takes on or better yet assimilates another’s speech, unavoidably universalizes his own bourgeois subject-position.

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67 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism.*
68 Schwartz, 112.
69 Ibid.
Certainly the aspirational capitalism offered by the smartphone’s “walled garden” of applications and the accessibility of a variety of simulated experiences could be said to intensify this project of universalism as well.

Given *Personal Shopper*’s incisive interest in the social and subjective effects of smartphone technology, one might suspect that the ghost story of *Personal Shopper* is only a MacGuffin which scaffolds Assayas’ actual interest in the effects of the smartphone on intersubjective relations and on urban life, but as I have indicated, the film’s engagement with spectrality forces the question as to the comparative hauntological effect of the cinema in relation to the apparatus of the smartphone. In opposition to much film theory after the digital turn, which seems to want film to adjust its ontology, for it to become post-cinema, Assayas’ *Personal Shopper* insists that the cinema can retain its spectrality as compared to other digital media apparatuses such as the smartphone. This thesis, in some way reiterates the tone of *Discourse*’s 2015 issue devoted to Derrida and what his impact might be for contemporary film theory and the re-evaluation of the question of cinema’s ontology now that we are well-beyond the analog versus digital debate. Unlike much film theory after the digital turn, Derrida’s theory of cinema was never overly invested in the materiality of celluloid but instead in cinema’s temporality, its retroaction and thus its heterology, or address to the other. In other words, as opposed to the question of medium specificity, echoing Derrida’s comparative analyses of film to television, through a rumination on haunting and the figure of the ghost, Assayas’ *Personal Shopper* attends to attenuations in duration as a comparative measure of the cinema and the smartphone.

2.3 Misrecognition and the Selfie Form

Although, as Maureen tells Ingo, Kyra’s extramarital lover, she is waiting in Paris for a sign from Lewis, her patience is short. After another attempt to make contact during a second
overnight stay in Lewis’ Parisian mansion fails, when she instead contacts a female ghost, Maureen is quick to misrecognize Lewis as an “Unknown” interlocutor who sends her a series of provocative texts, which begin the next morning. (Rather than take encouragement from her ability to contact any spirit, Maureen has instead abandoned the mansion, which has now been sold to a couple who was friends with Lewis who plan to renovate).70

As Derrida insists and as Personal Shopper will eventually prove, the absolute arrivant, the specter’s appearance cannot be anticipated in advance; this is a meeting that cannot be kept in an appointment book. And yet, for Maureen it is easier to misrecognize the texts from an “Unknown” number as Lewis’ sign than it is to continue to wait. Failing to remember that she had disclosed to Ingo her reasons for waiting in Paris and thus to suspect him as the unknown caller, Maureen, shaken from the sighting the night before, willfully mistakes him for Lewis. Instead of this possibility being dismissed, the question as to the identity of “Unknown” hangs for both Maureen and the viewer as a text conversation continues between them over the course of a few days, a conversation which will become exceedingly intimate.

In “The Discrete Image,” Bernard Stiegler writes that digital technology breaks the chain of material contiguities previously guaranteed through analog photography, “mak[ing] phantoms and phantasms indistinct.”71 The inability to distinguish the phantom from the phantasm is essentially Maureen’s plight as she becomes a victim of Ingo’s masquerade as the unknown caller, whose texts Maureen want to believe may be spectral contact from Lewis. As opposed to the loneliness of her mournful waiting the past three months, Maureen is libidinally rewarded by the instantaneous nature of the texted conversation and the littlest breaks in their dialogue cause

70 There is surely here also a humorous commentary on the narcissism of millennials and perhaps also Americans since Maureen incorrectly assumes that the only ghost that might be haunting a nineteenth century French mansion would be her recently deceased brother’s.
her anxiety. Through a series of aesthetic choices, Assayas’ film conveys the affective experience of their text exchange and its intimacy. Unlike many previous films, which have chosen to reproduce digital screen communications as intertitles, continuing in the style of the free indirect mode, in *Personal Shopper*, the iPhone is often filmed during the text exchanges in close-ups or even extreme close-ups, which are often also subjective or semi-subjective point of view shots that include Maureen’s hand holding the phone (fig. 2.1). Similarly, the phone is set to vibrate, which is scored in the film so that the vibrations are not only heard but more accurately felt by the audience in a way that is familiar but also becomes unsettling as the text exchange takes on a more sinister nature as Ingo attempts to frame Maureen for Kyra’s murder.

![Figure 2.1: Maureen’s first two texts from the Unknown Caller, Personal Shopper (Olivier Assayas 2016) screenshots](image)

In his interview with *Cahiers du cinéma*, Derrida identifies the cinema as similar to the psychoanalytic session, writing that “you go to the movies to be analyzed, by letting all the ghosts appear and speak. You can in an economical way (by comparison with a psychoanalytic
séance), let the specters haunt you on the screen.” In comparison, Maureen’s text conversations seem a reified version of an analysis since, as the unknown caller, Ingo seems eager to unlock Maureen’s innermost desires. But by the end of their exchange, which importantly for our purposes culminates in her texting him a mirrored selfie, it is clear that quite unlike the psychoanalytic session, rather than unravel Maureen’s ego identification towards the unfolding of her unconscious, the smartphone text exchanges fortify Maureen as a surface or ego through the stimulation of an auto-erotic narcissism.

Ingo’s text correspondence with Maureen relieves the anxiety of her waiting. Once she turns her attention to her iPhone and the ensuing conversation, Maureen ceases her overnight stays in Lewis’ former home and likewise ceases her anticipation of his sign. Instead, the phantasmatic signs from the unknown number fulfill her longing. While the properly cinematic space of Personal Shopper is thus associated with the undefined duration of a waiting, the smartphone is dialectically opposed to it, as characterized by the instantaneous nature of the texted conversations, an instantaneousness that is underscored by the editing style used to document the conversational interchange, cutting quickly in shot-reverse shot between Maureen and her phone. Reiterating this affectively, the text exchange begins with the presumption of intimacy. The first text Maureen receives from the unknown number insists, “I know you,” which after a few minutes unreturned prompts the second, “And you know me.” Maureen receives the third text which presumes knowledge of her trip to London while moving through a security checkpoint at the Paris train station, where noticeably the phone remains in her possession longer than her other belongings, only leaving her side briefly to rest in a basket as she makes her way through the security scanner. Making her way into a café to order an espresso

just before boarding the train, Maureen finally responds: “Who is this?” though this question will remain unanswered. Still shaken from her ghost sighting the night before and now from this mysterious exchange, Maureen shoots off a series of texts as her train departs for London: “R u real? R u alive or dead? Alive or Dead? Lewis?” Now beginning to cry, visibly shaking, and somewhat ashamed of her gullibility, Maureen then switches her phone into airplane mode for a portion of the train ride (fig. 2.2). Although she is quick to turn her phone back on in order to continue the exchange, these questions as such remain unanswered. Desperate after another failed attempt to contact Lewis, in resuming her exchange with the unknown caller, we cannot be sure if Maureen still mistakes this phantasm for the arrivant of Lewis’ specter, or if instead, she merely takes refuge in the libidinal satisfaction of this substitution, in its instantaneity as opposed to continued deferral.

Figure 2.2: Maureen texting “Lewis?” and crying shortly after, Personal Shopper (Olivier Assayas 2016) screenshots
When Maureen turns her phone back on, she sees a missed text from the unknown account, which insists, “I want you,” only to quickly receive another, “I want you and will have you.” Although, the next few texts Maureen receives suggest a typical horror set up—with him insisting he’s watching her on the train, then that he is in London waiting for her only to retract both—at the same time, it is clear already that Maureen is experiencing mixed emotions as a result of their exchange. As their conversation will proceed over the next few days, it will become clear that Maureen is seduced by its dangerous intimacy: already as their first conversation on the train comes to an end, and as unknown’s last text to Maureen intimates, she is left wanting more. Finally admitting that he is not in London and receiving no quick response from her, unknown retorts in a series of two back-to-back texts: “Are you relieved? Or disappointed?”

As Assayas’ use of free indirect discourse might imply, during the course of this ongoing text exchange, which takes up the middle portion of the film, the audience is never privy to the other side of the line: there are no shots intercut to the unknown caller’s phone, hand or face, and in fact the identity of Ingo is never directly revealed as the unknown caller, although this is clearly implied by his eventual identification as Kyra’s murderer. According to the plot of the film, Ingo masquerades as the unknown caller, intending to build a pseudo intimate relationship with Maureen in order to lure her to a hotel room so that he can murder Kyra without her catching him, and to later frame Maureen for the murder with evidence of her envy for her employer. At the same time, however, and what makes Personal Shopper such an interesting case study of Narcisscinema is that Ingo’s plan relies on the building up of Maureen’s ego through an escalating series of text exchanges. These exchanges reveal not her most secret desires but instead her most petty or superficial, such as to borrow Kyra’s boots or to wear the
couture clothing she buys for Kyra. Underscoring the superficiality of selfie culture, *Personal Shopper* makes clear that Ingo’s plan in large part relies on drawing her attention to surfaces, and to her appearance, so as to stimulate both her autoerotic desire and her narcissistic aggression and rivalry with Kyra, which via the text exchange, he can later use as evidence to frame her.

At the urging of the unknown caller, Maureen reveals her desire to wear the clothes she has picked for Kyra. Her boldness to do so begins in a long sequence on the evening prior to Kyra’s death, when Maureen, alone in Kyra’s apartment after dropping off some more clothes, tries on a black transparent dress and black harness corset she had picked up for Kyra earlier that day in London, along with a pair of black leopard print stiletto heels, and Kyra’s black lycra bra and underwear. The sequence is shot with much care: Maureen is texting with the unknown caller as she erotically begins to undress and sensually try on Kyra’s clothing, passing back and forth in an uncut pan from Kyra’s walk-in closet to the bathroom (where a day later she will find Kyra’s murdered body) in order to examine herself approvingly in the mirror (fig. 2.3). The allure of her surface and of the superficiality of fashion for Maureen, which is clearly suggested here, is foreshadowed in an earlier scene where Maureen is encouraged by a salesperson to try on a pair of couture lace-up high heel boots that she is picking up for Kyra. Indicating to the shop assistant that she had been in trouble with Kyra before for doing so, Maureen reluctantly agrees to try them on and similarly admires her appearance in the mirror.

As the film makes clear in this sequence, recalling perhaps the increasingly intimate relation of the fan to the celebrity made possible through social media platforms, Kyra represents for Maureen, an alter-ego: the possibility of being someone else, of escaping the excruciating pain of mourning Lewis and waiting for his sign. Shortly before she dares to try on the black couture dress, we see a sequence of Maureen scrolling paparazzi images of Kyra’s recent trip to
Milan fashion week where she appears in all of the clothes and accessories Maureen has procured for her: the Chanel sequined dress and leather pants as well as the vintage couture leather belts and bags we see her pick out for Kyra earlier in the film. But as her alter-ego, Kyra is also the target of Maureen’s narcissistic aggressivity. Given that this rivalry largely plays itself out almost exclusively through the mediation of Kyra’s digital photographs, it resonates in the context of contemporary selfie culture as a film such as *Ingrid Goes West* (Matt Spicer 2017) similarly suggests.

Just before her Internet search for Kyra, the unknown caller texts Maureen, who is lying on Kyra’s unmade bed, asking if she wants to try on Kyra’s dresses because it is forbidden. As if it was a dare, Maureen then proceeds to change into the black dress and harness earlier described, returning his text afterward and revealing her fear in having tried on the clothes. In response, the unknown caller insists, “I thought you wanted to be someone else.”

*Figure 2.3: Maureen’s escalating masquerade as Kyra, part one, Personal Shopper (Olivier Assayas 2016) screenshots*
Although Maureen does not text back, she responds by returning to Kyra’s bed and proceeding to masturbate (fig. 2.4). The sequence thus suggests that through her text exchange with the unknown caller, a narcissistic auto-eroticism that relies on Kyra as a narcissistic ego ideal and rival has been activated in Maureen.

![Maureen's escalating masquerade as Kyra part two, Personal Shopper (Olivier Assayas 2016) screenshots](image)

Although there are a number of shots of Maureen admiring herself in the mirror over the course of *Personal Shopper*, these are all shots of Maureen masquerading as her alter ego, Kyra: whether trying on Kyra’s clothes while on errands as her personal shopper or more sinisterly, appropriating them for her own auto-erotic pleasure. The final of these, and the climactic one, occurs when Maureen goes to the Hotel Concorde Sainte Lazare dressed in the Chanel sequined dress which she has taken from Kyra’s closet for what she thinks will be a face-to-face rendezvous with the unknown caller. However, Ingo fails to materialize and instead their text
exchange continues. Immediately after her arrival in the hotel room, Maureen receives a text from him asking her to send a picture. In fulfillment of his request, Maureen, who has removed her black trench coat, takes a mirrored selfie in the sequined dress being sure to use her left hand to cinch the waist of the dress in from the back in order to make it appear more form-fitting and flattering. One of the more common poses within the visual rhetoric of selfie culture, the mirrored selfie is understood to suggest intimacy while also confessing to the self-consciousness inherent to (but also belied by) this emergent genre of photography. While the selfie is typically understood as an instantaneous form of self-portraiture and thus also as a means of self-revelation, in Personal Shopper Maureen’s decision to share a selfie with the unknown caller stands as the climax of her self-alienation and her refuge in the surface projection of her ego. After sending her selfie as instructed, Maureen is validated by the unknown caller who texts back approvingly, “I prefer you like this.” But of crucial importance here is how the film undercuts and interrogates the assumptions that surround the selfie format and social media as a form that can authentically exchange for the self. As we see Maureen in the finished product of her selfie she appears confident, beautiful and well-polished, all of what Kyra appears in her paparazzi photos, but in juxtaposition to the apparent truth of this image, the film likewise reveals to us Maureen’s affective response to it. Rather than sustain or confirm the illusion that Maureen’s selfie can ever reveal herself to us or to the unknown caller, instead the film suggests the suppressive nature of the selfie format, which at best cannot reveal and at worst explicitly contradicts the affectivity of the scenario of its production. Set in dialectical tension with the finished product of her selfie, this pivotal scene in Personal Shopper captures what Deleuze calls an affection-image, as a look of self-doubt and insecurity sweeps over Maureen’s face.
immediately preceding her confession of shame and self-alienation when she texts back: “I feel ridiculous. It’s not me. I’m ashamed of myself. I don’t know why I came” (figs. 2.5 & 2.6).

*Figure 2.5: Maureen’s Mirrored Selfies, Personal Shopper (Olivier Assayas 2016) screenshots*

*Figure 2.6: The culmination of the text exchange: Maureen’s quick regret, Personal Shopper (Olivier Assayas 2016) screenshots*
Maureen’s selfie in Kyra’s Chanel sequined dress stands as the culmination of her alienation in the image of her alter-ego, but as the scene also reveals, she quickly regrets her identification with this image and its simulacral nature. At the same time, when Maureen finds Kyra’s murdered corpse the next morning, the film implies her unconscious willing of Kyra’s death (and thus her guilt) through her narcissistic aggressivity in the presumption of Kyra’s image. This suggestion is further underscored by her investigation as a suspect by the police, who question Maureen’s use of Kyra’s computer and her decision to spend the night at Kyra’s apartment.

2.4 ‘Thinking Together’: Cinematic Impartiality

Insisting that the “aporias of narcissism [are] the explicit theme of deconstruction,” Derrida argues that our singularity cannot be guaranteed by the narcissistic projection and the reflected immediacy of our egos but only through the specificity of our genealogy and inheritance, through the specters that precede and later haunt us. The narrative of Personal Shopper reiterates this conviction and in so doing, undermines any faith in the smartphone as an apparatus of authentic exchange and instead invests in cinema’s ability to set narcissism adrift. Nearing the film’s end, Maureen, who is newly guarded in response to her gullibility with Ingo and the phantasmatic intimacy of his smartphone seduction, abandons her hope in receiving a sign from Lewis and decides to leave Paris to meet her boyfriend, Gary abroad to camp just outside of Muscat, Oman. Although Maureen sought to escape the interminability of her grief through the instantaneous satisfaction of the text exchange as well as through her alienation in the image of her alter-ego, Kyra, after the trauma of the murder and the revelation of Ingo’s responsibility, Maureen’s distracted and narcissistic preoccupation with her smartphone suddenly

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73 Derrida, Specters of Marx, 122.
ends abruptly. Indeed, she is not shown with her iPhone for the remainder of the film which is also when Lewis’ specter finally arrives, only now that Maureen has finally ceased her anticipation of his sign.

Underscoring the film’s exploration of the dialectical tension between the hauntology of the cinema and the immediacy of the smartphone apparatus, Lewis appears only in the properly cinematic space of the film. The first time the audience is privy to his appearance although Maureen fails to see it, while the second, Maureen communicates with Lewis through a series of loud knocks. Just before leaving Paris for Oman, Maureen spends the night at the home of Lara (Sigra Bouaziz), Lewis’ former girlfriend. Just after a conversation with Lara’s new boyfriend, Erwin (Anders Danielsen Le) in the garden over breakfast, a breeze begins to blow in the garden around Maureen, who is now alone, sitting with her back to the house. Through the windows just above the kitchen sink, the apparition of a young man appears (fig. 2.7). As his figure moves to the right of Maureen’s back, his visibility dissipates and in its place a glass is visible floating in space. As the glass reaches the open doorway to the garden, it stays suspended for a number of seconds before abruptly and loudly crashing to the floor where it breaks. At the sound of this, Maureen turns around and enters the kitchen but explains away the broken glass to Lara as likely the fault of her new boyfriend Erwin, who has just left.

![Image](image.png)

*Figure 2.7: Lewis’ specter appears, Personal Shopper (Olivier Assayas 2016) screenshot*
The second and more pivotal of Lewis’ signs occurs in the last scene of the film once Maureen has arrived at Gary’s apartment in Oman. Shortly after finding a letter from Gary outlining her journey to meet him in the mountains to camp, Maureen witnesses another glass hovering in mid-air in the interior chamber of the apartment, which also quickly falls and breaks. In response to this sign, which the viewer recognizes as definitive given the breaking glass of the previous scene, but she does not, Maureen now facing the camera, repeats a line she has asked twice earlier in the film, once in Lewis’ Parisian mansion and again in the text exchange with the unknown caller: Lewis, is it you? Using a method she had earlier researched and which according to the film’s narrative Victor Hugo had used in séances to communicate with ghosts, Maureen proceeds to ask a series of questions to the presence, which communicates via a series of vibrating pounds: one for yes and two for no. However, in the middle of their dialogue Maureen becomes doubtful of the accuracy of their communication and also of the specter’s identity as Lewis:

Maureen: Lewis? Are you’re here?

Ghost: One pound

Maureen: Have you been waiting for me?

Ghost: One pound

Maureen: Are you at peace?

Ghost: One Pound

Maureen: Thank you.

Her face, at first registering a look of relief, quickly turns to doubt and she resumes her questions:
Maureen: Are you not at peace?

Ghost: One pound

Maureen now moves in closer to the camera, facing in a medium shot:

Maureen: Are you playing with me? Do you mean harm?

Ghost: Two pounds

Maureen: I don’t know you . . . Who are you? Who are you?

Lewis, is it you? Lewis, is it you? (slight pause)

Or is it just me?

In response to her last question and marking the final frame of the film, Maureen, who hears one resounding pound or yes from the ghost in response, looks straight into the camera, breaking the fourth wall and scans the frame as if in recognition of something. As a slight smile crosses her face, she breathes a sigh of relief. In the final shot of the film, Maureen acknowledges not only the presence of the ghost but likewise the spectral presence of the film audience itself. The final filmic image of Maureen thus has a secondary significance, which by having her gaze meet the camera’s, the film acknowledges in its final frame. Derrida insists that spectrality attends not only to the infiltration of the present by the past but also by the future. As her final portrait-like image insists, Kristen Stewart’s image in *Personal Shopper* belongs to this future, the future of the film’s projections, its spectral revivifications for audiences yet to come.

In the closing pages of *Specters of Marx*, Derrida warns of the further development of the techno-mediatic apparatuses, the promise of total immediacy, and the increasing foreclosure of spectrality: “One must remember that this absolute evil (which is, is it not, absolute life, fully
present life, the one that does not know death and does not want to hear about it) can take place.”

For Derrida, the promise of immediacy and the promise of self-presence are synonymous in that both reduce experience, foreclosing the coming of the unforeseen, the event, which he defines as an a-religious messianic force. While cinema, through the labor of duration and retroaction, de-reifies presence and self-presence offering our image to the other, the smartphone as examined *Personal Shopper*, on the other hand, seems to bring us closer to the dreaded foreclosure Derrida describes. As earlier stated, the smartphone’s intensification of instantaneity and the subject-effect function as what Lauren Berlant deems a cruel optimism, a small compensation for the greater dispersiveness and fragmentation of experience resulting from the intensification of neoliberal capitalism, which seems fortifying but ultimately leads to even greater subjective damage—as Maureen tellingly reveals to the unknown caller after sending him her selfie, *I feel ridiculous. It’s not me. I’m ashamed of myself. I don’t know why I came.* Throughout the narrative duration of *Personal Shopper*, mourning the death of her twin, Maureen has been bereft of a reflecting image that can confirm her singularity. Although as was previously stated, there are many mirror images of Maureen throughout *Personal Shopper*, in each of these Maureen is masquerading as an image of her celebrity alter-ego and employer, Kyra: these reflections suggest Maureen’s escalating consumption by the pathological narcissism engendered by her engagement with the smartphone as apparatus which culminates in the production of a mirrored selfie for the unknown caller, itself metonymic of selfie culture as a whole. On the other hand, in the film’s final medium shot, Maureen’s singularity is confirmed through the gaze of the camera itself, which in giving her image over to the other, and to us as an audience, sets her narcissism adrift (fig. 2.8).

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75 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 220.
In their introduction to *Discourse*’s special issue dedicated to Derrida’s film theory, and recalling Deleuze’s similar evaluation of free-indirect images as a form of cinematic *mitsein*, co-editors, James Cahill and Tim Holland link the heterological nature of the cinema in its stylistic and even chemical nature to what Derrida described to *Cahiers du cinéma* as cinema’s unique ability to “think together”:

*Cinema is* thinking together. Akira Mizula Lippit shows this logic at play in the very basic material of film, in its sensitive emulsion, which is formed from the ‘mixture of two immiscible liquids’ capable of producing a ‘synthesis without synthesis’ or a technique of critical suspension. Film’s primary techniques such as montage, superimposition, and shooting in depth, further materialize this assembly of heterogeneous elements into a constellation of relationships, comparisons, and juxtapositions. The elementary double exposure of opening the camera to the world and then that world’s images to an audience also allows for the double exposures of a thinking together across time and space.\(^76\)

Here Cahill and Holland index what is for Derrida the unique heterological capacity of cinema, while at the same time, providing rationale for what moving image studies offers a critical media theory of digital self-mediation. As Assayas likewise insists, the heterology of the cinema is able to hold in tension and think together its own ontology and in relation to the immediacy of the smartphone; this dialectical mode of engagement, or what Derrida refers to as the “just

\(^{76}\) Cahill and Holland, 8.
disadjustment of the anachrony,” is more theoretically productive than what digital media theory alone can produce.77 *Personal Shopper* lays bare the different modes of engagement, and thus the different forms of narcissism stimulated through these different media forms. The affectivity of the smartphone as apparatus and the pathological nature of its narcissism are only legible when set off against or remediated through the surplus narcissism of the cinema. *Personal Shopper* restores to visibility the temporality of the self-encounter and the affectivity from which narcissism necessarily emerges. It is this capacity for heterology, or what Bataille defines as the science of the heterogenous, which grants the liquid or moving image what Deleuze describes as its greater capacity for “objectivity, equilibrium, justice.”78 When Deleuze insists on the cinema’s justice, I propose we press on its synonym, impartiality. For Deleuze, cinema holds a unique potential to exceed the limits of individual perception and to grant us the possibility of a non-human perception, that of the ‘cine-eye’ that at best can accede the actual, revealing virtual and affective flows. To Deleuze, the cinema of Dziga Vertov is exemplary of this potential. Cinematic impartiality is likewise of crucial use to a critical media theory of self-mediation. In making the ‘I’ an object, cinema overcomes the aporias of narcissism, revealing the true affective complexity of self-mediation, or what Lacan deems its inherent drama. In the following chapter, we will see how this is further achieved in Darren Aronofsky’s *Black Swan* (2010), in which the disciplinary practice of self-mediation in the ballet functions as a poetics of contemporary selfie culture.

