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THE FLOW OF THE WATER:  
CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN REALISMS

by

JUSTIN HORTON

Under the Direction of Angelo Restivo

ABSTRACT

"Realism" is one of the enduring theoretical problems of the cinema. This study aims to broaden the parameters of the term by focusing on an often overlooked strain of thought that flows throughout the work of a number of prominent and seemingly incongruous thinkers such as Bazin, Kracauer, Benjamin, Barthes, Buñuel, and others. Realism, I contend, is undergirded by something far more elusive and irrational than verisimilitude or social commentary. To demonstrate, I will examine a body of contemporary American films that I will cast—perhaps provocatively—as realist. I rely heavily upon Deleuze to discuss how free indirect discourse and the disjunction of sound and image open realism to an oneiric and/or intersubjective realm.

INDEX WORDS: Realism, Bazin, Deleuze, Free indirect discourse, Sound theory, David Gordon Green, Mumblecore, Gus Van Sant, *George Washington*, *Kissing on the Mouth*, *Four Eyed Monsters*, *Elephant*, *Paranoid Park*

THE FLOW OF THE WATER:  
CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN REALISMS

by

JUSTIN HORTON

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

Master of Arts

In the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2010

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Justin Horton  
2010



THE FLOW OF THE WATER:  
CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN REALISMS

by

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College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

August 2010

## DEDICATION

For Connor.

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## CHAPTER 1

## RE-READING REALISM

“The word ‘realism’ as it is commonly used does not have an absolute and clear meaning, so much as it indicates a certain tendency toward the faithful rendering of reality on film. Given the fact that this movement toward the real can take a thousand different routes, the apologia for ‘realism’ *per se*, strictly speaking, means nothing at all.”<sup>1</sup> —André Bazin

By most accounts, 1968 serves as the point of demarcation between the classical period of film theory and its subsequent contemporary or political period.<sup>2</sup> In its early stage, film theory had concerned itself with questions of ontology, authorship, formal qualities, and the like. During the heightened political climate of the late 1960’s, the increased emphasis on the legitimization of film studies as a discipline and the twin influences of post-structuralism and the re-invigorated Marxism of Althusser marked a sea change in how scholars approached the medium. The growing sentiment was that cinema, being both popular and one of the most pervasive forms of “mass” culture, was one of the conduits of oppressive ideologies. The discipline’s concern, many argued, should be less with the aesthetic qualities or the techniques of *auteurs* than the uncovering of the ideological currents that flow—often unbeknownst to the spectator—below the surface of the filmic experience.

Cinema, and particularly that of the American, capitalist, Hollywood mode, was designed to entertain, enchant, and ultimately, in the eyes of the scholarly tradition that emerged in this new political climate, deceive. In this view, popular films were myth-making spectacles in which the unintended consequence of buying a ticket was the trading of one’s own agency for passivity. In short, the cinema is one of the many channels (or apparatuses) by which certain ideologies—

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<sup>1</sup> André Bazin, *Jean Renoir*, trans. W. W. Halsey II and William H. Simon, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973), 85.

<sup>2</sup> For perhaps the most cited elaboration on the shifting terrain of academic film studies, see David Bordwell, “Contemporary Film Studies and the Vicissitudes of Grand Theory,” in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, ed. David Bordwell and Noel Carroll (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 3-36.

racism, patriarchy, neoliberalism—perpetuate themselves, become hegemonic “common sense.” And we are all unwitting accomplices.

This shift from one era to the next is perhaps best illustrated in the firestorm surrounding the publication of Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” which today stands as the most famous, most cited, and most debated essay in the history of the discipline.<sup>3</sup> Mulvey, seeing the camera’s angle on the action as constitutive of a male, heterosexual, patriarchal, voyeuristic gaze, argues that the way to break the ideological stranglehold of the classical Hollywood form—which was at the time and continues to be prevalent worldwide—is through the creation of a counter-cinema that is purposefully un-pleasurable. Consequently, to valorize in the commercial cinema—as classical film theory often did—that which is beautiful, intriguing, or otherwise enjoyable in the cinema was tantamount to praising the methods of one’s own subjugation.<sup>4</sup>