78 Deleuze, *Cinema I*, 88.
3 THE MIRROR: NARCISSISM AS AFFECTIVE FORM

Writing in *The Interface Effect*, Alexander Galloway discusses the unworkability of representational models of advanced capitalism and in no small part due to digital technologies. As Galloway states in short, “adequate visualizations of control society have not happened. Representation has not happened. At least not yet.”¹ To illustrate this bind, Galloway discusses attempts to produce “network visualizations,” or renderings of the Internet, which inevitably result in redundant cloud-like images. Pondering the uselessness of such images, Galloway muses that networked culture may in fact be unrepresentable, that “power” today may be unrepresentable.² In such a regime, as Galloway argues, it is also difficult to achieve the orientation necessary for even a Jamesonian cognitive mapping.³ Instead, Galloway points to the usefulness of figurative aids, of “allegories of control . . . for a poetics as such for this mysterious new machinic space. As he continues, “to create a poetics for such algorithmic systems is the first step, necessary but not sufficient, in the quest to represent them.”⁴ Galloway’s turn to the figurative, his call for a poetics, thus in some ways resonates with Shaviro’s amended version of cognitive mapping as affective mapping.⁵ The impetus for this chapter finds itself somewhere in the middle of these: invested in the affectivity of contemporary media and convinced in affect’s productivity in the analysis of capitalist culture, while also persuaded by Galloway’s turn to poetics and the corresponding implication that the labor of textual analysis should not be strictly limited to cultural objects representationally linked to networked culture. As the first chapter has

¹ Galloway, 91.
³ Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.
⁴ Galloway, 98-99.
⁵ Shaviro, *Post Cinematic Affect*.
shown through the analysis of *Personal Shopper* (Olivier Assayas 2016), there is great value in the analysis of texts that explicitly examine the use of smartphone technology and its effects on contemporary subjectivity for this dissertation’s project of an elaboration of selfie culture. But following Galloway, this project shares in the conviction that certain contemporary narrative films seemingly wholly unrelated to contemporary selfie culture are nevertheless crucial to consider as poetics. As illustration, this chapter will examine Darren Aronofsky’s *Black Swan* (2010). While *Black Swan* has already been examined as an allegory of neoliberalism, or more specifically neoliberal post-feminism, as this chapter will show through close attention to the function of the mirror within the film, *Black Swan* also enacts a poetics of narcissism. In so doing, the film affectively maps the risks for subjective damage endemic to contemporary selfie culture.

By relating *Black Swan* specifically to selfie culture rather than to neoliberalism more generally, this chapter also will show that the labor of affective mapping can perhaps be more generative when it is more tightly focused. Rather than tying the film’s narrative to the general condition of subjective exploitation or even gendered exploitation under neoliberalism as other scholars have already done, this chapter’s reading of the film more specifically relates it to the subjective effects of image-based post web 2.0 digital media, particularly technologies of digital self-mediation. In so doing, this chapter finds itself in general agreement with Yasmin Ibrahim’s recent assessment that there has not been adequate analysis of narcissism as the new frontier of capitalist exploitation in post-web 2.0 culture.\(^6\) In order to produce this argument, this chapter focuses specifically on the crucial function of the mirror as motif within *Black Swan*.

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\(^6\) Ibrahim, “Coalescing the Mirror and the Screen: Consuming the ‘Self’ Online,” 106.
Following Lacan’s famous iteration of the mirror stage, the mirror stands as perhaps the most potent of narcissism’s aesthetic forms. While in canonical film theory, narcissism has only been limitedly analyzed in relation to spectatorship and cinematic identification, following Eugenie Brinkema, I will consider the mirror as affective form within *Black Swan* while also attending to elements of the film aesthetics which redouble the affective experience of narcissism for viewers of the film. This chapter attends to the mirror as emblem of narcissism and reconsiders Nina’s (Natalie Portman) schizophrenia in light of Freud’s association of this condition with pathological narcissism. At the same time, this chapter considers female narcissism and its use-value as a technology or disciplinary practice that bolsters compulsory heterosexuality and a culture of misogyny.

### 3.1 The Mirror as Motif in *Black Swan*

Almost without fail, *Black Swan* is viewed in relation to the political economy of neoliberalism and more specifically to the construction of femininity within it. Such readings rely on the ballet as an allegory for neoliberal post-feminist ideals such as competition and entrepreneurship of the self, an idealized youthful, white femininity and female complicity in acts of self-objectification, or otherwise put, the female body’s instrumental value in achieving success. As Kendra Marston quintessentially suggests, ballet’s focus on “the celebrated white woman as hyper-spectacle, object of the crowd’s gaze, signifies in relation to idealized constructions of neoliberal femininity with its rhetorical, mass-mediated focus on female agency, achievement and corporate discipline.” Readings such as Marston’s also frequently note the

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7 Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects*.
film’s self-reflexivity regarding the Hollywood film industry’s complicity with such constructions of femininity and its emplacement on the film’s stars: Natalie Portman, Mila Kunis, Winona Ryder, and Barbara Hershey. It is in fact the marked self-reflexivity of *Black Swan* which leads Marston to conclude that the film doesn’t merely reproduce the ideals of neoliberal post-feminism but also actively critiques them. The paratextual identities of the film’s female stars, for example, stand in marked tension to the ideal of white femininity represented by the ballerina. Natalie Portman and Winona Ryder’s Jewish heritage places the whiteness of the ballerina and the Hollywood film star under erasure while the anxiety around age and the Hollywood female star, embodied by Barbara Hershey, recalls the time crisis unfairly placed on women under neoliberalism when ideals of success are so closely tied to physical appearance. On the other hand, Katherine Fusco argues that *Black Swan* merely reproduces the cruelty of the contemporary gaze, typified by the paparazzo’s gaze in the TMZ era, and that the film and its audience sadistically traffic in the spectacle of Portman’s suffering.

Reading *Black Swan* as a critique of neoliberal femininity rather than complicit with it seems to hinge on the film’s exposure of the marked contrast between Nina’s physical and mental suffering and the idealized spectacle she produces as ballerina, an unsustainable dichotomy which culminates in Nina’s death at the film’s end. Writing in *Film Quarterly*, Mark Fisher for example, views the coincidence of Nina’s death with the achievement of her finest performance as a tragedy that underscores the impossible standards of a still patriarchal

10 Marston, 696.
11 Ibid, 705.
13 Marston, 697.
neoliberalism, which is personified in the film by the ballet director, Thomas Leroy (Vincent Cassel).\textsuperscript{14} Perhaps more interestingly, Steen Christiansen interprets the film as a critique of neoliberalism by focusing on the function of the digital morph.\textsuperscript{15} For Christiansen, the morph becomes a figure for the modulation characteristic of neoliberal control. While on the one hand, the digital morph makes Nina’s transformation into the black swan possible, on the other hand, it limits and prevents full metamorphosis. For both Nina and the audience, the digital morph functions as an “intensity effect” resonant with the demands of neoliberal biopower: “The morph is the specific visual expression of a cultural concern with the physical status of the human body, and the way new media technologies transform and produce our subjectivities.”\textsuperscript{16} Through his reading of the digital morph as a figure for biopower, Christiansen takes note of \textit{Black Swan}’s allegorical or poetic relation to networked culture. Yet the digital morph is not the dominant aesthetic device of the film; it comes second to the predominance of the mirror. As Christiansen notes, writing elsewhere, “the film’s larger structure [is] a house of mirrors,” and yet he declines to examine the poetic or affective function of the mirror in relation to neoliberal biopower as he does with the morph.\textsuperscript{17} Indeed, while all analyses of \textit{Black Swan} attend to the predominance of the mirror as motif, its full aesthetic and affective force has been overlooked.

Although the recurrence of the mirror in \textit{Black Swan} has been appreciated in resonance with both the extensiveness of the male gaze as well as with the self-surveillance that characterizes neoliberal post-feminism, it has not been thought through in relation to the rise of digital technologies of self-mediation, which exacerbate these cultural conditions. And yet, \textit{Black}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{14} Mark Fisher and Amber Jacobs, “Debating Black Swan: Gender and Horror,” \textit{Film Quarterly} 65, no. 1 (Fall 2011): 59.
  \item \textsuperscript{15} Steen Christiansen, “Metamorphosis and Modulation,” in \textit{POST-CINEMA}, \textit{POST-CINEMA} edited by Shane Denson and Julie Leyda, accessed May 11, 2016, \url{http://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/post-cinema/}.
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Christiansen, “Metamorphosis and Modulation,” n.p.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Steen Christiansen, “Body Refractions: Darren Aronofsky’s Black Swan,” \textit{Akademisk Kvarter} 3 (Fall 2011): n.p.
\end{itemize}
Swan emerges in 2010, the same year that the forward-facing camera becomes standard with the release of the iPhone 4 and seems retrospectively to presciently map the aesthetic and affective dimensions of a contemporary selfie culture in which self-reflective technologies and media forms saturate visual culture. Considering the film from this vantage point also suggests that Nina’s mental illness is tied to a pathological form of narcissism. While Nina is frequently described as a schizophrenic character, the relationship between schizophrenia and narcissism as described in Freudian psychoanalysis has been overlooked in previous readings of the film. The psychoanalytic concept of narcissism helps to clarify the interrelation between the mirror as a visual motif and Nina’s mental illness. Following Galloway, my interest in this combination of concerns is as a poetics of networked culture, and more specifically, of the subjective risks endemic to contemporary selfie culture. Like Hannah Westley, this dissertation maintains that self-mediating technologies such as the forward-facing camera unfold a process of what Julie Rak terms, “automediality,” of which any given selfie or vlog post is only a small byproduct. Additionally, the felt experience of self-mediation is often obscured in the image of the self presented to the camera. As an example of Narcisscinema, however, Black Swan elaborates this, revealing the affectivity Derrida ascribes to the live experience of self-mediation such as its seduction, suffocation, as well as its artifactuality, which can lead to the uncanny desire to reappropriate oneself. Like Derrida insisted regarding the live television scenario, this dissertation maintains that a critical media theory of self-mediation must address its full affective complexity, which may indeed contradict the surface appearance of the self-image. Through its

pressing attention to the motif of the mirror, this is precisely the contradiction that *Black Swan* is able to expose: that between affect and appearance.

Mirrors predominate thoroughly in *Black Swan*; within the mise-en-scène, Nina’s image finds itself consistently redoubled in a series of them: studio mirrors, bathroom mirrors, dressing room mirrors, in reflective windows, and vanity mirrors. Similarly, the film style itself traffics in the motif of the mirror through frequent use of 360-degree shots, confusing the pro-filmic and its virtual mirrored double, as well as mirrored two shots featuring Nina with her mother, her rival Lily, and even at one point, a disturbing sculpture, Fritz Scholder’s *Future Clone* (1999). Rightly then, readings of the film have not failed to note the film’s interest in the uncanny, the doppelgänger (Aronofsky has admitted the film’s inspiration in Dostoevsky’s *The Double*), and the confusion of the virtual and the actual.\(^{20}\) Previous analyses interpret this interest as less compelling narratively than as a scaffolding for Aronofsky to showcase his virtuoso technique: thus arguing that the film’s interest in self-reflection reveals a solipsistic love for itself. Although Mark Fisher observes that *Black Swan* is “largely about autoeroticism and fantasy,” narcissism is never mentioned in relation to the film, even despite Jacques Lacan’s influential use of the mirror in his explication of narcissism and the development of the ego as “the mirror stage,” and despite this theory’s influential effect on the development of psychoanalytic film theory. Indeed, although most critics recognize Nina’s instability as a form of psychosis or schizophrenia, none explore the link between schizophrenia and pathological narcissism as Freud maintained.\(^{21}\) This seems to result not only from an insecurity regarding just how obvious the mirroring motif stands on the surface of the film but also perhaps from a hesitancy around engaging in a psychoanalytic

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\(^{21}\) Fisher and Jacobs, 61.
reading of the film, which seems too easy and too obvious as both Steen Christiansen and Tarja Laine have implied. Following Cynthia Freeland, as Laine states in *Bodies in Pain: Emotion and the Cinema of Darren Aronofsky*, she prefers to attend to the affective-aesthetic system of the film rather than searching for psychoanalytic themes. But as this chapter will illustrate, concerns for film affect and aesthetics need not be at odds with psychoanalytic reading. Instead, the process of psychoanalytic reading should be adapted towards a greater engagement with these both. Before turning further towards this discussion, however, I will review the psychoanalytic theory of narcissism and the link between narcissism and schizophrenia that Freud establishes as well as how the theory of narcissism inevitably relies on the aesthetic.

As formulated in Freudian psychoanalysis, a certain amount of narcissism is normal, even necessary, in the formation of the ego. Although Freud’s theory of narcissism would change in its nuances over time, as discussed in his 1914 essay, “On Narcissism: An Introduction,” Freud viewed the libido as divided between ego and object libido, with the healthy individual developing towards an outward-directed object libido with sexual maturation. Freud argued that ego libido exists in a more or less inverse relation to object libido and yet the establishment of the ego is a necessary precondition for the establishment of object relations in the maturation of the healthy individual. Freud attests to this in differentiating between two phases of primary and secondary narcissism: in the case of secondary narcissism, and with the ego already established, the subject’s ego libido is rewarded no longer strictly through self-relation but through identification with others as ego ideals. Moving towards a fuller elaboration of the formation of the ego, Freud indicates in the narcissism essay that “a new psychical action” must

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23 Laine, 129-130.
propel its development. With this single sentence, Lacan will find the basis for his own 1936 theory of the mirror stage, in which he will brilliantly summarize the necessity of the narcissistic relation in the establishment of the ego. Narcissism for Lacan is literally caught up in the lure of the Imaginary, or that is to say, in the play of mirror images. As Lorenzo Chiesa argues, it is within this relation to the Imaginary—or, in other words, the subject’s foundational construction of the ego in an alienating and alienated image—that the early work of Lacan locates the unique drama of human subjectivity.\textsuperscript{25} In Lacan’s return to Freud, and as fundamentally opposed to the American tradition of ego psychology, it is the function of psychoanalysis to reveal the illusory nature of the ego and so in a sense also to puncture the subject’s narcissistic relation to it.\textsuperscript{26} At the same time, however, Lacan is ultimately more invested than Freud in an expansion of the theory of narcissism given his conviction in the lure of the Imaginary ego, as is made evident in his proclaiming the mirror stage an identifiable and fundamental instance in childhood development. Through the theory of the \textit{objet a}, and much more pessimistically than Freud, Lacan argues that after the foundational establishment of the subject’s relation to the ego in the mirror stage, true object relations become nearly impossible given the function of the \textit{objet a} as a narcissistic remainder, which interferes in any given inter-subjective relation.\textsuperscript{27} This function of the \textit{objet a} as a narcissistic remainder which stymies proper object relations is pessimistically if also pithily summarized in Lacan’s insistence, \textit{il n’y a pas de rapport sexuel}.\textsuperscript{28}

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While Freud viewed the small child as generally narcissistic, in some cases this narcissism persists into adulthood as a pathology and at the cost of forming proper object relations. As Freud also observes, however, the full-blown pathology of narcissism is generally not seen in analysis, since this condition would make one impervious to the process as a given since no proper object relation with the analyst, that is to say transference, could be established. This is because Freud linked pathological narcissism to the condition of schizophrenia, in which the individual likewise lacks proper object relations to the outside world. For this reason, schizophrenics were considered psychoanalytically untreatable—a shortcoming of the methods of psychoanalysis that was famously exploited as grounds for critique by Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus.*

Due to the link Freud established between narcissism and schizophrenia, and to the imperviousness of this condition to analysis, Freud is unable to elaborate pathological narcissism through his own case studies. Although he does utilize the personal history of Judge Daniel Paul Schreber, he otherwise turns to a series of figurative aids or aesthetic scenarios in order to explicate the condition of narcissism: these are the person in pain, the hypochondriac, the animal, and perhaps the most aesthetically compelling for Freud, the narcissistic woman.

Each of these seem in effect more geared towards explaining the lack of object relations characteristic of narcissism from the position of the external observer than they do to articulating the experience of narcissism from the inside out. With the elaboration of the mirror stage, Lacan following Freud’s model strongly associates narcissism with an aesthetic aid and a visible scenario: the young child before the mirror. However, Lacan is able to succeed where Freud did not. That is, in describing the scenario or mise-en-scène unfolding between the child and the

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29 Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia.*

mirror, Lacan envisions the felt experience of narcissism, while conveying its inherently dynamic nature.

As described by Lacan, narcissism is, in short, “a drama”: a dynamic of desire and rivalry that plays out between the subject and its more perfected form in the mirrored reflection.\(^{31}\) Initiating the alienation of the subject in a surface projection, a precursor to the ego, the mirror stage is valuable in describing not only the dynamic relation between the subject and its own ideal ego as gestalt, but likewise explains mature identification with other subjects as ego-ideals. However, as opposed to the normative subject, the pathologically narcissistic subject remains caught in the dynamic of the mirror stage; its object relations fully distorted by the primacy of the self-relation and to the point of psychosis. This second pathological condition is precisely what unfolds in the narrative of *Black Swan*. But if as Lacan argues, the mirror stage illustrates the outsized influence of the Imaginary on subjective experience, then as *Black Swan* suggests, the proliferation of the mirror or other self-reflective media forms may enhance the risks of a pathological narcissism. Or as put by Yasmin Ibrahim, describing the impact of digital technologies of self-mediation, “The virtual environment sustains and elongates that ‘mirror moment’ when we are entrapped by our fascination with ourselves.”\(^{32}\)

### 3.2 Re-approaching Cinematic Narcissism

Underscoring Nina’s narcissism, the question of identification in *Black Swan* is highly unstable. Although Christiansen argues that the ontological truth value of the cinematic image is rendered unreliable through our full immersion in Nina’s delusional psychosis, Katherine Fusco maintains that the camera work, including a proliferation of following shots and extreme close-ups, forecloses identification with Nina, who instead becomes objectified for our scrutiny:

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32 Ibrahim, 106.
“Aronofsky consistently positions the camera so that audiences view Nina’s world as though breathing down her neck rather than seeing through her eyes. . . . The look at Nina’s head, rather than through her face, emphasizes her position as a physical object. As a result, the film events seem strangely objective not subjective.” Tarja Laine similarly maintains that Aronofsky’s films paradoxically “plunge deeply into the subjectivity of their characters but do not necessarily invite identification.”

There are two interesting and interrelated threads to follow in this scholarly debate. The first relates to the overly strict definition of secondary identification as subjective point of view shots. As delineated by Christian Metz, cinematic narcissism results from the structural identification of the spectator with both the mastery of the apparatus itself and the mastery of the film hero’s subjective point of view shots. From this theory, of course, Mulvey articulated the alignment of these as a form of male privilege from which the female was structurally excluded and instead objectified. As the previous chapter’s discussion of free indirect discourse has already argued, however, the notion of subjective identification should not be so strictly defined in terms of a convention of Hollywood film style. In the modern art cinema, free indirect discourse developed as an aesthetic technique amenable to a more sustained i.e. durational form of character identification. Interestingly also, free indirect discourse frequently was employed in the modern art cinema as a structure of identification with female protagonists and as such also problematizes the strict gender binary of subjective and objective shots as theorized by Mulvey. Redefining the concept of cinematic identification has another corollary value, however, particularly to the project of this dissertation: that is, in opening up a reconsideration of the concept of cinematic narcissism. In other words, if subjective

33 Fusco, 22; Christiansen “Body Refractions,” n.p..
34 Laine, 6.
35 Metz, The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema.
36 Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.”
identification is too strictly defined around point of view shots, then relatedly, the concept of cinematic narcissism has likewise been too strictly defined around identification; *Black Swan* is a film that problematizes both these structures in a productive manner. As it has historically been understood, the question of cinematic narcissism is limited to a consideration of the experience of the filmic spectator and a relative scale of gratification available to him or her through the structure of identification.\textsuperscript{37} While these questions were relevant to the ideological critique of apparatus theory, an analytic approach more relevant in relation to mapping the poetics of contemporary selfie culture might begin with the question of what narcissism looks like as a cinematic image and equally what narcissism feels like as an affective image.

In response to a lack of scholarly rigor in the application of affect theory to cinema studies, Eugenie Brinkema has called for a return to close textual analysis through the analysis of form. Whether attending to a horizon line in *Open Water* (Chris Kentis 2003) as a form of anxiety or the light emanating from an overturned lamp as a form of grief in *Funny Games* (Michael Haneke 2007), for Brinkema, “specific affects [are] bound up with specific forms;” they are in other words narratively, even socially and historically situated: “Treating affect in such a way deforms any coherence to affect in the singular, general, universal and transforms it into something not given in advance, not apprehendable except through the thickets of formal analysis.”\textsuperscript{38} Brinkema’s polemical return to form and to textual analysis might also hold promise for the related practice of affective mapping. As was earlier intimated, the reading strategy of affective mapping as practiced by Steven Shaviro, Steen Christiansen, Robin James and others tends to a tautological relation to the political economy of neoliberalism. Affective mapping,

\textsuperscript{37} Jean-Louis Baudry, “Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematic Apparatus.”
\textsuperscript{38} Brinkema, xv.
however, like affect theory more generally may prove more productive when it is more specifically located, attending as this dissertation does, to a series of specific aesthetic forms used to affectively map selfie culture as an aspect of a larger neoliberal culture.

Perhaps of even greater interest though is what Brinkema’s attention to form may offer for the future of psychoanalytic film studies. Too strongly associated with a universalizing or structural conception of the spectator as well as diminished by a variety of legitimate criticisms from queer theory and critical race theory, the appeal of psychoanalytic theory for film studies began waning in the 1990s. Instead, new scholarship increasingly turned toward film phenomenology and affect theory’s methodologies as well as to reception studies, all of which seemed to offer a more open-ended model for describing the film-viewer relation. Although Slavoj Žižek would offer a model by which psychoanalytic film theory might continue to thrive through textual analysis, his primary focus was in utilizing film texts as illustrations for psychoanalytic concepts. But following Brinkema, psychoanalytic film theory would do well to further address the analysis of aesthetic form. Although film aesthetics have been productively analyzed in relation to psychoanalysis already, perhaps especially in sound studies with Michel Chion’s concepts such as the screaming point and the acousmêtre, there is more that can be done particularly in the analysis of the filmic image. In corollary with its decline as a scholarly methodology, the popularity of psychoanalysis has likewise waned as a form of psychological treatment. And yet, as popular and scholarly discourse’s engagement with the question of narcissism in relation to the emergence of the selfie format illustrates, its terminology remains largely ingrained and productive in the analysis of contemporary culture.

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Attention to the affective disorders described by psychoanalysis seem a logical place to extend Brinkema’s project of the formalist analysis of the affects. Brinkema’s insistence that affect is “not something given in advance . . . not apprehendable except through the thickets of formalist analysis,” in fact, recalls psychoanalysis’ emphasis on the particularities of the case study and its attention to formal analysis through the reading of the symptom, the dream, the slip of the tongue, and as situated in the particular life history of the analysand.41 Despite Christian Metz’s insistence regarding the importance of textual analysis, apart from the conventions of identification, narcissism has not been analyzed as a situated, formal aesthetic or affective structure within the filmic image. Analyzing narcissism particularly as an affective form is productive in articulating the poetics of contemporary selfie culture. In *Forms of the Affects*, Brinkema is highly focused on formal elements of the mise-en-scène, but other elements of film aesthetics are, of course, equally affective. While it may perhaps seem challenging to connect the syntax of cinema—techniques of cinematography, editing or even lighting—to specific affects in the manner in which Brinkema has done with the mise-en-scène, I would argue that this is equally possible if the reading remains contingent on the narrative context of the film. For example, although this chapter pursues a reading of the mirror as the affective form of narcissism in *Black Swan*, there are other elements of the filmic style which redouble the specific affects of a pathological narcissism.

My analysis of *Black Swan* thus relies on a marriage between the theory of cinematic affect proposed by Brinkema and Laine’s film-phenomenological reading of Aronofsky’s style as a cinema of the body. In an effort to firstly escape the solipsism of some film phenomenological and affective readings that prioritize the viewer’s experience and secondly to

41 Brinkema, xv.
specify affect beyond “the same model of vague shuddering intensity,” Brinkema perhaps sidesteps the questions of how the affects she so scrupulously shows are embodied by form are conveyed to the film’s audiences. Following Laine, it is the ‘affective-aesthetic’ system of the film that closes this circle. Although never exclusively so, following shots, the close-up, and the acousmatic voice in Black Swan take on and convey to audiences the affects of pathological narcissism in connection with the proliferation of its formal embodiment, the mirror, in the mise-en-scène. In other words, and in alignment with Brinkema’s insistence on close formal reading, the mirror’s predominance is what undergirds the viewer’s comprehension of the film as an affective experience.

As earlier stated, there has been disagreement in the literature on Black Swan as to whether the film invites identification with Nina. This difficulty is in part due to the frequent use of close, following shots in the film in which although subjective identification is implied, we also remain consistently aware of Nina as an object of our gaze, and often times, as Fusco describes, even as an object obstructing our gaze. But rather than dismiss the possibility of identification because of Nina’s visibility as object, the aesthetic choice of the shallow, following shot seems suggestive of the claustrophobic, self-objectification characteristic of narcissism. Similarly, the frequency of extreme close-ups and what Tarja Laine has described as the irruption of “acousmatic bursts of laughter,” convey its paranoia. In other words, these aesthetic choices allow for the audience’s immersion in Nina’s experience of pathological narcissism, or what Laine identifies as schizophrenia. Following Laine, I choose the word, “convey” here specifically: as opposed to merely a representation of this condition, I would agree with Laine that Black Swan, like Aronofsky’s cinema more generally, functions as an

42 Ibid.
43 Laine, 131.
‘affective-aesthetic system’ that immerses audiences in the ‘life-space’ of the film.44 Following Jennifer Barker’s description of the cinematic body, Laine argues that this is achieved through a “sheer corporeal film style.”45 The film aesthetics of Black Swan, such as a proliferation of close-ups, following shots, as well as the acousmatic laughter, directly convey to audiences the affective experience of Nina’s condition. That Nina’s condition is in fact pathological narcissism or schizophrenia, however, is confirmed by the function of the mirror as its affective form within the mise-en-scène.

3.3 Self-Mediation as Disciplinary Practice

In utilizing the figure of the narcissistic woman as one of his key figurative aids, Freud indelibly ties femininity to the risks of narcissism; more specifically, Freud implies that the more appealing the woman is to the male gaze (Freud’s is paradigmatic in this case), the greater likelihood she is to be narcissistic, that is, aware and admiring of her own allure.46 What Freud is unable to take into consideration, however, is the function that female objectification could itself play in exacerbating the self-awareness characteristic of narcissism. As John Berger has famously argued, as a consequence of a patriarchal society, women have been historically valued for their appearance as objects. As a result, women have internalized a split subjectivity: “she comes to consider the surveyor and the surveyed within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman.”47 If in fact as Freud argues, women are at greater risk for a subjective narcissism, then the social construction of gender roles plays a larger part in this reality than Freud is willing to address. In Black Swan, however, gender roles and

44 Ibid.
compulsory heterosexuality are fully implicated in the condition of female narcissism. In addition, the film explores the critical function of technologies of self-mediation in the maintenance of these.

In *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler argues that post-Oedipal adherence to a gender norm functions as an act in extended relation to the development of the ego in the mirror stage. Drawing from Freud’s association of pain and hypochondria as well as homosexuality with narcissism, Butler states that, “... gender-instituting prohibitions work through suffusing the body with a pain that culminates in the projection of a surface, that is, a sexed morphology which is at once a compensatory fantasy and a fetishistic mask.”48 As she continues, the post-Oedipal identification with a gender norm thus furthers the coordinating if also repressive function of the ego:

The imago of the body is purchased through a certain loss; libidinal dependency and powerlessness is phantasmatically overcome by the installation of a boundary and hence, a hypostasized center which produces an idealized bodily ego; that integrity and unity is achieved through the ordering of a wayward motility of disaggregating sexuality not yet restrained by the boundaries of individuation.49

As Butler has also argued, identification with a gender norm plays a crucial function in the maintenance of a compulsory heterosexuality, which not only guarantees the continuation of the patriarchal social structure but likewise the private property system crucial to capitalism.50 The Lacanian mirror stage presumes a transparent possibility of ego identification with the other built on the ease of forming an earlier relation with the image of the self. But in a patriarchal social structure, what do the various “others” experience during this process? How do sexual and

49 Ibid, 75.
racial difference interfere with or otherwise coerce the process of ego formation? Although the universal structure of the mirror stage as described by Lacan failed to, Butler addresses the different attenuations the process of ego formation will take on due to gender difference. Similarly, Frantz Fanon famously articulated the exclusion of the black subject from the reciprocity of narcissistic identification, the implications of which are further explored in Shawn Michelle’s Smith’s extended analysis of the difficulty of the mirror stage in a racist society. As framed in Black Swan, the process of ego identification in the mirror, or the dynamic of narcissism, is never transparent but always mediated through the presence of another’s gaze. Although Nina’s affective experience centers around herself, and is in fact narcissistic, she nevertheless lacks unmediated access to herself as love object.

In the narrative of Black Swan, Nina undergoes a conflicted journey towards the establishment of an ego under the duress of compulsory identification with a normative form of cis-gendered femininity. Consistent with Lacanian psychoanalysis, it is clear in Black Swan that the mirror is the site which precipitates Nina’s formation in the knot of the Imaginary-Symbolic. In the ordinary or normative case, the subject will accede to the Oedipal structure of the Symbolic, moving towards identification with their likes as ego-ideals and to sexual or object relations with the opposite sex. But from the perspective of a traditional psychoanalytic reading, due perhaps to her close relationship with her mother, Nina is in the process of a delayed or extended mirror stage at the beginning of the film. However, due to her casting in the role of the swan queen and the introduction of the cut of sexual difference through the symbolic authority of

51 Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks; Smith, “Envisioning Race.”
the director, Thomas Leroy, Nina is removed from the comforting seclusion of this childlike
dependency on the mother, forced to further pursue the process of a fully gendered individuation.

The reality of sexual difference and its threat to Nina’s enjoyment of the ballet is already
foreshadowed in her dream of dancing the part of Odette at the beginning of the film, but more
interesting for our purposes, is *Black Swan*’s constant indictment of the mirror as the site of
heterosexist symbolic authority. In so doing, female narcissism seems less an inherent
psychological condition than a necessary consequence of a culture of female objectification. As
framed in *Black Swan*, the institutional gaze such as that of the New York City ballet insists that
women participate in a process of self-scrutiny and self-surveillance as well as in a process of
aggressive competition in order to comply with the demands of the male gaze, in this case
embodied by the person of the director. Whereas to dance in the ballet is in fact an embodied,
affective, physical sport, it is valuable only as a spectacle commodity for audience consumption.
As in contemporary selfie culture, a normative and idealized feminine appearance plays a crucial
function in the ballet’s marketing and capital success.

In the prologue to *Black Swan*, the film begins immersed in Nina’s dream of dancing the
part of Odette. Dressed in a knee-length white tutu, she smiles, performing a solo on pointe on a
dark surface. Although this surface reflects her movements, importantly, it does not reflect her
image. Soon, however, Nina’s blissful solo is interrupted with the appearance of Rothbart, who
menacingly threatens her, surrounding her and meeting her movements with an aggressive series
of sexualized approaches. Translated through the ballet, it appears that in the dream Nina as
Odette is sexually violated, or raped, as she performs a gesture to indicate tears running down her
face after Rothbart’s embrace. In the next shot, her white tutu is now the shorter-length typical of
a mature, female soloist. Although her dream is in fact rather menacing, the next morning in the
first official scene of the filmic narrative, she tells her mother happily she had a dream of
dancing the swan queen. This pas de deux with Rothbart, however, reoccurs multiple times
throughout the film as Nina prepares to dance the part, clearly framing male sexual desire as a
threat to both Odette in the fiction of Swan Lake as well as to Nina as a maturing young woman
who lacks sexual experience. The threat and coerciveness of male sexual desire is thus a major
theme of the film.

As I have previously stated, it is Black Swan’s obsessive rumination of the mirror as
aesthetic device which grounds my analysis of it as the affective form of narcissism. But as I
have also stated, the impetus of sexual difference is a constant presence in Nina’s process of ego
identification. As framed by Black Swan, it is in fact the ballet’s constant requirement of self-
mediation which seems responsible for the exacerbation of female narcissism such as Nina’s and
towards the end of producing and internalizing an ideal spectacle of normative cis-gendered
femininity. Unlike the Freudian paradigm then, Black Swan acknowledges that the self-relation
characteristic of narcissism is not a universal structure but is differently attenuated for the
gendered other. The first pressing appearance of the mirror in Black Swan occurs on the morning
following her dream and the film’s opening. Here we are introduced to the tri-fold mirror which
Nina uses when training at home. As will be more forcefully insisted later in the film, the mirror
is never available for unmediated reflection. As Narcissus’ pleasure in the reflecting pool is
disturbed by Echo, the mirror for Nina is always already the site of the other’s gaze. This early
scene stands as perhaps the most tranquil of Nina’s encounters with the mirror when only her
mother’s gaze joins her own redoubled in the glass. The mother-daughter relationship in these
early scenes reflects a shared mutuality. Once Nina is cast as Odette, however, the cut of sexual
difference and the demands of the director overtakes Nina’s primacy in relation to the mirror.
The function of sexuality in identification is alluded to as soon as Nina reaches the New York City ballet studio, where the other female corps dancers apply their makeup in preparation for performance. Their faces reflected in a series of vanity mirrors, the dancers harshly debate the need for the principal ballerina, Beth (Winona Ryder) to retire due to her age. Like DePalma’s Carrie, Nina who stands outside the group of seated dancers, has not yet matured to the phase of aggressive competitiveness characteristic of the other young women, who eagerly prepare themselves for the spectacular gaze of Leroy in hopes of replacing Beth and being cast as the Swan Queen. Shortly, Lily (Mila Kunis) a new dancer to the ballet, who will become both Nina’s confidant and her greatest rival, enters the dressing room: our first glance at her emerging in a vanity mirror across from Nina, marking her clearly as Nina’s ego ideal (fig. 3.1).

As Christiansen rightly notes, Nina is coded queer throughout Black Swan; one of the primary means of her queer coding is suggested through her relationship with Lily.52 Unlike the other corps dancers, Nina’s rivalry of identification with Lily is not pure but is over-coded and ambiguated by a repressed sexual desire for her which will later become fully explicit in Nina’s delusion of their intercourse. That Nina does not naturally recognize herself in the reflection of

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heteronormative femininity is indicated in the scene just prior to her encountering Lily for the first time. Riding the subway into Lincoln Center, Nina looks into the reflective surface of the train window but where her face should recognizably appear, she and the audience encounter instead only an unrecognizable and non-individuated blur. Interestingly, in a later scene once she has been cast as Odette, using the reflective subway window to apply lipstick, Nina’s likeness emerges recognizably, now in conformity with dominant constructions of femininity.

The most crucial event that occurs between these two reflections and secures Nina’s compliance with the demands of the male gaze, is Nina’s casting as Odette after Leroy’s observations of her performing in rehearsal as a corps dancer. Echoing the earlier scene with her mother, here the most forceful presence in the mirror that not only redoubles but in fact circumvents Nina’s own gaze is that of the ballet director (fig. 3.2). Leroy makes it clear that to become Odette, Nina also has to accede to the demands of the male gaze and thus to compulsory heterosexuality. While Nina is convincing in her ability to dance the white swan, Leroy insists that the more erotic, daring, and dangerous black swan is a stretch for the shy and immature Nina. To prove herself, Leroy demands that Nina not only be responsive to his sexual advances but likewise seduce him herself. The nature of Nina’s sexuality, which is clear for viewers of the film given her interest in Lily, is never a question for Leroy who demands her conformity to every marker of heterosexual femininity. In order to coax the seductive black swan out of her, Leroy assigns Nina to “touch herself.” This should not be interpreted as the demand for a mere one-time act of autoeroticism. Rather as a synecdoche for the ballet itself, Leroy’s assignment implies that the self-rumination characteristic of female narcissism is an essential practice for the achievement of ideal femininity. That Nina’s mental health becomes a consequence of the suffocating self-scrutiny this practice entails is no concern to Leroy who will also drive his
former principal dancer and lover, Beth, to attempt suicide by walking into an oncoming car after her forced retirement. Whatever sacrifices are necessary to acceding to the demands of the spectacular gaze of the audience and thus the further capital success of the New York City ballet as institution, but if the subjective damage Nina undergoes as a cost of her gender conformity is no concern to Leroy, the same cannot be said of Aronofsky’s film.

While some scholars have argued that Aronofsky’s film reduplicates Leroy’s sadism, this interpretation seems inadequate given the film’s constant exposure of the dialectical contrast between Nina’s aesthetic fulfillment of the ideal as spectacle and the physical and psychological damage her lived body suffers as a consequence. The film’s obsessive attention to Nina’s subjective damage is notable through its preoccupation with what has been described as body
horror.\textsuperscript{53} Although there are many instances in the film that could be referred to, one of the most concise examples is the film’s attention to the mutilation of Nina’s feet. After a particularly grueling rehearsal with Leroy, for example, Nina returns home to practice a series of pirouettes. Reflected in the mirror image, Nina’s pointe shoe is visibly perfect, but as she continues the series of pirouettes, her ankle cracks (an event which the film highlights in emphasizing the sound as well as through the ominous soundtrack) and she is forced to quit. Once she removes her pointe shoe, we now see the reality of her mutilated foot: her bleeding, swollen toes and loosened toenail (figures 4 and 5).

\textbf{Figure 3.3: The external presentation of Nina’s pointe shoe and the horrifically damaged foot it contains, Black Swan (Darren Aronofsky, 2010) screenshots}

Nina’s feet thus become a synecdoche for her damage as a whole, telegraphing the total psychological and physical breakdown she will experience by the film’s end, when having achieved the spectacular perfection she has strived for throughout, Nina no longer recognizes her mirror image as herself. Disassociating, Nina mistakes her reflection for her rival, Lily and stabs herself leading to her death at the end of her first *Swan Lake*, a performance she and Leroy both deem “perfect.”

![Figure 3.4: Nina’s death at the film’s end, Black Swan (Darren Aronofsky, 2010) screen shots](image)

Given this chapter’s investment in *Black Swan* as a poetics of selfie culture, my interest is ultimately less in the particularities of Nina’s mental illness, than in the film’s indictment of the mirror as its cause. Indeed, it seems that Aronofsky’s film utilizes the narrative of the ballet as an alibi to examine the mirror as an aesthetic structure while also attending to the subjective damage consequent of excessive self-mediation and its critical function in maintaining femininity as a disciplinary technology. As Laine has argued, Aronofksy is often attentive to the subjective plight of highly obsessive characters, whether the cause be drug use (*Requiem for a Dream*), fame (*The Wrestler*), or genius (*Pi*), and my reading of *Black Swan* is consistent with this focus. Underscored as an element of the mise-en-scène to the point of magnification and distortion, the mirror suggests itself as the form of the affect of Nina’s narcissism, but also its

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54 Laine, 6.
cause due to its suffocating predominance within Nina’s daily experience as a dancer for the New York City ballet. More importantly for our purposes, the actions that consume Nina’s experience as a ballet dancer—the practices and processes of self-mediation—are likewise those that characterize contemporary selfie culture.

3.4 ‘Cybertyping’ and Selfie Culture

As in selfie culture, the mirror functions in the ballet as a disciplinary tool of self-surveillance for the production of bodies in alignment with an idealized construction of white, youthful, heteronormative femininity. In this way, Black Swan is very akin to Amalia Ulman’s condemnation of the regressive gender politics of selfie culture in her performance for the Excellences and Perfections series (2014). Going so far as to feign a breast implantation surgery, in Excellences and Perfections, Ulman engages in a performative masquerade executed through a series of selfies shared to Instagram (figures 6 and 7). Relying on the responses of her followers, and thus duping them unknowingly into participating, Ulman reveals the libidinal investment in white cis-gender femininity. But the larger intention of the work as its execution within Instagram indicates is to expose how this libidinal investment fuels capital growth. Like Nina as the marketed “fresh face” of the New York city ballet, the female body that conforms to the ideal object of the male gaze bears the highest exchange value within contemporary selfie culture. But as with Ulman’s Excellences and Perfections series and its exposure of the body horror of augmentation surgery through selfies of Ulman’s bandaged breasts, Black Swan is not merely complicit with this culture since it equally reveals the subjective damage that the mirror leads to, damage that is more typically suppressed from view. Indeed, as portrayed through her death at the film’s end, Nina as an individual subject is inconsequential once she has been used up as an embodiment of this ideal. Although the female body is required to maintain the
continuity of the ideal, in its individuality it is ultimately unsatisfactory and expendable. The recent documentary *Restless Creature* (Linda Saffire and Adam Schelssinger 2016), which tracks the forced retirement of prima ballerina, Wendy Whelan from the New York City ballet, in fact documents the reality of this very process.

![Figure 3.5: Selections from Amalia Ulman’s Excellences and Perfections series documenting a feigned breast augmentation and shared to Instagram (2014), part 1](image)
Judith Butler’s acute assessment of the restrictions gender places on the subject and its crucial function in the process of ego formation resonates with Lauren Berlant’s concept of cruel optimism, which she defines as “a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility.”\(^{55}\) Like Butler’s description of the ego, Berlant emphasizes cruel optimism as an attachment both to the formal and to the normative that remains complicit with “the productive

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pace of capitalist normativity.”56 The ego, in other words, may be the first and most formative object in the chain of cruel optimism’s attachments. If as Berlant insists, a critique of political economy inherently accompanies analyses of cruel optimism, then currently we must be attentive to capitalism’s exploitation of narcissism in contemporary selfie culture. As Ibrahim argues, “What has been less evident in our discussion of user-generated content has been the exploitation of this intrinsic flaw in the human condition and capitalist modes of production engaging this trait.”57 While Baudry once similarly contended that mainstream cinema reproduced the jubilation of the mirror stage to create cinematic pleasure and thus to support itself as a capitalist enterprise, Ibrahim rightly points out how this process of exploitation has been exacerbated through the domestication and intimization of the screen through handheld and wearable technology such as the smartphone.58 Perversely then, the attachment to the screen that the cinema initially helped to cement now feeds our attachment to ourselves and vice versa. Or, as Ibrahim suggests, “henceforth, both the mirror and the screen became autoscopic devices in consuming the self . . . implicating the self at the heart of value creation in the digital economy.”59

As Butler asserts of the ego, the digital self is likewise interpellated via gender and race and towards the creation of value for capital. Galloway recognizes this as “cybertyping’, asserting that:

There is a new kind of speech online, the speech of the body, the codified value it produces when it is captured, massified, and scanned by systems of monetization . . . The difficulty is not simply that bodies must speak. The difficulty is that they must always speak as.”60

56 Ibid.
57 Ibrahim, 106; Ibrahim, however, does overlook the relation of her analysis to the earlier work of Baudry and apparatus theory.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibrahim, 105.
60 Galloway, 136-138.
As Alice Marwick observes of Instafame, or microcelebrity within Instagram, it can be difficult to assess the causal roots of an individual account’s popularity. In the case of one account Marwick tracks, Cayla Friesz, her Instafame seems earned from nothing more than her embodiment of an ideal form of an All-American youthful, white cis-gendered femininity. As her followers Twitter account fan page, @Freeezyfans indicates, they love her simply “Cause she’s gorgeoussss!!”61 But the increasing popularity and visibility of Instagram users such as Cayla Friesz’s frequent selfies are not merely innocuous; instead these can perpetuate an investment in a predominating and constructed ideal of white femininity and to the further production of selfie practices themselves in alignment with and thus further promoting this construction as an ideal.

Galloway argues that digital media of simulation have achieved a “purely idealized racial coding.”62 As in the ballet, one’s individuality is less significant than one’s use value towards the perpetuation of the simulated ideal. In fact, through digital media technology, the fulfillment of raced and gendered ideals need not even rely on embodied acts but are increasingly achievable through pure simulation, a fact that was exhibited through marketing firm, Mediakix experimental monetization of a wholly simulated Instagram personality, Alexa Rae as calibeachgirl1310. Utilizing a hired model and trafficking in utterly banal imagery of a youthful, white and blonde cis-gendered beach babe, the company was quickly able to monetize the account towards the selling of branded content (fig. 3.7).63 Similarly, if also with more disturbing ethical implications and socio-political overtones, rather than hire black models, British photographer, Cameron-James Wilson has created a digital simulation of an African model,

62 Galloway, 124.
Shudu. With over one hundred thousand followers, Shudu, similar to Mediakix’s calibeachgirl but this time not just experimentally, is being sold to brands through Wilson’s virtual modeling agency, “The Diggitals” (fig. 3.8).64

Writing for The New Yorker, Jiyang Fan has traced the further entrenchment of white, European femininity as a cosmetic ideal in China through the overwhelming popularity of Meitu photo-editing applications. Over one half of the selfies uploaded on Chinese social media applications are first filtered and cosmetically altered through photo-editing applications owned by the Meitu corporation, which also sells smartphones designed to take better selfies. As Fan explains, “In nine years, the company—whose motto is “To make the world a more beautiful place”—has literally transformed the face of China.”65 The company has done so through the perpetuation of what is known as wang hong lian, or “Internet celebrity face.” With the aid of Meitu’s photo editing applications, more and more Chinese social media users, and especially young women, are altering their selfies to appear more Westernized: the single eyelid fold common in China altered to a more Westernized double fold, the skin lightened, and the eyes widened—there is even a popular “mixed blood” filter that results in a Eurasian appearance. Meitu thus clearly illustrates the perpetuation and exacerbation of whiteness as an ideal within selfie culture (fig. 3.9). In her interviews with China’s Instafamous, Fan alludes to the subjective damage that investment in this ideal can lead to as well as the damage of narcissistic self-objectification which includes undergoing excessive plastic surgery in order to appear in person as much as possible like one’s filtered appearance in social media space, a problem that is now

similarly occurring in the United States with the increasing popularity of photo-editing applications and enhancements. Following these developments in contemporary selfie culture, it seems clear that race and gender can become as effectively abstracted through digital simulation as they earlier were in the color coding of the nineteenth-century ballet of *Swan Lake*, where white signified the purity of the Russian royal bloodline and blackness, a threat to its dissolution.