Amid this about-face in approach to the object of study, some of the questions that had animated early film debate were abandoned as old-hat. One such disregarded question that I wish to explore in this project is that of the possibility and purpose of filmic realism. In classical film theory, the relation between the cinema and the real world was often binarized into two camps: the realists, their inclination towards films that represent the world as it is; and the formalists, those who embraced the artist’s ability to manipulate that which appeared on screen. The two tendencies each held in esteem various “patron saints”: in terms of filmmaking, the *ur*-documentarist Lumière and the fantastical Méliès; in the theoretical domain, the realist Bazin and the formalist Arnheim.<sup>5</sup> Yet, in the wake of post-1968 theory, such distinctions were

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<sup>3</sup> Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16:3, Autumn (1975): 6-18.

<sup>4</sup> Mulvey’s target is the popular, bourgeois cinema. Her attack does not extend to, say, the American avant-garde.

<sup>5</sup> On the various camps of classical film theory, see Robert Ray, *How a Film Theory Got Lost and Other Mysteries in Cultural Studies* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 3.



unnecessary, for the paramount concern moved away from how the film proper worked and towards how the film worked *to position the subject*. The very apparatus of the cinema, it was said, is bound up with illusion and ideological manipulation. That is to say, for example, that the motion we see on the screen is not actually movement at all but rather the illusion of movement, as the film strip is nothing more than a series of discreet photographs; the screen is not a window looking onto the world but a flat, two-dimensional plane, not unlike a painter's canvas; a movie's editing, suggestive of a change of viewing angle amid a consistent time and space, is constituted by scenes shot out-of-sequence and assembled piecemeal—minutes, hours, or days later and in perhaps diverse spaces. No matter narrative or documentary, long-take or montage, according to apparatus theory proponents, the film, once thought for a potential site of Truth, is *lying*.

Realism, the story goes, is always constructed, artistically and ideologically, and thus there can be no hope for some privileged access to “the real.”

It came to be that the realist theory of Bazin was rejected in part or *in toto*, his theories frequently regarded as naïve or blind to ideology, his writing valued for its critical enthusiasm more so than any theoretical validity. But there remains much in the *oeuvre* of Bazin that has managed to be overlooked, disregarded, simply missed, most notably an overarching theory of realism far more supple than has often been suggested. For instance, in his “Aesthetic of Reality” article, Bazin plainly states that “realism can be achieved in one way—through artifice.”<sup>6</sup> And so much for the line of thinking that Bazinian realism somehow sidesteps artistic machinations, for “every realism in art was first profoundly aesthetic.”<sup>7</sup> Here, it would seem, Bazin is anything but

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<sup>6</sup> Hugh Gray, trans., *What is Cinema?*, vol. 2 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971, 2005): 26.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

naïve. In fact, he explicitly acknowledges the constructedness of cinema. If “the book” has been written on Bazin, then perhaps it “is in need of some serious reconsideration.”<sup>8</sup>

Bazin thus serves as an ideal starting point for my purposes, for he has been both canonized *and*, until recently, widely rejected. Nevertheless, there remain many nuances in his conception of realism that have only now begun to be discovered and discussed, such as the resonances with surrealist thought and practice, his proposal that there are multiple and ever-evolving forms of realism, and that character interiority cannot necessarily be bracketed off from a realist approach. Each of these misunderstood arenas will prove beneficial in my reading of a selection of contemporary American films that has adopted and modified a type of “aesthetic of reality.” That is to say, these all exhibit certain characteristics of the neorealist prototype while attempting to work through the inherited limitations of such an aesthetic. Several of my examples are frequently framed within the tradition of realism, though others I will perhaps provocatively incorporate. I will first highlight these nuances before putting Bazin into alignment with other prominent scholars from various periods in history to demonstrate that the stakes of realism were always grander and greater than a simple “objective” record of a time and a place or the highlighting of the material conditions of poverty.