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*Marston, 695.*
When taken together, Christiansen’s and my analysis illustrate that the digital morph and the mirror are the two predominant and dueling poetic figures within Black Swan. As opposed to the original ballet, in Aronofsky’s film blackness becomes further associated with the extensive or metamorphological capacities of the digital’s expansive possibilities and whiteness with the
rigidity of the narcissistic ego. Although Christiansen alludes to his indebtedness to Shaviro’s theory of post-cinema in his reading of the digital morph as a figure of biopower, he seems unaware of how fully his analysis reproduces Shaviro’s of Corporate Cannibal (Nick Hooker 2008) (fig. 3.10) in his reliance on the coincidence of the expansive qualities of blackness and of the digital. As Alessandra Raengo has argued of Shaviro’s analysis of Corporate Cannibal and I would extend to Christiansen’s of the digital morph in Black Swan, the extensions and modulations of the digital image are in each case irrefutably connected to the affective and expressive capabilities of blackness. In the essay, “Blackness, Aesthetics, Liquidity,” Raengo articulates that the methodology of “liquid blackness” is grounded in the conviction that liquidity is an aesthetic form in which blackness is [frequently] encountered in contemporary visual and sonic culture.” Inspired by Harry Elam’s observation that blackness can travel—and be loved—on its own and apart from black people, as well as Franz Fanon’s attention to the often illegible distinction between the fact of blackness and the lived experience of the black man, as a reading strategy, liquid blackness remains attentive to this as both a productive and problematic gap, maintaining that it is the state of a certain liquidity which, as Raengo states, “grants access to blackness as a detachable and usable experience” and likewise as a poetic or allegorical form. Via their coincident appearance in the figure of the morphing figure of Nina as black swan (fig. 3.11), for example, Christiansen ascribes a series of modifiers to both blackness and the digital:

68 Shaviro, “Corporate Cannibal” in Post-Cinematic Affect, 11-34.
70 Raengo, “Blackness, Aesthetics, Liquidity.” Although the concept of “liquid blackness” as a reading strategy emerged in response to these forms of affective cooptation, as a pressure point and a critical diagnostic, it has expanded to both a research group and journal publication concerned with black aesthetic expression in contemporary visual and sonic culture that challenges traditional understandings of the Black Arts. For more, see liquidblackness.com.
the morph is affective, a figure of desire, of resistance, a “line of flight,” transgressive but also abject.\textsuperscript{71} In other words, the morph conveys the expansive potentialities of digital extension: potentialities that are both in Aronofsky’s film as well as in Christiansen’s analysis, as they earlier were in Shaviro’s, coded through reference to blackness.

\textbf{Figure 3.10:} Grace Jones in Corporate Cannibal (Nick Hooker 2008), screenshot

\textsuperscript{71} Christiansen, “Metamorphosis and Modulation,” n.p.
In *Black Swan*, as Galloway asserts of digital technology more generally, racial metaphorics are fully available and reproducible through the art of digital simulation. Gabrielle O’Brien incorrectly describes the finale of *Black Swan* as a “fade-to-black that takes on the subjectivity of the protagonist in a pure form . . . [when] she is finally perfect.” In fact, however, the finale is a fade-to-white. Although Nina experiments with the extensiveness of blackness, the perfection of her performance depends on her clinching the ending, dying as the white swan, Odette, a perfection she in fact achieves by erasing the line between performance and embodiment, sacrificing her lived body for pure representation. In so doing, Nina dies fully immersed in the mirror projection of the Imaginary and of female narcissism. As in contemporary selfie culture more broadly, in *Black Swan* the digital technology of the morph makes blackness available or

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72 O’Brien, 107.

*Figure 3.11: Nina transforms into the black swan via the digital morph, Black Swan (Darren Aronofsky 2010) screenshots*
“liquid” but also ultimately discardable in a manner that is resonant with Saidiya Hartman’s observation of the fungibility of blackness as a property of enjoyment in the legacy of slavery.73 Thus, of equal significance in *Black Swan*, is narcissism’s coding as white. As Richard Dyer has argued, whiteness as an ideal has been historically embodied in the figure of the “angelically, glowing white woman,” an ideal that he argues comes closest to its fulfillment in the Romantic ballet. As Dyer also notes “the language of this image remains powerful” today.74 *Black Swan*, of course, traffics in the image of idealized white femininity while also emphasizing the impossible expectations Leroy imposes on Nina to fulfill and dance the parts of the virginal white and erotic black swan, the contradictory desires Dyer indicates it has always been met with: “The Romantic ballet constructed a translucent, incorporeal image. Yet the ballerina was also always a flesh and blood woman showing her legs . . . The Romantic ballet produced both the most ethereal stage aesthetic and the sex show.”75 Dyer’s observation suggests that female attempts to embody whiteness as an ideal will necessarily meet with failure. As chapter four further explores, this inherent failure is a consequence of the Kantian conception of the transcendental subject as a mirror image of the white male. In the legacy of Kantian philosophy, sexual and racial difference remain relegated to oscillating demarcations of the condition of the object. Before pursuing this discussion further, however, we must first examine what *Black Swan* reveals to be an undeniable symptom of selfie culture’s investment in the subject form, a preoccupation with the face.

75 Ibid.
4 PLAY: NARCISSISM AS CREATIVE INVENTION

“Know your faces: it is the only way you will be able to dismantle them and draw your lines of flight.”—Deleuze & Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*

As a poetics of selfie culture, *Black Swan* is a film that is inevitably consumed with the face as spectacle. In a recent article on the face as technology, Zara Dinnen and Sam McBean insist that such a fascination with the face as “a new kind of digital object” is common in contemporary narrative cinema.1 Examining the fascination with Scarlett Johansson in a trilogy of science-fiction films including *Her* (Spike Jonze 2013), *Lucy* (Luc Besson 2014), and the object of chapter four, *Under the Skin* (Jonathan Glazer 2013), Dinnen and McBean argue that contemporary narrative cinema’s recent attempts to render the face as story offer a useful working through of the increasing technologizing of the face in digital culture.2 Pointing to the rise of both digital self-mediation and facial recognition surveillance, Dinnen and McBean mobilize visual artist Zach Blas’ concept of a “Global Face Culture.”3 This chapter further considers this observation, arguing that the contemporary context of digital networked media represents an intensification of the facializing regime. Whereas Deleuze and Guattari describe the delimitations of the face for the purposes of subjectification and signification, digital technologies of facial surveillance achieve a further alienation via the achievement of the digital facial image or DFI. As Dinnen and McBean describe citing Blas, “Facial recognition programs work by making over the face as co-ordinates, data; such systems ‘substitute the meaning of faces for a mathematics of faces.’”4 Dinnen and McBean astutely suggest that Scarlett

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1 Zara Dinnen and Sam McBean, “The Face as Technology,” *New Formations*, no. 93 (Summer 2018): 123.
2 Ibid.
4 Dinnen and McBean, 125 and Blas, n.p.
Johansson’s science-fiction films convey the anxieties surrounding this technologizing of the human face. They are likewise alert to the problematic use of Johansson’s white femininity as a repeated and empty signifier of the human in these films. However, in their exclusive attention to the science fiction genre and to questions of the posthuman, they overlook how the digital object of the face is also a significant form of capital in the post-web 2.0 era. As this chapter will show, Nicolas Winding Refn’s 2016 film, The Neon Demon approaches the increasing facialization of the post web 2.0 era and selfie culture precisely as intensifications of capitalism. At the same time, the film is equally alert to the interpellation of white femininity as the ideal form or face of this process.

Although Deleuze radically revises the psychoanalytic theory of narcissism in Difference and Repetition, affirming it as a form of creative invention, with the concept of faciality he and Guattari later advance in A Thousand Plateaus, he pursues the critique of the ideological effect of the ego as surface projection. As we shall see, these projects do not exist in isolation; rather, Deleuze’s affirmation of narcissism as a form of play necessarily relies on overcoming the representational regime engendered through facialization. As Deleuze and Guattari argue, it is through faces that the twin processes of subjectification and signification come to colonize the self. After examining contemporary selfie culture as an intensification of the facializing regime through an analysis of The Neon Demon, this chapter also considers Deleuze’s affirmation of the play of narcissism as an opening for alternative modes of self-assertion in social media and photo-sharing sites: modes that escape the face.

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5 Ibid, 128-133.
6 Dinnen and McBean, 133.
8 Deleuze and Guattari, “Year Zero: Faciality.”
4.1 The Face is a Horror Story

With the concept of faciality, Deleuze and Guattari theorize signification and subjectification as twin procedures. In becoming a speaking subject, the self is alienated from the immediacy of affective experience via the abstract machine of faciality. Laying claim to the self, this abstract machine produces a surface, a face intended for restricted communicability and representational thinking. Drawing from both Freud’s theory of the ego as well as the Lacanian Symbolic, the theory of faciality addresses the formative and instrumentalizing effects that signification places on the self. Whereas Lacan describes the ego’s initial emergence in the Imaginary mirror stage, Deleuze and Guattari insist more forcefully on the operation of signification prior to this. In other words, the child must already recognize faces to proceed with the mirror stage. Additionally, the theory of faciality as an abstract machine, like Deleuze and Guattari’s project more generally, removes emphasis from the Oedipal structure of psychoanalysis and its preoccupation with the unique history of the analysand towards a concern with the social and the discursive operation of power therein. As they insist, “Choices are guided by faces, elements are organized around faces: a common grammar is never separable from a facial education.” And yet they are equally attentive to the social-historical contingencies of power’s operations, again differentiating from psychoanalysis in insisting that faciality is not a foregone destiny of human experience but rather one that emerges via a certain social-historical milieu: one that they associate primarily with both despotism and the emergence of Christianity. For the first time, putting a face to its singular monotheistic God, the binary system of the

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9 Ibid, 164.
11 Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, 179.
abstract machine of faciality emerges with Western Christianity which codifies bodies and produces faces as they conform or differ from the idealized white male image of Christ as the Pantocrator. The Christian era likewise unleashes the highly productive visual regime we associate with modernity, which is thus itself inherently hierarchized by gender and racial difference:

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\ldots \text{given a concrete face the machine judges which it passes or not.}\ldots \text{At every moment, the machine rejects faces that do not conform, or seem suspicious.}\ldots \text{At any rate, you’ve been recognized, the abstract machine has you inscribed in its overall grid.}\]

Deleuze and Guattari equally stress the intensification of faciality under capitalism. Although it is not explicitly mapped out, one can assume Deleuze and Guattari associate the alienation of labor under capitalism to signification and subjectification as functions of faciality. Equally, one may also think of the facialization of the money form itself and commodity fetishism. It is here, in particular, that faciality proves useful as a critical matrix for the analysis of selfie culture. While Yasmin Ibrahim has importantly emphasized the exploitation of narcissism for capital growth with the rise of the smartphone, the forward-facing camera, and other wearables, narcissism alone fails to fully address the other predominant mode of consumption engendered by these technologies: that is, the manner in which objects of all kinds are facialized and thus made exchangeable via smartphone application software. As Deleuze allows, the operations of facialization are not restricted to human subjects. A case in point is illustrated in the repetitive framing mechanism employed within photo-sharing and social networking sites. Although as users we may upload the content of our choosing, it inevitably

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12 Ibid; Herzog, 69.
13 Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, 177.
14 Ibid, 182.
15 Ibrahim, “Coalescing the Mirror and the Screen: Consuming the ‘Self’ Online.”
16 Deleuze, Cinema I, 63-67.
must conform to the facializing frame of these applications, which thereby render anything and everything exchangeable and profitable as content. In such an environment, it hardly seems surprising that the human face has itself become a predominant object of exchange. Rather, I would suggest that the selfie is metonymic of the larger operations of facialization at work in post web 2.0 digital technologies.

Winding Refn’s The Neon Demon is a salient film of selfie culture, given its exploration of both the libidinal and capitalist investment in the face characteristic of the contemporary moment. Describing The Neon Demon as a “film for the future” to Cahiers du Cinéma upon its debut at the Cannes film festival, Winding Refn uses tropes of the horror genre to create a cautionary tale concerning the increasing facialization of neoliberal visual culture.\(^{17}\) While he describes it somewhat differently as a film concerned about the increasing viciousness of beauty culture and its predation on youth, it is clear from the experience of the film that both of these are undergirded by an investment in the face, in this case namely the face of Jesse (Elle Fanning), a 16-year old ingenue newly arrived in Los Angeles and beginning a modeling career.\(^{18}\)

The film begins ambiguously with an arresting medium shot of Jesse wearing a metallic blue mini dress, splayed lifelessly across a divan with a pool of blood at her feet, dripping from a wound at her neck. From this opening shot which transitions into a close-up (fig. 4.1), one may be led to believe that her throat has been slit, and she is dying (particularly given the gratuitously violent ending of Winding Refn’s previous film, Only God Forgives (2013)). But in fact, as the camera pans out into a long shot, revealing the presence of set lights and the flash of a camera lens, it becomes clear that Jesse is posing for a photo shoot. Although she aspires to become a


\(^{18}\) Ibid.
fashion model, this shoot is only a favor for her friend, Dean (Karl Glusman), himself an entry-level photographer. The film’s opening shot foreshadows the film’s end, when after having achieved fast success in the Los Angeles fashion industry, Jesse is murdered by a trio of envious competitors. One of these, the makeup artist Ruby (Jena Malone), who is also Jesse’s scorned lover is introduced in the film’s opening scene. Ruby, intuiting that Jesse is a minor and new to L.A., takes her under her wing, inviting her to a hip party later that night and helping her to break into the fashion scene’s tight milieu. As Ruby insists, Jesse’s youth and inexperience, and her “whole deer in the headlights look” is exactly what the industry is looking for. It is thus established early on in the film that youth is a commodity that Jesse possesses, as other girls have before her, but one that is impossible to retain.

![Figure 4.1: The film’s spectacular first image of Jesse on a modeling shoot, The Neon Demon (Nicolas Winding Refn 2016), screenshot](image)

Winding Refn describes *The Neon Demon* as charting a journey from innocence to narcissism. During the first half of the film, Jesse remains innocent, largely unaware of either her physical beauty or its power over others. This is not to say, however, that she is entirely unaware of its potential value. As she tells Dean early in the film, she was inspired to come to L.A. because even though she never had a talent, she was always pretty and “you can make money off of pretty.” But it is still clear from the film’s narrative that both the full effect of her

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beauty as well as its potential exchange value surpass her understanding. Jesse’s arrival in L.A. is met by all she encounters variously with astonishment, lust, envy but always desire. As Cahiers du Cinéma’s Cyril Béghin rightly points out, The Neon Demon knowingly recalls the narrative of David Lynch’s Mulholland Drive (2001) and Betty’s (Naomi Watts) fantasy of being spotted as the It girl in Hollywood as well as its famous tag line, “this is the girl.” But in altering the narrative context from the milieu of Hollywood film to that of the fashion industry—exchanging the actress for the model—Refn’s film speaks more directly to the post web-2.0 cultural moment: whereas Betty still had to put in a convincing audition in order to land the part, Jesse need only show up and be seen. Her rise to success in the L.A. fashion scene thus recalls the notional “famous for being famous,” of well-known celebrities of the post-web 2.0 such as the Kardashian-Jenners. Indeed, Winding Refn cites as inspirational for the character of Jesse witnessing his own young daughter and the manipulative influence of digital media consumption on both her self-conception and sense of reality, its predation on both her youth and her femininity. Such predations are personified in the film through the people surrounding Jesse, all of whom literally want a piece of her as is made clear by the film’s horror ending when she is murdered and cannibalized by Ruby and her two modeling rivals, Gigi (Bella Heathcote) and Sarah (Abbey Lee), in a final attempt to extract and consume whatever it is that makes her beauty unique and unrivalled.

The action of The Neon Demon largely consists of a series of encounters between Jesse and various figures from the fashion industry: other models, fashion designers, photographers, and agents as her journey progresses from the new girl to fashion’s hottest commodity. Since the film works within the parameters of the teen horror genre, her success culminates with her

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21 Béghin and Elliott, “Un Film Pour L’avenir: Entretien Avec Nicolas Winding Refn.”
infection by the titular “neon demon,” which lures her through the attraction of a self-seduction in an elaborate and highly stylized mirrored scene around the one-hour mark, culminating in her descent from innocence into what Winding Refn describes as a ‘total’ and we might add monstrous narcissism.”

Through the appearance of the neon demon (a moniker itself suggestive of digital mediation), Jesse, like Ovid’s Narcissus, becomes exposed to and for the first time fully aware of the intoxication and value of her own appearance, which is again predominately a matter of the face. The arc of this journey is narratively sparse—little cause is established for the appearance of the neon demon or its targeting of Jesse (perhaps due to Winding Refn’s budget constraints)—instead as with Black Swan, the film seems predominately interested in relaying aesthetically the drama of the narcissistic self-encounter. The Neon Demon envisions narcissism as an experience of autoeroticism and self-seduction, and the images of this sequence unfailingly recall the emergence of the forward-facing camera, given its avowed object of critique, the post-web 2.0.

Lasting over five minutes in length, the sequence begins just after Jesse is chosen to close the runway show for fashion designer, Robert Sarno (played by an uncredited Alessandro Nivola), a coup for such a new model. After the close of the show, the demon appears suddenly to Jesse in a symbolic form (an inverted triangle composed of four smaller ones). The film then cuts from the fashion show discontinuously to an unknown and darkly lit interior environment where the short mini-dress Jesse modeled for Sarno has suddenly transformed into a long gown. Here, Jesse reappears in long shot, silhouetted and emerging from the center of a blue-lit diamond shaped doorway that echoes the form of the neon demon. The sequence unfolds without diegetic sound, featuring only the non-diegetic soundtrack of the at-turns propulsive and

22 Ibid.
scintillating score of Cliff Martinez, which as Stephane Déorme notes, itself functions as a sort of narcissistic and emotional double for Jesse throughout the film, which is generally low on dialogue.\textsuperscript{23} Also the composer for Harmony Korine’s \textit{Springbreakers} (2012), Martinez’ similar score here recalls Korine’s earlier narrative of Millennial solipsism as well as its similar audiovisual aesthetics.\textsuperscript{24}

While Jesse is at first seen a long distance from the blue-glowing neon demon, she begins to walk towards it and also towards the viewer, reiterating the earlier image of the fashion runway. As she approaches it more closely, entering into a filmic closeup, the formerly symbolic demon has transformed into a multidimensional crystal, reflecting Jesse’s image back to her on three of its faces. Initially frightening Jesse, these reflections together seem to possess an agency and will of their own as they seem to move forward towards her, not conforming to her own limited movements. As she watches her doppelgangers’ fold into one another, the blue crystal disappears and is replaced by a pink one in which Jesse will now become utterly seduced by her reflected image (figs. 4.2 & 4.3). As Jesse observes, an autoerotic seduction unfolds as her central double kisses and caresses the surfaces of her other reflections. After this, the neon demon returns to its symbolic form, the inverted triangle now illuminated in pink and red, recalling traditional symbols for femininity. As this extended five-minute sequence closes, Jesse exits this unknown interior through a pinkly-lit triangular doorway, after which she will have completed her journey into ‘total’ narcissism, and in the remainder of the film, before her death,

\textsuperscript{24} For more on \textit{Springbreakers} see Jenny Gunn, “Deleuze, Žižek, Spring Breakers and the Question of Ethics in Late Capitalism,” \textit{Film Philosophy}, no. 22 (Winter 2018): 95–113.
navigates the LA fashion world with a new and dangerous awareness of the power of her own image.

Figure 4.2: Jesse’s narcissistic transformation by the titular Neon Demon, The Neon Demon (Nicolas Winding Refn 2016), screenshots

Figure 4.3: Jesse’s self-seduction at the behest of the Neon Demon (left), The Neon Demon (Nicolas Winding Refn 2016), screenshots

As my analysis of this unquestionably abstract central sequence suggests, *The Neon Demon* is a film largely devoid of narrative continuity but nevertheless intent on cultivating mood recalling sources as various as music video, Giallo horror, and fashions advertising.\(^{25}\) The impact of digital networked social media and its commodification of the self is not limited to the story but is likewise salient in the film aesthetics, which Winding Refn has described as inspired by the segmentation of YouTube viewing practices as well as his experience as a director of advertising campaigns for perfumes.\(^{26}\) While as an allegory of neoliberal beauty culture’s predations the film may be entirely heavy-handed, it is aesthetically astute in its reproduction of the affective investment in the face characteristic of contemporary selfie culture. In its emphasis on filmic affect, *The Neon Demon* employs a variety of aesthetic devices to make Jesse’s beauty

\(^{25}\) Béghin and Elliott, “Un Film Pour L’avenir: Entretien Avec Nicolas Winding Refn.”
\(^{26}\) Ibid.
palpable: lighting effects such as lens flares, colored filters, and strobe effects, manipulated frame rates, suspenseful diegetic silences, and of course its pointed reliance on Martinez’ seductive score but beyond all of this is its predominating reliance on and paradoxical usage of close-ups.27

Whether fashion photographers, seducers, or rivals, everyone that Jesse encounters is intoxicated by her appearance and particularly her face. Like the world of its diegesis, The Neon Demon’s aesthetic organization is consumed with the spectacle of Jesse’s face, which the film prioritizes through its tendency towards close-ups at the expense of fetishistic shots of her body. The film’s preferred shot is by far the medium close-up. As opposed to the standard or extreme close-up, the choice of the wide-angle medium close-up renders a sort of repetitive flatness to images of Jesse that is resonant with both the fashion magazine spread and also with social media and photo-sharing sites such as Instagram which have recently taken on so much importance for fashion marketing (figs. 4.4 & 4.5).

Figure 4.4: Medium Close-Up of Jesse on a modeling audition, The Neon Demon (Nicolas Winding Refn 2016), screenshot

More interestingly, however, is the manner in which *The Neon Demon*’s close-ups break from their traditional function in Hollywood cinema to reveal character emotion and interiority and instead are concerned only with external appearance. As Winding Refn states of his character, Jesse “appears, that’s all.”

Tellingly in casting Elle Fanning as Jesse, he consulted only her fashion modeling work, not her previous films, concerned primarily with her ability to pose. Indeed, the shots of Fanning as Jesse in the film (which consistent with Narcisscinema more generally, play off her paratextual celebrity as a fashion icon and brand ambassador for Tiffany and L’Oréal) unfold as a series of highly stylized poses.

Given his avowed inspiration in his daughter’s digital second life and a You-Tube aesthetic, we might view Winding Refn’s underdeveloped and critically-panned horror narrative as a mere scaffolding for a far more devoted aesthetic project: that is, to render the phantasmatic unreality of what Alexander Galloway deems the “spectacle playground” of the post-web 2.0 a filmic reality. As such, I would suggest we consider *The Neon Demon* as another instance of the post-cinematic, particularly in its re-inscription of the close-up.

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28 Béghin and Elliott, “Un Film Pour L’avenir: Entretien Avec Nicolas Winding Refn,” 35.
29 Ibid.
30 Galloway, 2.
For Deleuze the filmic close-up holds the unique achievement of the affection-image.\textsuperscript{31} In the affection image, the face is removed from its significant and subjective function and instead becomes a register of the affective encounter. In the close-up the face is a receptive plate while its micro-movements register an affective reaction. When the close-up accedes to the affection-image, the face becomes removed from its individuating function within the action-oriented filmic narrative. Although the affection-image is rare in the movement-image of classical Hollywood cinema, where instead faciality presides, it is more frequently achieved in the time-image of the modern art cinema (Deleuze gives the example of Bergman’s \textit{Persona} (1966)).\textsuperscript{32} As Greg Flaxman and Elena Oxman argue, “if the face is caught up in or captured by a politics, the politics of the face constitutes a project to dismantle its determinations.”\textsuperscript{33} According to Deleuze, cinema possesses this radical potentiality. Although it is not necessarily intersubjective, the affection-image always registers a relation, that is, the effects of an encounter with an external object or other. Action-image close-ups are also equally relational even if their significance is restricted to the representational meaning of the filmic narrative. In \textit{The Neon Demon}, on the other hand, we experience a close-up of a third kind. Here, the close-ups of Jesse fail to register any external relations. This is precisely her allure: the allure that Freud attributed to the spectacle of the narcissistic woman, and as will be discussed in the next chapter, that OOP reiterates in its conception of the object.\textsuperscript{34} As Winding Refn states, \textit{The Neon Demon} traces Jesse on a journey from innocence to narcissism, but in fact, as emotional states these are not at all distant.\textsuperscript{35} In either case, the innocent or the narcissistic face is free from the blemishes of external relation; it

\textsuperscript{31} Deleuze, \textit{Cinema 1}, 63-67.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid; Herzog, 63-74.
\textsuperscript{33} Flaxman and Oxman, 49.
\textsuperscript{34} Freud, “On Narcissism: An Introduction.”
\textsuperscript{35} Bégin and Elliott, “Un Film Pour L’avenir: Entretien Avec Nicolas Winding Refn,” 36.
remains a blank canvas (fig. 4.6). The a-relational close-ups that we witness in *The Neon Demon* thus seem fully post-cinematic. Metonymic of the digital screen more generally, Jesse’s face is a scannable but impenetrable surface. Returning to Deleuze and Guattari’s observation that faciality increases in the capitalist era, we might consider the emergence of the post-cinematic close-up in the context of contemporary selfie culture a climactic if concerning development.

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 4.6**: Jesse’s explicit treatment as blank canvas as her nude body is spread with gold paint by fashion photographer, Jack, *The Neon Demon* (Nicolas Winding Refn 2016), screenshot

The concept of faciality is alert to the dangers of self-alienation, and the potential loss of the immanence of our affective experience to the expressive demands of the signifying subject. As the post-cinematic close-ups of *The Neon Demon* aptly convey, the face of Jesse is bereft of interiority or intentional expressivity. Its beauty is precisely its blankness seemingly indicative of its utter availability for external use and an inexhaustible exchange value. And yet, as in the contemporary context more generally, the commodification of the self visible in the *Neon Demon* is inflected by a neoliberal ethos of competition. Whereas a Benjaminian analysis would insist that commodification effaces aura, the issue is not so simple when considering the human as commodity. As previously discussed in chapter two, in the visual culture of the selfie, there are faces like Jesse’s that do indeed sell better, and these most often conform if not to the ideal image of a youthful white femininity then to other gendered and racialized stereotypes or what
Galloway deems cybertypes. The entrepreneuring self of neoliberalism is often not merely a commodity in this context but a willing participant and competitor in its attention economy. *The Neon Demon* is importantly alert to the rigged and manipulative cruelty of this system. No matter how much entrepreneurism of the physical self models Gigi and Sarah pursue (in the drastic form of plastic surgery and other extreme interventions) they can no longer compete with Jesse’s youth, leading them ultimately to murder her by the film’s end; here, competition is a zero-sum game. In addition, although Jesse is invariably desired, the stimulus of others’ attraction to her is entirely selfish. In the fashion milieu in which the film is set, Jesse is nothing more or less to others than a source of value to exploit. Whereas in an earlier era and film such as Max Ophuls’ *Lola Montès* (1955), this process of exploitation would have been approached as a matter of misrecognition, reaffirming the humanity of the woman beneath her objectification, in the horror story of *The Neon Demon*, female commodification is a brutal, indisputable and also consensual reality. This is ostensibly the future that Winding-Refn’s film wants to warn us against but signs of which are already visible in the contemporary context of the post-web 2.0.

The persistence of female objectification in selfie culture creates a critical opening for us to examine the accessibility of self-assertion within selfie culture. While the innovation of the forward-facing camera may seem to offer the potential for the disruption of the male gaze—granting women control over their own representations—its emergence as a smartphone application always already undermines its feminist politics. The production of selfies may *feel* liberating for women and other minorities, but their predominant use within corporate photo-sharing and social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook merely exploit these good feelings for their own capital growth. This is to reiterate media theorist, Douglas Rushkoff’s

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36 Galloway, *The Interface Effect.*
important observation that using these platforms makes us their product not their customers.\footnote{Olivia Solon, “You Are Facebook’s Product, Not Customer,” \textit{Wired UK}, September 21, 2011, https://www.wired.co.uk/article/doug-rushkoff-hello-etsy.} In other words, we are the content (and data) Facebook and Instagram sell to advertisers. With his 2014 \textit{New Portraits} series, Richard Prince highlights this process of exploitation, underscoring the synergy between social media’s profit model and his own method as an appropriation artist. Like Winding-Refn with \textit{The Neon Demon}, Prince pursues this project in the form of an immanent critique. Infamously creating a series of canvas photo-prints from screen grabs taken from Instagram, which he later exhibited at the Gagosian gallery and sold for tens of thousands of dollars, Richard Prince’s artistic practice in the “New Portraits” embodies the capitalist exploitation that fuels social media’s financial success. The more Prince’s appropriations for the series were met with both highly-publicized outrage and litigation for copyright infringement, the more marked the contrast seems to the relative inattention of users to social media corporations’ similar ills. Importantly also, like \textit{The Neon Demon}, Prince’s canvas prints highlight post-web 2.0’s investment in whiteness as an aesthetics (his enlargements drawing attention to the white field of Instagram’s platform design) as well as to social media’s exploitation of difference.

Take for example photographer Donald Graham, whose work was appropriated for Prince’s “New Portraits” exhibition. Graham filed suit against Prince for the unaccredited appropriation of his photo, “Rastafarian Smoking a Joint, Jamaica” which was included as one of Prince’s “new portraits (fig. 4.7).”\footnote{Shane Ferro, “Authorship Is Quickly Dying, and Artist Richard Prince Is in Legal Trouble Again,” \textit{Business Insider}, accessed April 29, 2015, http://www.businessinsider.com/authorship-is-dead-and-richard-prince-is-in-legal-trouble-again-2015-2.} Although it is ostensibly possible Prince did not know that the photo was Graham’s—given that Prince appropriated it from Instagram user Jay Kirton aka


rastajay92 who had himself re-grammed it unaccredited from indigoochild’s unaccredited upload—Prince’s appropriation seems intentionally provocative given his recent famed legal win on appeal against another photographer, Patrick Cariou. Cariou had sued Prince for appropriating photographs from his photo publication, Yes Rasta for Prince’s Canal Zone exhibition at the Gagosian in 2008, and the suit received a huge amount of media attention. Here, Prince’s appropriations of photographs of Rastafarians seem intended to mimic and perhaps critique the larger and more insidious appropriation of Rastafarian culture in commercial advertising. It is precisely this form of shallow use of Rastafarian culture that rastajay92 also performed in originally sharing Graham’s photo as is suggested by his comment beneath: Real Bongo Myan a Real Congo Nyah followed by an emoticon of a raised fist, a gesture of protest and solidarity originally associated with the Black Panthers, but which here functions only as a shallow cliché for individualism.

Figure 4.7: Richard Prince, New Portraits Installation View with Graham’s photo at center, Gagosian Gallery 2014

Prince’s series also exposes social media’s capitalization of the female face through his appropriations of the selfies of Instagram users such as nightcoregirl. Prince’s appropriation of nightcoregirl’s selfie (fig. 4.8) was featured as the frontispiece for the exhibition via its placement on the Gagosian webpage. As such, the image was frequently copied and re-circulated in various announcements and reviews of the exhibition. Yet, as was the case with all of the subjects of the thirty-eight portraits initially featured at the Gagosian, the owner of the nightcoregirl account, was never contacted for permission to use her image nor was she compensated in any form. \(^{40}\) Nightcoregirl’s tangential relation to her own image is suggestive of two defining aspects of labor in the increasingly precarious conditions of late capitalism: self-branding and worker flexibility. The greatest commonality across all of Prince’s Instagram portraits is arguably the notional self-branding that they seem to promote. For example, the actual individual owner behind the nightcoregirl account is a D.J. and like many other Instagram users with public profiles, her account doubles as a promotional vehicle for her work. The line between leisure and business thus blurs indistinguishably as to the social function of her Instagram account and so many others like her, be they small time D.J.s or famous celebrities. Social media self-promotion is now a requisite component of professional development in a wide-variety of fields and is more often than not also not compensated. Yet faces such as nightcoregirl’s are the content that Instagram relies on to exist and uses to attract advertisers. As a subsidiary of the publicly traded social media giant, Facebook, Instagram’s current estimated worth is $100 billion. \(^{41}\)

\(^{40}\) Although Prince did send nightcoregirl a gift: a smaller print he had made of another of another Instagram photo of her in s&m bondage costuming, which she, in turn, posted to her Instagram feed.

In his final works of the early 1990s, Deleuze issues a series of warnings regarding the singular force of marketing in late capitalism. In “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” for example, he observes that, “this is no longer a capitalism for production but for the product, which is to say, for being sold or marketed.”\textsuperscript{42} While in \textit{What Is Philosophy?}, he and Guattari regret that, “the only events are exhibitions and the only concepts are products that can be sold.”\textsuperscript{43} Needless to say these observations read eerie in the context of the marketing and commodification of the self, characteristic of selfie culture. Although in these late works Deleuze and Guattari may not explicitly augur the totalizing logic of the market overtaking the self, the earlier concept of faciality and their observation regarding its intensification under capitalism certainly point towards this conclusion. That being said, their philosophies committed to


rhizomatic connections that undo hierarchies of power, Deleuze and Guattari never give in to
cynicism. Instead they insist that true creation is still possible, the province not of marketers but
rather of artists and philosophers:

But the concept is not given, it is created; it is to be created. It is not formed but
posits itself in itself—it is a self-positing. Creation and self-positing mutually imply
each other because what is truly created, from the living being to the work of art,
thereby enjoys a self-positing of itself . . . What depends on a free creative activity
is also that which, independently and necessarily, posits itself in itself: the most
subjective becomes the most objective.44

As we shall see, Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy of creativity offers a model by which the
“Global Face Culture” characteristic of the post-web 2.0 era might potentially be hacked, in
which self-assertion in social media spaces is no longer tied to faciality and self-representation
but rather becomes a ‘self-positing’ through the playfulness of the creative act. We can explore
this idea in more detail by turning to Deleuze’s theory of narcissism as creative invention as
described in *Difference and Repetition*.

4.2 Life Artists

According to Freudian psychoanalysis, there is an established link between pathological
narcissism and schizophrenia. The lack of external object relations characteristic of the most
acute form of narcissism correlates with its symptoms including delusions, megalomania,
antisocial behavior and paranoia.45 In light of Deleuze and Guattari’s infamous critique of
psychoanalysis through the figure of the schizophrenic, it may not come as a surprise then that
for Deleuze, narcissism is equally redeemable.46 Deleuze’s most sustained engagement with the
question of narcissism occurs in *Difference and Repetition* seeming in hindsight to lay the

44 Ibid, 11.
groundwork for his and Guattari’s later proclamation of the schizophrenic as a creative figure.\footnote{Deleuze, “Repetition for Itself;” see also Dorothea Olkowski, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” in Gilles Deleuze and the Ruin of Representation (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999): 147-176.}

In this earlier if no less determined disagreement with the viewpoint of Freudian psychoanalysis, Deleuze insists that narcissism is a state of self-satisfaction or pleasure that is triggered through our relationship to external objects of contemplation. Like Derrida’s second-person narcissism, Deleuze’s theory thus rejects the vision of pathological narcissism as proffered by Freud.\footnote{Derrida, “Narcissism,” accessed June 13, 2018, http://hydra.humanities.uci.edu/derrida/narc.html; Lippit, Cinema without Reflection: Jacques Derrida’s Echopoiesis and Narcissim Adrift.} In so doing, the Deleuzian model of narcissism counters the lay conception of narcissism as vanity and self-centeredness in a manner that is productive for the analysis of contemporary selfie culture.

Deleuze’s revision of narcissism occurs in\textit{ Difference and Repetition} through his engagement with the question of the pleasure principle. Drawing from the influence of Henri Bergson, Deleuze views time as a pure duration within which the self emerges as a particular contraction, a living present.\footnote{Deleuze, \textit{Difference and Repetition}, 70; Henri Bergson, \textit{Matter and Memory}, trans. N. M. Paul and W. S. Palmer, Reissue edition (New York: Zone Books, 1990).} This notional self is sustained through habit, or the first passive synthesis, through which the perceiving self encounters the world; in short for Deleuze, the self is\textit{ defined as} contemplation, and it is only through the contemplation of external objects that self-knowledge becomes available.\footnote{Deleuze, \textit{Difference and Repetition}, 73.} Already, we can see Deleuze’s alterations to the Freudian paradigm: whereas Freud and later Lacan describe narcissism as proceeding and indeed grounding external relationality and intersubjectivity, Deleuze insists that it is our contemplation of external objects which first trigger narcissistic pleasure in passive synthesis. Following Freud, Deleuze agrees that pleasure is the outcome of the binding of excitations; however, for Deleuze, pleasure is a narcissistic self-satisfaction that results from the contemplation of external objects
The self, defined as habit of contemplation, thus proves that repetition surpasses pleasure as principle:

If we consider narcissism to be not a contemplation of oneself but the fulfillment of a self-image through the contemplation of something else: the eye or the seeing ego is filled with an image of itself in contemplating the excitation that it binds. It produces itself or ‘draws itself’ from what it contemplates. The effect of binding is to install the pleasure principle and renders it possible . . . Repetition in habit or the passive synthesis of binding is thus ‘beyond’ the pleasure principle.  

In addition to rejecting the predominant model of narcissism as a captivation with one’s own image, Deleuze’s reevaluation likewise undermines the determinative effect of the global ego. Rather, with every new encounter with a contemplative object, Deleuze insists that a new “larval” subject or provisional ego emerges in the id. In other words, there are as many egos inhabiting the self as there are objects of contemplation. Although that is not to say that all objects are created equal. Reiterating Lacan’s object a, Deleuze equation the “object equals x,” is likewise alert to virtual objects of contemplation. With the appearance of the virtual object, the self makes contact with the pure past, or the ontological unconscious. The virtual object can emerge in two ways; like the object a, Deleuze insists that the virtual object can become “stuck” to real objects of contemplation (Deleuze offers as an example the series of stones in Beckett’s Molloy) or alternatively may emerge in reminiscence or involuntary memory, appearing “underneath representation” (as the madeleine episode reveals Combray in Proust’s In Search of Lost Time). The contemplation of the virtual object triggers a more intensive contemplation in the second passive synthesis, which due to its contact with the pure past, is also more intensively
pleasurable. Thus, although Deleuze admits of the resemblance of his concept of the virtual object to Lacan’s object a, their affects are entirely dissimilar.\(^\text{56}\) Whereas for Lacan, the object a if unavoidable, represents desire as lack and stymies external object relations and intersubjectivity, for Deleuze the emergence of the virtual object fulfills the self via its connection to the ontological unconscious that exceeds it.\(^\text{57}\) As such, the virtual object for Deleuze reconfigures the death drive from its negative association with an inevitable return to inanimate matter as the desire for and recognition of duration itself, that is, the pure past which exceeds the self and the present as a particular contraction. Similarly, the fleeting quality of the virtual object and its fickle nature, unlike the object a, is not something to be mourned as a figure for desire as lack but rather attests to the inherent playfulness of difference in repetition, a playfulness that inspires creative invention.\(^\text{58}\)

As an example, Dorothea Olkowski offers the fort-da game.\(^\text{59}\) Freud’s observation of little Ernst playing with the reel concludes that the act is a symbolic substitution for the lack of the real mother, a substitution by which the child attains satisfaction via a symbolic authority to compensate for the uncontrollable comings and goings of the mother.\(^\text{60}\) But for Deleuze, Ernst’s symbolic game with the reel attests to the immanent presence of the virtual object in it. Whereas the virtual object first coincided with the mother herself, now it has stuck to the reel: precipitating Ernst’s play.\(^\text{61}\) It must additionally be emphasized that for Deleuze as opposed to Freud, the virtual object never coincides with any final first object that can be traced in the

\(^{56}\) Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 101.

\(^{57}\) Ibid, 101-103.

\(^{58}\) Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 103-104.

\(^{59}\) Olkowski, 157-158.


\(^{61}\) Olkowski, 157-158.
analysand’s past such as the mother: rather the mother is just one of the many iterations of the object = x. As Olkowski explains, Deleuze’s revision of narcissism as a form of creative invention marks a stark contrast with the Freudian paradigm:

What is important in this reading is that, rather than attributing a sense of moral degradation to the character of the patient, narcissism is the condition of creative invention, a condition that transforms the child from a pathetic, revengeful ‘patient’ into a life artist, a creative and reflective spirit.

While the play of difference in repetition, the game of the object = x, occurs for all of us, it is according to Deleuze, the artist who truly traces the path of the virtual object, building through her creative practice a genealogy of its appearances.

It is important to underscore how Deleuze’s model of narcissism as creative invention radically revises how we may view the notion of self-assertion in digital social media and photo-sharing spaces. From such a point of view, the narcissism of the passive syntheses is testified in creative practices that document the quirks of our individual object relations as determined through the aleatory play of the virtual object. The question of what narcissism looks like in social media spaces is thus entirely reconfigured in a manner that seems highly productive towards overcoming the myriad limitations and ethical compromises coincident with current notions of digital self-assertion and existing technologies of self-mediation as have been previously discussed. Although the examples are potentially innumerable, I offer as a starting point the creative practice of fashion designer, Batsheva Hay and the invention of the Batsheva dress as documented in her Instagram practice through the #batshevadress account.

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62 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 104-105.
63 Olkowski, 157.
64 Ibid.
In a profile for *The New Yorker* magazine, Hay recounts her inadvertent reinvention as a fashion designer after leaving a career as a high-profile attorney.65 Always interested in vintage clothing, the New York-based Hay was particularly attached to a 1980s Laura Ashley mid-corduroy dress with a floral print. Unable to locate a replacement when the fabric became too worn for wear under the arm, Hay commissioned a copy in the garment district. Working off her original dress and vintage fabrics purchased from eBay, she produced a small run of modest midi dresses echoing the Laura Ashley that she loved but with a few changes: a more pronounced waist line, a higher neck, a few ruffles, a higher collar and puffier sleeve. Intended initially only for her own wardrobe, Batsheva’s retro-style dresses began to attract attention in her Upper West side neighborhood: friends and neighbors wanted one too. Such attention soon inspired the birth of the Batsheva dress line, the return of the Prairie style to contemporary fashion, and the birth of the “Urban Prairie Girl,” or U.P.G.66 The Batsheva style belies Hay’s attachment to a certain high-femme-modest aesthetic associated variously with the Amish, the Victorians, and pioneer women but perhaps especially Orthodox Jewish dress. Although Hay and her husband, fashion photographer Alexei Ray are both modern Orthodox, Hay’s re-appropriation of conservative modesty culture is not wholly sincere but intentionally provocative. Hay cites as additional inspirations, for example, Courtney Love’s “kinder-whore” aesthetic as well as the knowingly modest attire of Cindy Sherman’s housewife persona from the *Film Stills* series. Often paired with combat boots or vintage running shoes, as described in *The New York Times*, the Batsheva dress knowingly channels “conflicting forces”: balancing “a genuine nostalgia for Laura Ashley, Gunne Sax, and ‘Little House on the Prairie’ . . . along with a sort of ‘re-appropriation and

parody’ of stereotypically feminine silhouettes and styles.” In so doing, the Batsheva dress has been resonant in the MeToo era as an antidote to the self-objectification and sexualization characteristic of post-feminism. Indeed, the prairie style that the Bathseva dress recalls was last popular during the 1970s and second-wave feminism.

Undermining the representational thinking of psychoanalysis, as previously stated, Deleuze rejects that the repetition compulsion is linked to any repressed final term. Although Hay attests to the inspiration for the Batsheva dress in a dream of her mother, this does not indicate that the later production of the Batsheva dress line should be finally traced back to the loss of the mother per se, that is, read as symptom. Rather, via the second passive synthesis of reminiscence, the dream of her mother inspired the creative invention of the Batsheva dress line, as Hay describes: “I had this dream of my mother, of how she was at her wedding and in the seventies, when she was wearing all these beautiful prairie dresses. I was almost making clothing for the dream of my mother that I had back then.” Although the virtual object might have first stuck to Batsheva’s mother, it later broke off, attaching to the prairie dress she frequently wore in Hay’s childhood, and later inspiring her own creative practice as a fashion designer. While the difference may be subtle, Deleuze undoes the psychoanalytic association of the repetition compulsion with lack and through an emphasis on the play of difference, instead, underscores its real productivity.

Deleuze’s revision of the psychoanalytic theory of narcissism offers a model for the radical rethinking of what practices of self-assertion look like in social media spaces. The Batsheva dress line reflects the difference in repetition characteristic of the narcissistic play of

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67 Ibid.
68 Malle, “Pioneer Women Are Roaming the City.”
69 Batsheva Hay as quoted in Russell, “Batsheva Hay Rethinks the Traditions of Feminine Dress.”
creative invention as Deleuze describes. For Hay, the virtual object clearly “stuck,” (to use Deleuze’s term) in a certain modest dress pattern and so inspired the invention of a fashion line. As Chloe Malle describes, the Batsheva dress plays off “a visual library” for women born in the late 1970 and early 1980s recalling variously the party dresses of their childhood, their mothers, and the costumes of beloved storybook characters. But what is more interesting for our purposes is how the official #Batsheva dress Instagram account itself functions as just such a visual library, testifying to the play of difference in repetition. As such, Batsheva Hay’s Instagram practice stands out as more narcissistic, if in the Deleuzian sense, than any selfie practice could possibly compete with.

The #Batsheva dress Instagram account asserts Hay’s unique identity through its meticulous accumulation of the play of difference in repetition of the object = x, in this case, attached to a particular style of feminine dress. Rather than using the account merely as a marketing platform for her own designs, inventively, Hay also uses the account to create a virtual scrapbook of images that inspired the Batsheva dress design. This accumulative project is also open to her Instagram followers who can collaborate by tagging the account in order to submit their own found objects and nostalgic attachments. The resulting virtual scrapbook includes a diversity of objects, but each of which recall the look of the Batsheva line: these include variously Batsheva’s own fashion spreads and photos of Hay modeling her designs, but also childhood photographs, film and television stills, vintage magazine ads and illustrations, Julia Margaret Cameron and Cindy Sherman photographs, and an Alice Neel painting (fig. 4.9). Unlike that of the typical fashion house, the feel of the #Batsheva dress account is thus both collaborative and aleatory. Featuring nary a selfie, #Batsheva dress revels in the play of

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70 Malle, “Pioneer Women Are Roaming the City.”
difference in repetition, while in the process, revealing Hay to her audience through the rumination of her narcissistic attachment to the virtual object and its myriad appearances in endless reiterations of a modest, vintage dress pattern. As such, and under the paradigm of a Deleuzian narcissism, it disrupts the predominant model of self-assertion within digital media spaces as the reproduction of the face, productively undermining the Symbolic and particularly Capitalist overcodings of the subject characteristic of Winding Refn’s *The Neon Demon* as well as contemporary digital culture. As Deleuze encourages, the self does not return as reflection but emerges in contemplation. One must invent the self otherwise.

Recalling Derrida’s insistence that narcissism is foundational for intersubjective relationality, Deleuze explains how narcissism informs our attachments through the aleatory movement of the virtual object. For Deleuze, an object becomes intentional through this very form of play. But as will be further discussed in chapter four, the theory of the human as object and of objects as withdrawn espoused in the recent object-oriented philosophy expands upon Freud’s nihilistic account of pathological narcissism as schizophrenia. Furthermore, in its
insistence on framing the human as a singular object, object-oriented philosophy relegates realities of racial and sexual difference to the status of what Fred Moten deems the non-intended, or the thingly, in a way that complicates Deleuze’s affirmation of narcissism. For if as Deleuze proposes, narcissism is what informs our intentional relations to objects, as we shall see, it is also what determines those we fail to intend.

5 ALLURE: NARCISSISM AND THE OBJECT

5.1 Selfie Culture and Object-Oriented Philosophy

Perhaps the most radical iteration yet of narcissism in critical theory is manifested in the recent object-oriented philosophy (OOP hereafter). OOP’s claims are useful as a diagnostic tool for examining modes of being such as selfie culture’s object-oriented subjectivity, which de-prioritizes external relations and is instead preoccupied with self-relation—that is, the affective experience of oneself as image and as object. Similar to selfie culture, OOP registers a change in sentiment toward the condition of objecthood or, more specifically for our purposes, toward the thinking of the self, or the subject, as an object.

As a branch of speculative realism, OOP emerged somewhat organically from a series of blogged conversations and debates shared by young, contemporary philosophers that most notably included Graham Harman, Levi Bryant, and Ian Bogost.¹ Similar to speculative realism, OOP rejects the anti-realism of post-structuralist and postmodern philosophy, more summarily referred to as “the linguistic turn,” which acknowledges human thought as a proper, structural limit.² In response to twenty-first-century developments such as global climate change and the increasingly blurred boundaries between humans and technology, speculative realism rejects the

² Ibid, 2-5.
notion that the subject-object, or human-world binary, which philosopher Quentin Meillasoux
deems *correlationism*, should strictly delimit philosophical speculation. As Meillasoux states,
speculative realism rejects “the idea according to which we only ever have access to the
correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the
other.” What distinguishes object-oriented philosophy from speculative realism more generally,
however, is its investment in the integrity of objects and its refusal, unlike other philosophers of
becoming such as Bergson, Whitehead, or Deleuze, to reduce objects to their relations. Instead,
in formulating OOP, Harman, and later Bryant, Bogost, and their followers were inspired by the
implications of Heidegger’s tool-analysis, maintaining that there is a withdrawn dimension to
any object that exceeds its relations and remains integral despite them. To explain this
fundamental premise, Harman develops a taxonomy of the quadruple object, which postulates
that any given object is divided between its sensuous or manifest qualities and a real or
withdrawn dimension.

Interestingly, while Levi Bryant recognizes that OOP’s split object is not unlike the split
subject of psychoanalysis, divided between the withdrawn unconscious and the apparent ego,
Harman analogizes his concept of the object to the Freudian dream, which is divided between the
latent and manifest (read: real and sensuous). Furthermore, in the concluding passages of *The
Quadruple Object*, Harman explicitly links his metaphysics of object relations to Freudian
psychoanalysis as metaphysics of consciousness, particularly in the aspirations of its scope, and

3 Bryant et al, 3.
4 Ibid.
5 Bryant et al, 9.
6 Ibid, 8.
7 Harman, *The Quadruple Object*.
8 Ibid; Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, 281.
has elsewhere identified Freud as one of his intellectual heroes.\(^9\) Similarly, Levi Bryant was trained as a psychoanalyst, identifies as a “resolute Lacanian,” and in *The Democracy of Objects* utilizes Lacan’s graphs of sexuation as a model for contrasting anti-realist and realist ontologies in the explication of his philosophy of object-relations, which he has deemed *onticology*.\(^10\) More generally, however, the indebtedness of OOP’s theory of the object to the psychoanalytic theory of the subject remains implicit.

According to OOP, psychoanalysis as a theory of human subjectivity can only represent a sub-category of a more macroscopic system. But as a practical matter, the logic of object relations as elaborated in OOP draws primarily on the psychoanalytic concept of narcissism, and in so doing, establishes a new and more radical extension of the narcissistic relation that curiously echoes the salience of self-reflective technologies in today’s selfie culture. And yet neither Harman nor Bryant admit that the psychoanalytic concept of narcissism is an influence on their theories. While Harman’s *The Quadruple Object*’s overlooks addressing narcissism, Bryant addresses it in conjunction with his rejection of human exceptionality, analogizing the correlationism of the linguistic turn to a form of narcissism, which over-emphasizes the human dimensions of being: language, culture, mortality, and so on, at the expense of objects.\(^11\)

Although Bryant does not acknowledge that narcissism is a foundational idea within OOP, this relationship becomes apparent if we consider OOP’s emphasis on the impossibility of true object relations.

While Lacan relies on the concept of the *objet a* to explain the difficulty of intersubjective relations, OOP similarly and perhaps more drastically insists on the fundamental


\(^11\) Ibid, 257-258.
impossibility of unmediated inter-objective relations tout court. For example, Harman argues that in any given encounter, there is only one perceiving real object encountering an entirely sensuous realm, any sense of which can only be garnered through metaphor, or what Bryant refers to as translation. In other words, there is no meeting between real objects, which instead remain withdrawn from one another. Similarly, Freud insists that the pathological narcissist is untreatable through the methods of psychoanalysis, given his utter independence from external object relations. According to the terms of Freudian psychoanalysis, this withdrawal from the external world can make an individual psychotic. Following this logic, OOP’s object world could be characterized as populated by free-floating psychotics, or what we may otherwise identify as pathologically narcissistic objects. Additionally, and more consistent with the psychoanalytic theory of narcissism, as indicated by Harman’s concept of allure, OOP’s proposed failure of external relationality corresponds to a libidinal fixation on self-relation.

In The Democracy of Objects, Levi Bryant seems convinced that rejecting correlationism and disavowing human exceptionalism is a strong enough gesture to escape accusations of narcissism. However, as psychoanalytic theory and particularly Lacan’s mirror stage proves, narcissism, like OOP more generally, is preoccupied with the image (imago) of the subject as an object. Tellingly, Harman’s concept of allure prioritizes the object’s relation to itself as the aesthetic instance par excellence, which is also the moment of the object’s existence that the philosopher most effusively imagines. According to Harman, the aesthetic instance of allure is the object-state in which, once removed from the controlling perception of any other external real object, the sensuous qualities of an object begin to orbit around their own withdrawn real

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12 Lacan, “Of the Gaze as Objet Petit a.”
13 Harman; Bryant.
object and in the process become charged with its essence. While Harman’s choice of the word *allure* may be suggestive enough of the privilege that he grants to this instance of self-relation, it seems worth quoting him at length to further illustrate this point:

[a] real object and sensual qualities will meet only when fused. In such cases the sensual qualities are stripped from their current sensual overlord and appear to orbit a withdrawn real object, an invisible sun bending them to its will. The very invisibility of the object makes it impossible to compress the object together with its sensual qualities into a bland purée, as often happens in boring everyday experience. This fusion occurs for example in artworks of every sort… Instead of the direct sort of contact that we have with sensual objects, there is an allusion to the silent object in the depths that becomes vaguely fused with its legion of sensual qualities. As a general term for the fusion of withdrawn real objects with accessible surface qualities, we can use the term *allure*.

As this pivotal passage of *The Quadruple Object* illustrates, the self-relation, or the event of allure, is privileged as quintessentially aesthetic in Harman’s ontology.

OOP affectively communicates its investment in the failure of relationality through the rhetorical device of the list, or what Ian Bogost refers to as the “Latour litany” (38-39). Mimicking Bruno Latour’s Actor Network Theory as a stylistic device, OOP appropriates the aesthetic of the list, in which a variety of objects democratically coexist but only limitedly interact. Latour’s Actor Network Theory deprioritizes human, social, or institutional agency, proposing instead a network of influence composed of objects, technologies, ideas, and a variety of other human and non-human components, legitimizing the premise of a flat ontology, that “all objects equally exist although they don’t exist equally.” Underlining the philosophical conviction of a true democracy of objects and the belief that the human is only different in degree and not in kind from any other object, OOP’s lists are often populated by both the

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15 Harman, 103-104.  
16 Ibid.  
17 Bogost, 38-39.  
mundane and the exceptional. Objects emphasized in the list of Bogost’s *Alien Phenomenology* include DVD players, automobiles, kudzu, and a variety of foodstuffs forming what he refers to as a flat “compendium of collocation.” 19 Such said flatness, along with the implication that object interactions are strictly sensuous and thus of limited effect, are the two pillars that most often roil OOP’s critics. But as Alessandra Raengo has persuasively implied through her analysis of OOP’s oversight of racial blackness as an object, perhaps its failings are not due as much to their so-called democracy of objects but more specifically to their construction of the human as a singular object. 20 OOP’s proclamation that “all objects equally exist but don’t exist equally” rings particularly shallow when considering the human itself. In the legacy of the commodification of the human in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, as Raengo argues, blackness is both the object that already problematizes the distinction between subjects and objects but likewise irrevocably shatters any wholeness of Being as the literature of Afro-Pessimism insists:

. . . how does an OOP (or OOO) orient itself toward an object it has not yet understood and has even less welcomed into the ontological fold? Black, as the sign of the New World slave, is precisely this object: the object that already challenges any centrality of the human and, beyond that, the “object” from whose standpoint anthropocentrism reveals its imbrication with and dependence on white supremacy. 21

Tellingly, Harman has attested in interviews that the concept of withdrawal indeed signifies a limit to the effects of politics. 22 When it comes to the human, the reverse Platonism which grounds OOP implies a set of disturbing and retroactive ramifications, implying that institutions such as slavery and colonialism’s effects—and more broadly that of history itself—are strictly limited, merely rebounding off the withdrawn essences of their human objects. When

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19 Bogost, 38.
20 Raengo, “Black Matters.”
21 Ibid, 248.
22 Geoghegan, *Graham Harman’s Object Lesson*. 
considering blackness as an object in particular, Harman’s concept of withdrawal likewise takes
on a disturbing resonance with surplus value: no matter how intensively blackness may be mined
in the sensuous realm, an essential portion of it nevertheless exists in remainder as real object. As
critiques of OOP such as Raengo’s and Katherine Behar’s object-oriented feminism show,
realities of gender and racial difference and histories of racial and gendered oppression
problematic OOP’s proposal of the human as a singular object and its libidinal investment in a
narcissistic objectification of the human as a singular category. As Amy Herzog similarly
argues, “blackness and femininity haunt the boundary between the human and the nonhuman and
are the core to the often myriad and often violent exchanges that take place there.”

5.2 Under the Skin’s Human-Object(s) Lesson

Herzog’s crucial reminder is made in the context of her analysis of Jonathan Glazer’s
2013 film, Under the Skin. Invoking the figure of both the prostitute and the slave, Herzog
argues that the hybrid protagonist of Under the Skin (Scarlet Johansson), less a character than a
tool, recalls the already slippery distinctions between subjects and objects in the context of
commodification and how “particular forms of difference are foundational to that economy.”
Indeed, Under the Skin’s narrative of an alien fallen to Earth exhibits precisely why OOP’s
foundational conception of the human as a singular object is so unacceptable. Less invested in
reproducing a rote science-fiction narrative concerning an extraterrestrial threat to the survival of
humanity, Glazer’s Under the Skin exploits the device of the Female’s nonhuman gaze to
examine the violent stratifications of human life. As Lucas Hildebrand astutely suggests, Under
the Skin thus seems invested in exploring what Alexander Weheliye refers to as “racialized

23 Katherine Behar, ed., Object-Oriented Feminism (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2016).
Review of Contemporary Media, no. 57 (Fall 2016): n.p.
25 Ibid.
assemblages,” which he defines as a “set of sociopolitical processes that discipline humanity into full humans, not quite humans, and nonhumans.” Undergirding any reading of Under the Skin which prioritizes examinations of race, as Hildebrand’s does, is the film’s preoccupation with visual metaphors of race through its contrasting mise-en-scène design which is alternately predominately white and predominately black. In particular, it is the spatial construction of the Female’s harvesting site as a black and highly tactile uterine pool, an extension of her alien body which is later revealed to be itself equally black, that points to the film’s racial investments. The repeated appearance of this black pool is a crucial figure indicating Under the Skin’s exploration via racial metaphorics of two fantasies of the human as object which precede, unconsciously inform, and inevitably problematize OOP’s narcissistic ruminations on the human as object. These are the fantasy of the female object of desire—the prostitute—and secondly, the violent imposition of objecthood and fungibility on black life with chattel slavery. In the guise of the white object of desire, the Female is ideal as long as she comports herself under the rubrics of female objectification, prioritizing her availability to male desire; her security, however, is always precarious. When no longer the employee of her alien overlords and no longer protected by the armor of her white van, the Female quickly becomes persecuted with the threat of sexual violence. Wandering alone at the film’s end, she eventually meets sexual violence in the forest when she refuses the advances of a logger. In its blackness, first as figured by the pool, the Alien beneath the disguise of the white Female is treated both as a threat to the stability of the human and later threatened—met with violence in the film’s excruciating final scene, burned by the logger and a companion once her white, feminine surface is revealed as a disguise masking a

black, alien body. While Hildebrand remains concerned that perhaps *Under the Skin* problematically employs metaphors of blackness to figure the nonhuman, I would argue that given the film’s ending, which intentionally explores sexual and racial violence from the position of the victim through the person of the Female, that *Under the Skin* succeeds as an anti-racist film.\(^{27}\) *Under the Skin* foregrounds the persistence of racialized assemblages such as Weheliye describes as fundamentally human, thus problematizing OOP’s belief that human relations could be construed as flat.

Although aesthetically complex and narratively oblique, the plot of *Under the Skin* based on the science-fiction novel by Michel Faber is simple enough. An alien visits Earth in order to harvest human life, the necessary substance of an alien technological development. While in the novel, human life is used as a food source, in the film its usefulness is much more obscurely presented; human insides are liquified and processed to produce a glowing red light. What has not been adequately addressed by current literature on the film, however, is that the narrative of *Under the Skin* is very much about the experience of passing. Once on Earth, the Alien masquerades as a simulation of the human female, the embodiment of femininity as a form of technology as described by Teresa de Lauretis.\(^{28}\) While most criticism of *Under the Skin* focuses on the alien’s passing as human or at best as female such as Elena Gorfinkel’s attentive analysis of the film’s gender dynamics, less attention has been paid to how the alien passes as both white and female, on how the lure of female objectification and an ideal form of cis-gendered feminine appearance is exploited by the Female’s alien overlords as a method to seduce and lure the victims necessary for their technological developments.\(^{29}\) If, indeed, it is human flesh which

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\(^{27}\) Lucas Hildebrand, “On the Matter of Blackness in Under the Skin.”

\(^{28}\) De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction*.

sustains the alien technological needs, it is important to note that the Female’s victims are uniformly white and male. In fact, the only male victim spared by the alien is deformed with neurofibromatosis while women and minorities are utterly discounted by the Female’s transactional gaze as she prowls the streets of Glasgow for victims.

Readings of *Under the Skin* which like OOP approach the human as a singular category overlook the film’s various reminders of the ways that the racial, gender, and ethnic other is excluded from this status. To this point, Hildebrand helpfully recalls Stuart Hall’s description of the more expansive notion of black in the British context which signifies “the other” in a larger and more general sense than it does in the U.S. context where it is very specifically tethered to African-American identity.\(^30\) By the film’s end, the alien has herself experienced this exclusion in multiple ways. Dropped to Earth in Scotland, after assuming a woman’s likeness, the Female roams the streets in a white van trolling for victims. Two of her alien superiors, who have assumed white male bodies, occasionally check in on her to monitor her progress in harvesting victims. In the guise of the seductive Scarlett Johansson, the Female is able to easily lure men out of nightclubs back to her home for what they assume to be sex but will in fact be their end. In the film’s three seduction and harvesting sequences, the dynamics of the gaze are destabilized in a manner that is particularly resonant in the context of contemporary selfie culture and its own interrogation of the politics of gazing. While her male victims (and likely as well filmic audiences) at first assume the reliability of the power dynamics of the male gaze and the intentions of female seduction for male pleasure, once they have entered the Female’s home, it becomes clear that the dynamics of the male gaze and of female objectification are employed as a source of power, exploited towards the alien’s ultimate ends of human harvesting.

\(^{30}\) Hildebrand, n.p.
To begin her ritualistic killings, the Female puts on the pretense of sexual seduction, performing the initial operations of a strip tease. While her male victims are captivated by her performance and distracted by their arousal, they fail to notice the simultaneously occurring total transformation of the Female’s home into an alien space. Although her home appears ordinary on the exterior, inside all laws of space are suspended as it becomes all at once an extensive and empty black space that is also reflective and absorptive. Seemingly tactile and sticky, this emergent black stuff which is an extension of the alien’s being admits its human victims like another amniotic fluid (fig. 5.1). In it, its victims remain suspended until their insides are sufficiently liquified and their skins eventually sloughed off. After they are incubated in the Female’s black pool, their insides are filtered down a chute and processed to produce the alien’s finished technological product.

As Alessandra Raengo has persuasively suggested, the image of the Female’s black amniotic pool, closely recalls Richard Wilson’s 20:50 (1987), a permanent installation piece at the Saatchi gallery (fig. 5.2).31 As a rectangular platform filled with sump oil, 20:50 similarly confounds opposites and spatial stabilities as the black pool in Under the Skin. As described on Saatchi’s website:

Viewed from the entrance platform 20:50 appeared as a holographic field: simultaneously a polished floor, infinite clear pool, an expansive and indefinable virtual space that clinically absorbs and mirrors the gallery architecture. The room was in fact entirely flooded in oil.

Through this altered perspective 20:50’s phantasmical aura is enhanced, amplifying the disorientating and mesmerising experience of the space, and further confounding physical logic.32

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31 Alessandra Raengo, “The Stakes of Black Liquidity” (American Comparative Literature Association Experimental Conference (ACL(x)), Penn State University, 2016).
Like its precursor, Richard Wilson’s 20:50, the figure of the pool in *Under the Skin* at first seems to allow for fantasies of a material blackness seemingly abstracted from the body and painful histories of racial subjugation and racialization. But, as was explored in chapter two’s discussion of the digital morph in *Black Swan* as well as of Nick Hooker’s *Corporate Cannibal*,...
digital effects technologies frequently rely on the metaphors of blackness to fuel fantasies of digital immersiveness. As Raengo describes in reference to *Corporate Cannibal*, blackness stands in for the affective materiality that is otherwise absent in the digital effect’s immaterial image. That is, blackness is mobilized and appropriated to redouble the digital’s illusion of affective and material presence. Relatedly, Raengo observes how circulating images of Wilson’s 20:50 sublimate the experience of the installation itself which is reportedly overwhelmingly olfactory, given that the sump oil used to create the work emanates a horrible stench that is rarely remarked on in reviews of the work. This act of sublimation resembles that of Shaviro’s in his analysis of *Corporate Cannibal* for the conceptualization of post-cinematic affect: in which the affective capacities he attaches to *Corporate Cannibal*’s (black) digital image are detached from the pro-filmiic performance of Grace Jones. In light of these abstractions, Raengo worries that, “Both works provoke or emphasize some attachment to black matter, and to what it seems to do for the non-black subject who feels entitled to extract it, seize it, and purpose it for its own goals.” But while *Under the Skin* certainly flirts with the same risk, it is more politically invested: ultimately tethering its exploration of a seemingly figural blackness to a critique of racialized assemblages. As in the case of Shaviro’s analysis of the *Corporate Cannibal* video, that the film’s racial critique is often overlooked seems less a fault of *Under the Skin* than of its literature, which often focuses on the film’s gender politics at the expense of an intersectional analysis of race.

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34 Ibid.
As previously mentioned, of no small significance to *Under the Skin*’s investment in questions of racialized assemblages is its ongoing examination of the experience of passing. Although the risks of passing are not highly dramatized, nevertheless the Female’s success as a procurer of male flesh relies on a convincing performance of white femininity. The journey begins with the acquirement of a female body, which only with the film’s end do we learn is in fact merely the external surface of a white female skin. Of equal importance is the alien’s attainment of human communication and gestural skills, which are also very gendered, particularly geared towards flirtation and seduction. Although it is not often noted in literature on the film, the opening sequence that culminates in the emergence of a human eye, features on the soundtrack the utterances of a female voice as it masters the vowel and consonant sounds of human (presumably English) speech. Once skin, sight, and speech are achieved, the Female acquires clothing, stripping them off a female corpse that reads as a former sex worker, brought to her by her alien superior. That the Female’s passing as white is equal if not of greater significance to her gendered performance is underscored in this sequence’s mise-en-scène, a brightly lit white, but otherwise wholly abstract and empty space. In the following sequence, the Female’s first actions on Earth are a visit to a shopping mall (an astute albeit brief allusion to the entrenchment of capitalism in human life) where both she and the audience observe the rituals of human femininity. Again, underscoring de Lauretis’ understanding of femininity as technology as well as Judith Butler’s analysis of gender as performative, it is clear that from the alien perspective of the Female, gender is less something innate or indelibly human than learned and adapted via a series of adornments: clothing, hair style, make-up, nails, and so on.37 That the

Female’s successful passing relies on a necessary participation in these rituals of femininity is signaled through the image of her application of lipstick in a vanity mirror (fig. 5.3).

![Figure 5.3: The Female applying lipstick, Under the Skin (Jonathan Glazer, 2013) screenshot](image)

The difficulty of passing is affectively explored as it unfolds in the film over a series of stumbling blocks that the Female encounters during her time on Earth. While in the film’s initial scenes, she succeeds in blending in without any difficulties, it soon becomes apparent that her lack of human empathy and particularly her lack of a motherly instinct threaten her assimilation. These fundamentally gendered lacks first surface when the Female attempts to pick up a surfer on the beach and witnesses a couple drowning in rip tides. From her blank expression, it is clear she feels no empathy for them nor their newly orphaned toddler, who she leaves abandoned and sobbing on the beach. As Ara Osterweil observes, the character of the Female is thus somewhat radical for narrative cinema, a woman with desire but utterly lacking care.38 Perhaps for this reason, she avoids the companionship of other women altogether. Other than in the shopping mall, the Female is only once seen among other women when she is unintentionally swept into a crowd of them on the way to a night club, where she has come seeking another male prey. She earlier hides in her van to avoid meeting fellow female company, whose companionship seems to

38 Osterweil, 47.
frighten her. The smooth operation of the Female’s passing is most publicly threatened, however, by a literal misstep, when she trips and falls on a busy Glasgow sidewalk. This fall, shot on location in Glasgow by largely hidden Go Pro cameras, which as Herzog describes will resurface paratextually as the “ScarJo Falling Down” meme, threatens the alien’s assimilation since she has not learned the appropriate human response to tripping, which is of course to quickly get back up.³⁹ Instead, gawked at by locals, she remains still and flat on the ground, facing the pavement until she is aided to her feet by a crowd of passing men, tense and fearful that this trip up has exposed her alien nature.

Risks of the Female’s potential exposure intensify, particularly in the film’s second half once she abandons her task as the procurer and attempts to hide from her superiors: that is, once she attempts full assimilation. Her decision to more fully pursue a human life is triggered in a pivotal scene brought on by her procurement of a male victim disfigured by neurofibromatosis. Ostensibly unable to register his deformity, the Female picks him up in her van, after offering him a ride to the local grocery. She thus pursues her usual seduction routine which by this time, audiences have witnessed on three separate occasions. Although he enters the van, hooded to mask his appearance, with her coaxing he removes the hood and she rotely coos at him as she is programmed to do. While viewers, like The Deformed Man himself, initially register the cruelty of her repeating her script in this context—asking him if he lives alone, why he doesn’t have a girlfriend, and why he shops at night—nevertheless with her kindness and her touch she eventually convinces him of her sincerity and is able to bring him back to her house where the harvesting procedure should occur. Once he enters her home and the disorienting space of the

black pool again emerges in preparation, however, something pivotal seems to occur for the Female.

Here, for the first time, we are given a glimpse of the alien’s real identity, of the black body that is hidden beneath her white female skin (figs. 5.4 & 5.5). Although the scene is oblique, and audiences may not connect this figure’s appearance to the person of the Female, its emergence here seems in response to the company of the disfigured man. Recalling the affinity Linda Williams has argued exists between the woman and the monster in their otherness in the traditional horror genre, in this scene, the alien comes to know her blackness as otherness through an identification with deformity. The emergence of her self-awareness is thus coupled with an acknowledgment of how otherness is figured as monstrosity in the human context. Significantly, and recalling Shawn Michelle Smith’s analysis of the difficulty of the mirror stage for the racially black subject, this instance of mirrored identification is proceeded and repressed by an alternative mirror stage, in which the Alien has retreated from the pool, newly immersed in the admiration of her disguised, surface appearance as the Female in a mirrored reflection from the window of her house’s door.

41 Smith, “Envisioning Race.”
Figure 5.4: The Alien’s first reveal during the harvesting of The Deformed Man, Under the Skin (Jonathan Glazer 2013) screenshot

Figure 5.5: A frontal shot of the Alien dissolves into a profile of the Female, Under the Skin (Jonathan Glazer 2013) screenshot

Figure 5.6: The Female’s first mirror stage, Under the Skin (Jonathan Glazer 2013) screenshot
The only trace that remains of her former identification with The Deformed Man, or any acknowledgment of her own identity newly understood as “monstrous,” is the revelation in the following scene that she has let him go, sparing him from harvesting. The Deformed Man is next seen nude and wandering the grass fields behind a residential neighborhood where he will quickly be re-captured by her superior. By this time, however, the Female will be unable to complete his harvesting. She has escaped to live as human.

That to live as human means simultaneously to retreat from any identification with blackness is powerfully signaled in the scene of her initial escape. Spurred on by her desired identification with her mirror reflection as the Female over and above her felt identification with The Deformed Man, the Female’s escape is symbolized as a retreat into the folds of whiteness. She escapes from her home and the space of the black pool into the literal envelopment of a dense, white Scotland fog (fig. 5.7).

And yet, whiteness proves little refuge as the precarity of the Female’s passing only intensifies in the film’s final half. No longer protected by her routine as procurer, once she attempts to more fully experience the daily life of the human she quickly realizes her embodied differences are
insurmountable. As Elena Gorfinkel argues, these differences are signaled by her attempts at engaging in the primary physical pleasures of human life, eating and fucking. Although programmed with the capabilities for human sight and speech, she has apparently not been granted the capabilities of human taste or digestion. Seated at a suburban restaurant, her eyes desire a delectable piece of German chocolate cake, but in bringing the fork to her mouth, she discovers that she cannot ingest it. As she coughs the cake up violently and spits it out, she makes a spectacle of herself, and her humanity again faces scrutiny, recalling her earlier public fall.

Leaving the restaurant in fear of exposure, she wanders haphazardly, eventually boarding a bus where her lack of a coat on such a cold, wet day concerns the other passengers. Her seeming disorientation triggers the affection of an older gentleman, The Quiet Man, who takes her to his home and shelters her overnight. His genuine and chivalrous care for her seems to comfort her and fuel her further identification with her surface appearance. The first night she stays over with The Quiet Man, we witness an intensification of the mirror stage as the Female admires and explores the reflection of her nude female body in a full-length mirror (fig. 5.8).

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42 Gorfinkel, “Sex, Sensation and Nonhuman Interiority in ‘Under the Skin.’”
Figure 5.8: The Female's second mirror stage, Under the Skin (Jonathan Glazer 2013), screenshot

The following night, however, her assimilation is again threatened when she attempts to engage in intercourse with him only to learn that she was also not fitted with female sexual organs. With this realization, and the “outing” of what we may identify as her transgender identity to her companion, she is forced to flee again. Wandering into the Scotland forest, she meets a logger who questions and later follows her to a shelter where he attempts to sexually violate her while she sleeps. Although she runs away, he eventually finds her again where the escalation of his violent attack causes her external skin to rip, revealing her black alien skin beneath. Peeling off the outer, white skin, the two gazes of the Alien and the Female meet, locked in a look of mutual sympathy and identification (fig. 5.9). As the Alien holds the Female’s face in her hands for one last rumination, she is doused in gasoline by the logger and a companion who have returned to burn and destroy any trace of her alien blackness. The film closes with a shot of the Alien’s final disappearance in a trail of ephemeral black smoke and ash, which eventually commingles unrecognizably with the newly falling snow.
5.3 Blackness as Thing and the Limits of Phenomenology

The narrative of the Female’s failed passing in *Under the Skin* reiterates Sara Ahmed’s elaboration of whiteness as a phenomenology. Ahmed describes how one’s orientation towards the world is the effect of racialization. Drawing on Franz Fanon’s “The Lived Experience of the Black Man,” Ahmed shows how the corporeal schema elaborated by phenomenology which “attends to the tactile, vestibular kinesthetic, and visual character of embodied reality,” is an embodied form of white privilege. As she argues, the habitual being in the world that phenomenology describes cannot account for the embodied experience of the black individual, which is instead mediated by the racial-epidermal schema. Whiteness as an orientation relies on a habitual coherence of the object world. As Ahmed describes, the presence of non-white body disorients this coherence. In order for whiteness to be maintained as a mode of habit and form of familial privilege, it is necessary to put the object world back in place, a project that includes the *fixing* in place of non-white subjects as objects. This is precisely the experience that Fanon describes. While he possesses the habitual, corporeal modes of desire suggested by

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phenomenology (he focuses as an example on the embodied actions of smoking), these are mediated by the racial-epidermal schema and an all-pervasive awareness of how his actions may be perceived to disorient the environs of white colonialism. His description of a small child’s exclamation, “Look a Negro!,” illustrates this moment of fixing, his designation as an object, through which whiteness regains and maintains its orientation and privilege.\(^{45}\) Similarly, while the escalating slippages of the Female’s passing in Under the Skin threaten her acceptance into the human fold, the emergence of her blackness precipitates once and for all such a fixing, through the action of a violent burning inevitably recalling Fanon’s rumination that, “All this whiteness burns me to a cinder.”\(^{46}\) Ahmed argues that, “When we talk about a ‘sea of whiteness’ or ‘white space’ we are talking about the repetition of the passing by of some bodies and not others,” and here it would seem remiss not to reiterate how the Female’s trans body marks her as doubly disorienting within the normative space of white supremacy.\(^{47}\)

In the “Lived Experience of the Black Man,” Fanon describes in painstaking detail the misery of the repetitive failure of being recognized as a fellow subject in the context of white colonialism. His apt summation of this experience which is foundational for so much of Black Studies, reads, “I came into the world anxious to uncover the meaning of things, my soul desirous to be at the origin of the world, and here I am an object among other objects.”\(^{48}\) In his recent trilogy, consent not to be a single being, Fred Moten questions, however, if the condition of objecthood is sufficient to describe the repeated failure of recognition that Fanon so evocatively describes. Instead, and in a manner that is productive for problematizing the assumptions of OOP, he elaborates a theory of blackness as thing which more radically claims

\(^{45}\) Ibid, 93.
\(^{46}\) Fanon, “The Lived Experience of the Black Man,” in Black Skin, White Masks, 94.
\(^{47}\) Ahmed, 159.
\(^{48}\) Fanon, 89.
the ability for disorientation that it has always possessed. With the trilogy, we thus see Moten more fully articulating his earlier insistence that the object can and does resist.

With his earlier *In the Break* and following Saidiya Hartman, Moten had claimed the experience of objecthood for blackness.⁴⁹ Both Moten and Hartman claim Aunt Hester’s beating as described by Frederick Douglass as the primal scene for the subjection of blackness in and after slavery and its violent disfiguring of the human into a commodity object. But Moten insists, however, that the black object resists and that this resistance is figured through the sound of Aunt Hester’s scream, which he deems an “animateriality.” As Moten describes following Hortense Spillers, this animateriality is the unintended consequence of slavery’s perverse maternal line, relied on to provide the continuity of both production and reproduction, but which thus nevertheless exceeds its economics, language, and the subject-object binary.⁵⁰ Beyond appropriation and fungibility, this sound likewise fuels the creative potentiality of the black radical tradition as exemplified for Moten in the jazz ensemble.⁵¹ With *consent not to be a single being*, Moten further refines the resistance of the object through a conceptualization of blackness as *thing* or the thingly.⁵² Of the three volumes, this theoretical move is perhaps most clearly visible in *The Universal Machine*, which importantly includes an expanded version of Moten’s 2008 essay, “The Case of Blackness.”⁵³ Playing off the mistranslation of Fanon’s crucial essay, “The Lived Experience of the Black,” as “the fact of blackness,” Moten’s title draws his attention to the etymology of the thing in Heidegger. Mining the etymological

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differences between Ding and Sache in old German, Moten presents blackness as the Sache, the case or contested matter before Ding, or a gathering of men in deliberation. By positioning blackness as the case or matter (thing) opposed to the gathering (human), Moten reiterates the paraontological divide proposed by Afro-pessimism. But his turn to thinking through blackness as thing also serves to mark a distinction within Black Studies traditions influenced by Fanon’s description of blackness and its lack of ontological resistance as an experience of objecthood, or of being “an object among other objects”:

What I’m after is obscured by the fall from prospective subject to object that Fanon recites: namely, a transition from things (chooses) to object (objet) that turns out to version a slippage of movement that animates the history of philosophy. What if we bracket the movement from (erstwhile) subject to object in order to investigate more adequately the change from object to thing . . . What if the thing sustains itself in the absence or eclipse of meaning that withholds from the thing the horrific honorific of ‘object’?

In so doing, Moten draws greater attention to black life than to the failure of its recognition in the context of white supremacy. Moving past what Fanon was even perhaps capable of, Moten claims the thingly to articulate how black existence persists and in so doing, disrupts the subject-object binary that undergirds whiteness as a phenomenology. Of all the trilogy, the effectiveness of reconceptualizing blackness as thing is perhaps made most clear in his critique of Emmanuel Levinas and the phenomenological tradition in the first chapter of The Universal Machine, “There is No Racism Intended.” Ostensibly a critique of the implicit Eurocentrism of Emmanuel Levinas and its more explicit emergence in the philosopher’s late writings, here Moten also draws on the concept of intentionality in phenomenology in order to elaborate why objecthood is a less than satisfactory model for the theorization of blackness. Quoting from a

54 Moten, The Universal Machine, 144-145.
55 Ibid, 144.
56 Moten, “There is No Racism Intended,” in The Universal Machine, 1-64.
1929 essay examining the work of Husserl, Moten examines Levinas’ understanding of the affective intentionality characteristic of phenomenology as that which determines the essence of human consciousness. Overcoming mere solipsism, or affective self-regard, the human consciousness establishes relationality with the world through its relation to objects. The subject-world relation, in other words, is maintained through affective intentionality which makes of things in the world, intentional objects of consciousness. However, as Moten underscores and as OOP reaffirms, there are things in the world that fail to be intended by philosophy, perhaps especially the gendered and racial other. For Moten, this failure to intend is precisely racism, phenomenology’s blind spot, which reveals its de facto inability to transcend narcissistic self-contemplation, or the experience of the European white male. Embracing the thingly as opposed to objecthood speaks to the persistence of blackness in the space of this inattention, which is precisely the experience Fanon describes in “The Lived Experience of the Black Man,” an experience not fully accounted for by the condition of the object. If the object is the racial-epidermal schema, then Moten suggests that the thingly is the black existence that exceeds it.

More importantly than merely exposing phenomenology’s homocentrism, Moten’s elaboration of the thingly opens up a thinking of blackness as the unintended as well as a consideration of the potential politics of such a positionality:

Are there persons who in a way that is far more problematic than failing to transcend objecthood, refuse to attain objecthood? Can we describe phenomenologically, or otherwise—the convergence of personhood and thingliness? […] What is it for the failed or abortive object to take up or claim the refusal of objecthood? What is it not to intend?

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57 Ibid, 15.
59 Ibid, 16.
For Moten, the politics of thingliness is best exemplified through actions of “nonperformance,” which refuse political and philosophical subjecthood and its many political and ethical compromises. Moten takes up the term “nonperformance” from contract law and more specifically legal scholar, Sora Han’s analysis of an 1857 freedom suit known as Betty’s case.60 In said case, the legal status of an African-American woman, Betty, is under dispute. Having travelled with her slaveowners from Tennessee to Massachusetts, Betty was there recognized legally instead as a contractual agent with free will. In rejection of the formal freedom granted her by Massachusetts law, however, Betty returns with her owners to Tennessee, and in so doing ‘nonperforms’ the contractual terms of freedom as determined by the state. What makes Betty’s act of nonperformance radical for both Han and Moten, is that it reveals the continuity between freedom and slavery, that is, absolute freedom’s dependence on the radical act of choosing slavery as its most obscene guarantee.61 Betty’s nonperformance, which further shows the continuity between slavery and the (bound) contractual subject of the state also reveals Emancipation as a “nonevent” as Saidiya Hartman insists.62 Betty refuses these terms altogether, enacting instead what Moten deems the “erotics of fugitivity.”63 Other examples of such nonperformance that Moten has claimed include the historical actions of Harriet Jacobs’ hidings and Elizabeth Eckford’s averted gaze, obscured by dark sunglasses during her walk into a newly desegregated Little Rock Central high school, but perhaps most frequently he points to the work of philosopher and conceptual-performance artist, Adrian Piper.64 Although with In the Break, Moten initially views Piper’s work as ruminations on and performances of blackness as iterations

61 Ibid.
63 Moten, Stolen Life, 247.
64 Moten, “Refuge, Refuse, Refrain,” in The Universal Machine, 65-139.
of the animateriality of black objecthood that was previously discussed, it seems clear in the recent trilogy and perhaps especially in *The Universal Machine* that the significance of Piper’s performances are founded more specifically in her embodiment of blackness as the thingly.\(^{65}\) In particular, Moten points to Piper’s 1970 Untitled Performance at Max’s Kansas City as the embodiment of the thingly or the unintended. Although Piper would deem this performance a failure due to the knowingness of Max’s Kansas City’s audience—the cognoscenti of the downtown Manhattan art scene—her total sensory deprivation during the performance, in which she circulated the space of Max’s Kansas City entirely gloved, blindfolded and with ears plugged, succeeds in reiterating the condition of blackness as non-intentional: redoubling its non-phenomenological, non-relational status beneath the racial-epidermal schema.\(^{66}\)

In so doing, Piper’s ‘non-performance’ of the phenomenological subject corresponds with David Lloyd’s argument that the racial and gendered other remains “under representation,” within the terms established by Enlightenment aesthetic philosophy, particularly Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*.\(^{67}\) As Lloyd argues, the racial and gendered other remains relegated to the threshold of the developmental structure of aesthetic philosophy that culminates in the rational subject. She is thus at once both its permanent exception and structural necessity:

> The savage-Carib or Iroquois stands at the threshold of a development that culminates in civil society but remains subjects to the ‘charm of the senses’ as Kant earlier calls it. This heteronomy of the senses over the judgment must be overcome for the full history of the subject to unfold. The savage represents at once the instance of subjection and the latent potentiality of the aesthetic.\(^{68}\)

As such, the gendered and racial other remains a persistent threat to the teleological project of aesthetic philosophy. Returning to Edmund Burke, Lloyd shows how femininity and particularly

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68 Ibid, 48.
black femininity threaten the mastery of the rational subject.\textsuperscript{69} Femininity always possesses the potential to dissolve the rational subject into a sentimental passivity, a terrifying power that threatens the stability of the beautiful-sublime binary which structures aesthetic experience, but this danger is repressed as the gendered other is treated as an “uncanny metonymic absence” in Burke’s \textit{Philosophical Enquiry}.\textsuperscript{70} As Lloyd argues, however, this repressed threat surfaces in Burke’s description of an encounter with a black woman, where the sublime “vacuity” of blackness overlap with the disarming beauty of femininity. The black woman thus represents a potent threat to the mastery of subjective rationalism while also exposing the lie of universalism.\textsuperscript{71}

\textbf{5.4 Adrian Piper’s Proto-Selfie Practice}

As Moten argues in \textit{Stolen Life}, the blackness of things possesses an erotics of fugitivity which he ties to the unruliness of the Imagination prior to the rational Understanding.\textsuperscript{72} Blackness as the creative productivity of the Imagination is repressed in Moten’s view via Kant’s invention of racial blackness in the natural history. While racial blackness for Kant signifies the purposive hierarchization of the human into classes, and more generally proves the teleology of nature, nevertheless for Moten, those who are the victims of racialization likewise retain an (under)privileged relation to the pure potentiality of the Imagination, a potentiality boded forth in the black radical tradition.\textsuperscript{73} Indeed claiming this productivity for Moten is central and differentiates his position from Afro-pessimism. Moten’s model of the black radical imagination

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{70} Ibid, 64.
\item \textsuperscript{71} Lloyd, 64-66.
\item \textsuperscript{72} Moten, “Knowledge of Freedom,” \textit{Stolen Life}, 1-95.
\item \textsuperscript{73} Ibid; see also Robert Bernasconi, ed., “Who Invented the Concept of Race: Kant’s Role in the Enlightenment Construction of Race.” In \textit{Race} (Malden, Mass: Wiley-Blackwell, 2001): 11-36.
\end{itemize}
lies in the jazz ensemble, but as Stephen Best reminds us in his recent *None Like Us*, Cedric Robinson sets up a much longer lineage for this tradition. The historical originators of black radicalism—such as the palmaristas of Brazil who would burn and destroy their settlements rather than accede to the Portuguese colonists—claim a strategic opacity that disrupts the desire for recognition that Western individualism presumes. As Best argues, channeling Robin D.G. Kelley, acts such as the palmaristas’ disrupt the Western value system through a surreal and inherently aesthetic form of paradoxical action. Moten proclaims the same of Betty, whose obscene refusal of freedom stands as a “non(solo) performance [that] is against the law.”

In her proto-selfie practice documented in *Food for the Spirit*, Piper asserts herself precisely at this intersection. Here as in The Mythic Being series, blackness is both the objectification of the racial-epidermal schema which interferes with her recognition as an intentional object of phenomenology and the aesthetic informality of the chromatic saturation of a black shadow, the fugitive erotics of the Imagination which threaten the formalism of the Kantian Understanding. Moten has attested his attraction to Piper’s work because of this very informality and praises her as one of the first artists to abandon object-based art, or work with discrete form, which Moten views negatively as the corollary and support for the spectator-subject. The Understanding’s tendency towards categorical forms—preeminent among these being that of the rational subject itself—is something which the erotic fugitivity of blackness both precedes and generates and thus can also undo. As Moten argues:

> The contrafantastical trauma of self-obsessional *Bildung* had been as a matter of law (both supposedly natural and juridical) refused to the people who are called

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76 Moten, *Stolen Life*, 255.
77 Ibid, 198.
black . . . To have been refused this traumatic development is, at the same time, to
have been drafted in its operation as apparatus. So that to refuse what has been
refused is a combination of disavowing, of not wanting, of withholding consent to
be a subject and also of refusing the work, of withholding consent to do the work,
that is supposed to bring the would-be subject online.78

As a light-skinned African American woman who could often pass as white, Piper’s
performative identity, like Under the Skin’s Female, flickers at the epicenter of a collapse. As she
describes in her 1991 essay “Passing for White: Passing for Black,” her experience of anti-black
racism was experienced somewhat intermittently, until her work began to more intentionally
draw attention to race and racism in her performance art into the 1970s and beyond, perhaps
most clearly in her performance as the Mythic Being, a persona that Piper invented which took
on the stereotypes of a hyper-black masculinity associated with the Black Power Movement. In
other words, if like the Female of Under the Skin, Piper regularly experienced sexual
objectification in performances where she appeared as herself, such as in the Catalysis series,
what Moten might refer to as her “(under)privileged” relation to racial blackness remained for
her both omnipresent if also repressed until Piper chooses to more demonstratively draw it out in
her work.79 Exemplary in this endeavor, and particularly interesting for our purposes, is Piper’s
1971 photographic series, Food for the Spirit. In what may now be identified as a proto-selfie
practice, here, Piper engages in a performance of what Amelia Jones identifies as a “strategic
narcissism,” that we might also identify as a politics of the thingly.80 While reading Kant’s
Critique of Pure Reason, with Food for the Spirit Piper creates a series of self-documentation,

78 Moten, Stolen Life, 243.
79 Moten’s notion of blackness as (under)privileged rhymes nicely with Lloyd’s notion of the gendered and racial
other as under representation. Through it, Moten also marks the distinction between black people and blackness:
Blackness “must be understood in its ontological difference from black people, who are, nevertheless,
(under)privileged insofar as they are given (to) an understanding of it,” see Fred Moten, and Stefano Harney, The
Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study (New York: Autonomedia, 2013): 47.
80 John P. Bowles, Adrian Piper: Race, Gender, and Embodiment (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press Books,
2011); Amelia Jones, Body Art/Performing the Subject (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 1998).
taking her picture daily in front of a mirror, engaging in a primitive version of selfie photography and in the process revealing the limitations of the Kantian conception of the universal subject. Although described by Piper as a mere reality check of her objective existence as she was more and more taken in by the abstract category of the rational subject while reading Kant, the aesthetic choices visible in the photographs in *Food for the Spirit* reveal greater political intent.\(^{81}\) These aesthetic choices both problematize contemporary object-oriented philosophy’s conception of the human as a singular object while also serving as a model for a political selfie practice for women and minorities.\(^{82}\)

As a finished piece, *Food for the Spirit* consists of a spiral-bound notebook of fourteen black-and-white self-photographs or proto-selfies of Piper paired with torn pages of a paperback copy of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* featuring Piper’s hand-written notes and markings of the text. Together, these documents attest to what Moten might describe as Piper’s own invaginative relation to Kantian metaphysics. While as reader of Kant, Piper is able to approach the abstract reason of the Kantian rational subject, *Food for the Spirit* reiterates her constitutive material persistence.\(^{83}\) Despite her partaking in acts of material self-discipline and self-denial, such as yoga and fasting while reading the critique, her gendered and racialized identity remain resolute. Piper’s gender identity, for example, remains clearly visible in her nude self-portraits despite her fasting and yoga practice. Given her light-skinned appearance, however, Piper’s racial identity, like the Female’s, is in fact less indexical than that of her gender identity and must be more intentionally conjured instead via her aesthetic choices. Through the chromatic saturation of the finished photographs, Piper draws out to visibility the thingly persistence of blackness.

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\(^{81}\) Bowles, 205.

\(^{82}\) Aria Dean has likewise claimed *Food for the Spirit* as a proto-selfie practice that is also politically viable given its assertion of her racial and gendered identity, see Aria Dean, “Closing the Loop.”

\(^{83}\) Lloyd, 64.
Paradoxical in its relation to a founding text of the Enlightenment, the illumination of the photographs markedly decreases throughout the fourteen photographs, culminating in a series of four in which Piper herself is barely visible beneath a dense and hazy shadow (figs. 5.10 & 5.11). Piper’s work in *Food for the Spirit* thus emerges in the crucial space dividing aesthetic philosophy from the work of art. Although these are too often conflated, as Lloyd argues the distinction is paramount, since “bear[ing] the signifying scars of unfree existence,” the work of art holds a crucial political force of potential to expose the contradictions of aesthetic philosophy.⁸⁴

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⁸⁴ Ibid, 11.
Because of her light-skinned appearance, Piper can be said to experience objectification in a manner which may be revealing in relation to the theorization of the object in OOP. Remarking on her performances for the Catalysis series, Piper reported her shock at the insistence of her sexual objectification from male spectators. Even when covered in cod liver oil, Piper continued to be lured at by desirous male spectators. However, in the guise of the Mythic Being, Piper passes beyond both desire and recognition beneath the racial-epidermal schema to the non-intended status of the thingly. The notional human as object, conjured as an object of desire by OOP, is indeed much closer to Piper’s experience in the Catalysis series. Indeed, Harman’s concept of allure and its uncanny similarity to Freud’s description of female narcissism attests as much. But as Moten theorization of the thingly and Piper’s performance works insist, there are humans who remain both undesired and unintended and thus problematize the proposal of the human as a singular object of desire. As previously mentioned, Shawn

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85 Bowles, 162-204.
Michelle Smith has shown how racial blackness in the legacy of colonialism and slavery likewise interferes with the formation of the subject and the process of identification described by Lacan’s mirror-stage. \footnote{Smith, “Envisioning Race.”} The allure of self-objectification so foundational to both OOP and to selfie culture is itself thrown into crisis by the experience of the black subject in a racist society, something which both \textit{Under the Skin} and Piper’s proto-selfies for \textit{Food for the Spirit} powerfully index.

Slavoj Žižek insists that the essence of human experience is connoted by the hysterical question—what am I as object?—but it can seem in the context of contemporary selfie culture that this question has for some lost a good deal of its sting. \footnote{Slavoj Žižek and F. W. J. von Schelling. \textit{The Abyss of Freedom/Ages of the World.} Trans. Judith Norman. Ann Arbor, Mich: University of Michigan Press, 1997, 78.} OOP’s libidinal fascination with the subject as object reiterates that of selfie culture more generally, in which digital technologies provide nearly constant opportunities to contemplate both the self and the subject, as image and object. But the emergence of these technologies and their promise of transparent representation too quickly move past the painful histories of objectification which proceed them. As \textit{Under the Skin} and Piper’s performance art necessarily remind us, for the racial and gendered other, the violence of objectification is all too well-known.

In their recent article, Grant Bollmer and Katherine Guinness call for a phenomenology of the selfie. Arguing that the selfie is a relational practice, in which the self is asserted as distinct from a background, they advocate for a “politics of relation,”: “Ontologically, a selfie is about an act that performs a distinction, which performs a relation. Politically, then, we must question the specific relations that are performed and how they make visible or invisible the world in which we exist.”\footnote{Bollmer and Guinness, “Phenomenology for the Selfie.”} The notional phenomenology for the selfie that they invoke is thus a
proscriptive suggestion that our selfie practices make of our background an intentional and affective object. But perhaps Piper’s *Food for the Spirit* proffers instead a more radical politics, which insists that relation is not universally accessible. As a proto-selfie practice, Piper’s *Food for the Spirit* suggest how strategic feminist narcissisms can be employed otherwise. While so much recent literature assessing the feminist politics of the selfie remains caught up in proving the form as a mode of subjective self-assertion for women and minorities, Piper’s practice instead models what Moten’s *consent not to be a single being* trilogy advocates: the claiming and re-assertion of one’s subjugation as the racial and gendered other as an effective mode, indeed still the best available apparatus despite the claims of OOP, for critiquing the always already compromised terrain of subjectification.

6 CODA

This dissertation argues that narrative cinema is a crucial aid in the affective mapping of contemporary selfie culture, a visual culture saturated by a variety of new technologies of self-mediation. In what I define as Narcisscinema, the subjective effects and affective experience of self-mediation are intensively scrutinized. In chapter one’s *Personal Shopper*, the subjective and cultural effects of the smartphone and the affective experience of digital self-mediation are specifically examined. Chapter two’s *Black Swan*, however, exhibits a poetics of selfie culture, exposing self-mediation as a disciplinary tool of compulsory heterosexuality while also revealing both the embodied damage conforming to an ideal form of cis-gendered femininity can lead to as well as selfie culture’s investment in this ideal. This discussion continues in chapter three, where I argue that *The Neon Demon* pursues an immanent critique of the intensification of faciality in selfie culture before turning to Deleuze’s theory of narcissism as creative invention as a potential model for its disruption.
As I have argued, because of both its surplus narcissism and its capacity for besidedness, narrative cinema is a crucial tool for exposing both the felt experience of self-mediation and narcissism’s inherent drama, the full picture of which is often repressed in the image of the self, presented to the forward-facing camera. Unlike analyses of individual practices, Narcisscinema’s dialectical engagement interrogates the larger ontological significance of technologies of digital self-mediation. Because of this, critical media theory should look to cinema in order to account for the significance of digital self-mediation as a new mass practice. It is important to emphasize that the films examined in this dissertation are exemplary of a much larger potential group of contemporary films that would also fall under the rubrics of Narcisscinema such as *The Bling Ring* (Sofia Coppola 2013), *Unfriended* (Levan Gabriadze 2014), *Knock Knock* (Eli Roth 2015), *Bang Gang* (Eva Husson 2015), *Nerve* (Henry Joost and Ariel Schulman 2016), *Ingrid Goes West* (Matt Spicer 2017), and *Cam* (Daniel Goldhaber 2018). That many of these abut the horror genre speaks to our cultural anxieties surrounding the second lives of our digital selves.

The forward-facing camera’s artifactual construction of the self recalls the inherent compromises of the formal subject. As David Lloyd argues, Kantian aesthetic philosophy’s investment in representation functions as a political tool for the subjugation of the impulsive (sensational) self.\(^1\) Through the intervention of judgment, which we might consider a proto technology of self-mediation, sensate experience is transformed into rational knowledge, producing docile subjects of the state. As Lloyd further argues, the aesthetic regime of representation orders a hierarchy of the human, reserving the capacity for rational thought and the subject-position for the white-European male. While over time, concessions are necessarily made to this rule so as to maintain the lie of universalism, rational philosophy’s teleological

\(^1\) Lloyd, 3.
construction nevertheless relies on a developmental hierarchy of the human that consistently relegates racial and gendered others to a permanent state of exception.2

Within contemporary digital culture, the transparent frame of the forward-facing camera promises the universal accessibility of self-assertion through representation. Like object-oriented philosophy’s conception of the human as a singular object, however, the myth of the universal subject relies on the repression of persistent and violent racialized assemblages, the realities of which I argued in chapter four are metaphorically approached in Under the Skin’s narrative of an alien falling to earth. In such a context, Lloyd promotes resistance to representation and the subject position as difficult but politically necessary for the future of aesthetics:

So profoundly does the regime of representation continue to saturate our modes of thinking, of perception, of feeling that we do not yet know what possible spaces this rupture might open for us. But whatever those spaces may eventually allow, the return of the aesthetic to the feeling, desiring, even the fearing pathological subject continues to offer the prospect of a living otherwise in the face of the generalized state of exception with which the neoliberal state has displaced the ‘unilateral declaration of universality’ of the liberal racial order.3

Considered in the context of Lloyd’s critique, the rise of selfie culture suggests nothing but a further entrenchment of representation’s regime. But as explicated in the previous chapter, Moten has already located what is for Lloyd only a hypothetical aesthetic future in black performance, claiming its ability to defamiliarize the subject position via “the irruption of the thing: through the resistance of the object.”4 As opposed to mainstream feminism’s persistent investment in equality, Moten advises the disinvestment in the subject position through a strategic claiming of objectification and envisions non-performance as a means of critiquing the

2 Ibid.
3 Lloyd, 18.
4 Fred Moten, “Taste Dissonance Flavor Escape (Preface to a Solo by Miles Davis)” in Black and Blur: 66-85.
compromises of the subject form. In continually asserting her racial and gendered identity in the *Food for the Spirit* series while reading Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, for example, Piper nonperforms the construction of the universal subject. In this proto-selfie practice, Piper thus models a strategic narcissism that claims one’s racial and gendered status prior to its exploitation while also accepting the inevitability of objectification and undermining the desirability of the subject form, given its entrenchment in histories of white male supremacy.

In rejection of the confrontational rubrics of phenomenology’s construction of the subject-object binary or of the Hegelian model of intersubjectivity, Moten proclaims the social life of things and the entanglement of black being. As akin to the soloist in the jazz ensemble, which Moten identifies as exemplary within a larger black radical tradition that persistently questions Western values, individuation persists in an ongoing and improvisational relation to the collective. The *consent not to be a single being* that Moten advocates in his recent trilogy thus rejects by definition narcissism’s prioritization of a self-relation or its construction of the self as an isolated monad. In revealing the inherent partiality of any self-image, the Narcisscinema examined in this dissertation performs crucial critical analysis of the compromises of the formal subject, but it begs the further question: where in contemporary cinema is a politics of entanglement and the thingly fully enacted? In closing, I would like to consider British-Nigerian director Jenn Nkiru’s music video for jazz artist Kamasi Washington’s “Hub Tones” (2018) as a prime example. Like the saxophone track in Washington’s single, Nkiru’s video models individuation as a persistence in entanglement, a mark of dissonance, that refuses the closure mirrored by the narcissistic subject form.

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In *Black and Blur*, Moten anticipates the thingly irruption of black performance in a series of 1882 Thomas Eakins’ photographs of a young black girl.⁶ In the series, the young girl appears on a divan in the classical pose of the female art historical nude, conflating as properties of enjoyment the bodies of the wife, the prostitute, and the slave girl. Eakins place ment of the young black girl in this history of the nude highlights by way of absence, the black body’s typical decorative use and relegation as property that sets off the white female, creating a hierarchy of objects, as famously exhibited for example in Manet’s *Olympia* (1865).⁷ By merely appearing in this place, Moten argues that the girl creates an indelible mark of dissonance in the history of the female nude:

> To attempt to locate her agency is precisely to mark the fact that it lies, impossibly, in her position, in an appositional force derived from being-posed, from being-sent, from being-located. Her agency is in her location in the interval, in and as the break. This is what it is to take, while apposing, the object position with something like the dual force of holding and outpouring that Heidegger attributes to the thing which, in its defiance of the ennobling force of representation, ennobles representation.⁸

Crucially for Moten’s analysis, in one of the photos in the series, the girl appears with her back to the camera, refusing to return the camera’s lascivious and proprietary gaze (fig. 6.1).

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⁶ Fred Moten, “Taste Dissonance Flavor Escape (Preface to a Solo by Miles Davis)” in *Black and Blur*: 66-85. Although I prefer not to reproduce this photograph here (accession # 1985.68.2.565), it can be viewed in the online catalog of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts.

⁷ Ibid, 72.

⁸ Moten, “Taste Dissonance Flavor Escape (Preface to a Solo by Miles Davis)” in *Black and Blur*, 76.
In so doing, Moten argues that the girl’s fugitive movement not only engenders a thingly irruption of the resistance of the object but likewise engenders a spontaneous form of cinema that while it prefigures motion picture technology also must be disciplined towards its full achievement as technology. For Moten, in other words, Eakins’ libidinal desire to recapture the young black girl’s escaped action and fugitive movement in turning away inspires his interest in Muybridge and primitive motion picture technology, as more generally, the desire to discipline black movement fuels the cinematic grammar of narrative cinema as D.W. Griffith formulates it.⁹ An averted gaze similarly conjures dissonance and the thingly irruption of black performance in Nkiru’s *Hub Tones*, productively disrupting the commerce in faces and undermining the faith in representation characteristic of contemporary selfie culture.

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⁹ Ibid, 76-77.
Jenn Nkiru has quickly become an important and critically-acclaimed practitioner of contemporary Black cinema whose focus on rendering rarely seen aspects of black life—particularly queer identity and black feminist thought—is an expression of a younger generation of black artists’ conception of identity, style, and history. Although she works frequently in the commercial music video form, like her contemporaries, frequent collaborators, and fellow Howard graduates Arthur Jafa and Bradford Young, Nkiru intentionally pushes the format to more formally experimental and theoretically-informed ends, creating work that lives as comfortably in the formal gallery space as it does on online streaming platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo. To recognize the unique situatedness of this type of work, the liquid blackness group has utilized the term, the music art video.\textsuperscript{10}

As Moten argues in his analysis of the Eakins’ photograph, neither the still nor the moving image can offer unadulterated freedom for the black subject, given that both captivity and forced labor were equally conditions of slavery. Instead, he insists that the black subject must improvise forms of fugitivity that disrupts the economies of both.\textsuperscript{11} Similarly, Arthur Jafa has emphasized the necessity for black filmmaking to disrupt the white gaze’s demands for and enjoyment of black performance that Hartman describes in *Scenes of Subjection* through the rejection of synchronization.\textsuperscript{12} Towards this end, in his recent works such as *Dreams Are Colder than Death* (2013), *Love is the Message, the Message is Death* (2016) as well as the music video for Jay-Z’s *4:44* (2017), he models the use of post-dubbed sound since it allows for greater

\textsuperscript{10} liquid blackness, “(A) Black Lineage of the Music Art Video,” Atlanta Contemporary Art Center (March 26, 2019).

\textsuperscript{11} Moten, “Taste Dissonance Flavor Escape (Preface to a Solo by Miles Davis),” 71.

fugitivity. As I argue elsewhere of her 2017 short film, *Rebirth is Necessary*, Jenn Nkiru’s work pursues a similar aesthetic and ethical strategy.  

Weaving a compelling portrait of the endurance of African diasporic culture, *Rebirth* features a variety of audio and video archives (with samples featuring Sun Ra, James Baldwin, Fred Moten, Steve Reich, Kathleen Cleaver, and Alice Coltrane among others) as well as original footage shot in South Africa and her native South London. This large variety of one to five second audio and video archival clips are intermixed with one another, totally disrupting the notional fidelity of the synched image and documentary realism. Instead, pursuing Black studies as an aesthetic practice, the vitality of African diasporic culture emerges ‘in the break,’ through the use of montage, which predominates as the aesthetic organization of the film, recalling the remix logic of hip-hop sampling and reflecting Nkiru’s background as a club DJ. Like early hip-hop, the experience of *Rebirth is Necessary* is frenetic. While in comparison Nkiru’s *Hub Tones* is markedly restrained, nevertheless montage predominates here too as a guiding aesthetic and ethical principle. No longer a matter of frenetic editing, instead a complex montage of influences is woven into the frame in addition to the already complex audio-visual relationship of the video, where three dancers’ pro-filmic movements are paired to the non-diegetic soundtrack of Washington’s “Hub Tones,” insisting on the video’s approximate but not synchronized relationship to its audio source.

One of the most relevant aspects of Nkiru’s method in relation to the topic of this dissertation is her insistence that the “clearest sense of self” guides and inspires her filmmaking.

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14 Jenn Nkiru, *Jenn Nkiru’s Panafrican Imagination: Black Studies as Aesthetic Practice*: Screening and Artist Talk, Georgia State University, April 14, 2019.
practice, but this self cannot be approximated through technologies of self-mediation in the traditional sense. Instead, it requires expression through attention to forms of black sociality in African diasporic community and aesthetic practices. Nkiru’s writing of the self through the social exceeds the relational politics of the selfie that Grant Bollmer and Katherine Guiness propose as an antidote to the narcissism of contemporary selfie culture. Her identity as a British-Nigerian woman cannot be conveyed through representation or formal reflection but only through enacting what Fred Moten (a frequent reference for Nkiru) identifies as an aesthetics of entanglement. *Hub Tones*, in particular, enacts the refusal to be a single being that yet retains rights to the specificity of one’s embodied experience—to one’s unique place or solo—in the larger collective ensemble. This intention becomes clearer through a brief analysis of the video.

In a filmed discussion with Kamasi Washington, Nkiru reflects on the density of references woven into *Hub Tones*’ aesthetic imagery. On the surface, the video is rather simple. For a track lasting over nine minutes, *Hub Tones* portrays little more than three black female dancers performing in what appears to be an auditorium. In point of fact, however, Nkiru’s frame is loaded with references. The most insistent is provided through British-Ghanaian artist, Larry Achiampong’s “Pan-African Flag for the Travellers’ Ascension” (2017) which hangs behind the dancers. As described on Achiampong’s website, this is one of four flags the artist completed in dedication to African-diasporic identity, each featuring 54 stars in honor of the countries of Africa and composed in the colors green, black and red symbolizing the land, people, and “struggles” of Africa, while the yellow gold in the flag’s upper section represents hope for “a

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16 Bollmer and Guiness, “Phenomenology for the Selfie.”
new day and prosperity.”

The three dancers are dressed in green embroidered dresses emphasizing their connection to the land of Africa and wear sashes featuring the phrase “Nation Time,” in reference to Amiri Baraka’s poem “It’s Nation Time,” a rallying cry for the Black Nationalist movement. Additionally, as Nkiru explains to Washington, the make-up, crystal headdresses and eyebrow jewels are all in homage to a performance style of Nina Simone. Perhaps most obscurely, if also timely, the even lighting scheme of the video is intended to recall that of the Capitol building, when Anita Hill testifies before the judiciary committee during Clarence Thomas’ confirmation hearings, a representative appearance of black women in public spaces, facing down institutional authority. Nkiru’s specific references here as well as her profilmic subjects are testament to her intention to center in particular the strength and endurance of black women within the larger African-diasporic community.

Hub Tones opens with a close-up of a female face, as she gazes vacantly offscreen to the right of the frame. Her body sways, resonating with the staccato piano opening Washington’s track. Briefly, an intertitle featuring “Hub Tones,” in green lettering appears before returning to the close-up of the woman’s face whose eyes are now closed as they will remain for the next eight minutes. With nearly imperceptible shifts in shot ratios, the first half of Hub Tones slowly moves out from its obsessive focus on this face. Like a reversal of Michael Snow’s structural film, Wavelength (1968), the video transitions incrementally from close-ups to medium close-

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20 Kamasi Washington, Hub-Tones.
21 Ibid.
ups, low-angle medium shots, and then three-quarters shots over the course of the first four minutes, performing the equivalent of a slow zoom out (albeit with the use of a discrete series of cuts) revealing finally that its central figure performs with two other female dancers. While in the video’s initial close-ups, their swaying arms move in and out of the frame, we cannot be certain who these rightfully belong to. Instead their primary function is gestural, akin to exterior tracings of the central dancer’s otherwise private enjoyment. When all three are at last together visible in long shot, they face off screen right, seemingly oblivious to any audience either diegetic or filmic, an effect which is somewhat unsettling since the larger space of the video suggests an auditorium with the dancers performing on an elevated stage of some kind. Their trance-like dance thus seems part of a ritual whose nature we are not privy to. Just past the five-minute mark, the video begins to retrace its earlier path, zooming in from the three-quarters view, and eventually returning to its obsessive rumination on the face of the central female figure as it proceeds through a series of close-ups beginning around the six and half minute mark. The resemblance of the video to a form of moving-image portraiture is reinforced through its 4:3 aspect ratio. For the next minute and a half, the video focuses unmoving on this face as it sways across the frame in rhythm with her body’s movement. Her eyes remain closed but visibly fluttering given the camera’s low angle, creating small but suspenseful glances at the whites of her eyes (fig. 6.2).

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23 In conversation with Kamasi Washington, Nkiru cites her inspiration in a Nigerian tribal ritual dance performed to connect with the ancestors. During the dance, it is believed contact with the spirits deepens as the tone in the music shifts, see Kamasi Washington, *Hub-Tones*. 
Throughout this process, the viewer becomes intensely aware of their desire for her gaze which would seem to offer greater access to her otherwise infectious physical absorption in the dance (and by extension Washington’s track). When the video partially allows us the satisfaction of look, it is only after a hard cut to another intertitle, “directed by Jenn Nkiru,” at eight minutes after which the video just before ending has returned to a low-angle three-quarters shot of all three women who look away from the camera again offstage right, finally barring access to her fully exposed face in close-up.
In Deleuze’s description of the affection-image he explains how in the close-up, the face’s functional value can be superseded as it is overtaken in the absorption and expression of affect.\textsuperscript{24} To become an affection-image, however, the tenor of the affective experience requires communication to the audience. In \textit{Hub Tones}, the denial of the look interferes with this transfer, reserving the affective experience for the performing body. This vigorous refusal of the look that \textit{Hub Tones} enacts through the woman’s shut eyes persists as a consistent mark of dissonance, a thingly irruption of black performance, akin to the averted glance of the little girl in the Eakins’ photo. While on the one hand, \textit{Hub Tones} obsessive ruminaton on the face suggests an affinity with the zeitgeist of contemporary selfie culture, its refusal of the look and of the affection-image undermines its terms of exchangeability, its trafficking in faces.

The female figure’s averted glance is essential to Nkiru’s stated goal for \textit{Hub Tones} in the claiming of space, a claiming that like the turned away body of the little girl, both interrupts the use of the black female body as an object in support of the spectator-subject and bars the exploitation of black affect for his enjoyment.\textsuperscript{25} More pressing for the project of this dissertation, however, is how Nkiru’s video alerts us to our investment in the face as a synecdoche for the self. As the rise of selfie culture makes abundantly clear, through faces we approximate the essence of an individual, but a life is never contained in representation. Rather, a life is an aleatory improvisation lived in duration. Like Narcissus’ tear, \textit{Hub Tones}’ refusal of the look breaks the narcotic spell of representation, returning our attention to the reality of movement (kine) and to the pool as liquid-image. While the tragedy of the Narcissus myth is that this lesson comes only too late, Nkiru’s cinema suggests that for us, there as yet remains possibility.

\textsuperscript{24} Deleuze, \textit{Cinema I}, 105-110.

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