#### BAZIN: UR-REALIST, SURREALIST

If Bazin maintains such a prominent place within the history of film studies, why, then, is the depiction of him so porous, so filled with omissions that contradict that larger consensus on

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<sup>8</sup> Christian Keathley, *Cinephilia and History, or The Wind in the Trees* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006): 63. Just such a reconsideration has recently gained momentum. Angelo Restivo’s *The Cinema of Economic Miracles* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002) casts the post-neorealist films of Antonioni and Pasolini as a “reinvention” of neorealism, one that conforms to some of the more misunderstood aspects of Bazin’s work. Daniel Morgan has likewise begun to reevaluate Bazin’s notions in “Rethinking Bazin: Ontology and Realist Aesthetics”, *Critical Inquiry* 32:3, Spring 2006, 443-481. Noted Bazin biographer Andrew Dudley is also intervening on behalf of Bazin in light of the proliferation of the digital in his book *What Cinema Is!* (New York: Blackwell Publishing, 2010), which will factor into my argument later.

the writer and his ideas? Dudley Andrew has suggested that the nature of Bazin's writing—he was a contributor to a number of periodicals and journals as opposed to, say, writing a single tome on his theories—resulted in a body of work that today is rarely read sequentially or within the context of the adjacent days' or weeks' writings, as did his original Parisian audiences.<sup>9</sup>

Consequently, his work, if read in sequence, displays the characteristic of ideas being revised and worked out over time. Thus, when read piecemeal or anthologized, there may appear to be inconsistencies or contradictions—factors, I contend, for the current misreading of Bazin.

Further, Bazin's influence was quickly eclipsed in his native France by many of the thinkers who would become central to the structuralist turn.

In the customary understanding of Bazin, two primary ideas emerge in one of his most famous essays, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image”: the indexical nature of the photographic (and, by extension, the cinematic) image and the automatic rendering of the proflmic event by the mechanical processes of the camera. The image, argues Bazin, bears an existential link with that which was filmed. For example, though a superbly detailed painting (that is, an icon in the sense of Pierce) of one's aunt might convincingly represent her, it doesn't bear a physiological connection to her in the same way that her lipstick adhering to a cigarette butt in an ashtray does. The painting could well have been done from memory or otherwise copied from any other representation of her. The lipstick, though, can only come from her having been in that space and at that time. Though surely photography, under most circumstances, renders a quite convincing icon of the proflmic event, the resulting image's very existence is tied to the existence of the photograph's subject.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See *André Bazin* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990) and *The Major Film Theories: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

<sup>10</sup> André Bazin, *What is Cinema? vol. I*, trans. by Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967, 2005): 9-16.

Secondly, and most importantly, the camera may render what is in front of it with only the slightest of interventions from the camera's operator (turning on, turning off). Writes Bazin, "All the arts are based on the presence of man, only photography derives an advantage from his absence."<sup>11</sup> Thus, the mechanical reproduction of the camera frees the non-cinematic artist (the painter, the sculptor, etc.) from the "problem of realism," which had been so central to the other plastic arts since the invention of Renaissance perspective. A painter operating in a realist mode, for instance, must first apprehend an object in the world and then concoct an image that more or less corresponds to one's perception of that object onto the canvas. The benefit of photography is that the selection of what portions of reality one wishes to capture becomes the foremost concern of the photographer, for the camera mechanically renders the object before its lens. Similarly, the painter is no longer burdened with the "keeping of records," for that impulse has been answered by a more appropriate medium with the invention of the camera. Hence, painting is free to pursue abstraction and expressionism while photography may take up the mantle of the realist impulse, a task for which, according to Bazin, the medium is ideally suited.

Therefore, Bazin stakes his claim that photography is essentially a realist medium, one that is fully dependent for its image upon that which is in front of the lens.<sup>12</sup> An example: a photograph of an oak tree is necessarily one of an actual, specific oak. By contrast, the drawing of an oak needn't be of an actual tree; instead, it may be an amalgam of several that the artist has seen, or a grotesque oak, even an "ideal" oak. Photography, on the other hand, renders an image of the necessarily real object in a specific place and time. This characteristic points to additional consequences with regard to Bazin's focus on automatism that rarely garner as much attention.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 13

<sup>12</sup> Obviously, animation and certain practices of the avant-garde—Brakhage's *Mothlight* (1963), for example—complicate Bazin's ontology. This problem becomes more pronounced with the advent of digital technologies and CGI.

By being automatic and instantaneous, the process of photography aligns with many of the practices of the surrealists.

Christian Keathley quite convincingly argues that Bazin's realism can be productively considered in relation to the surrealists' penchant for automatic writing, the attempt to "write one's unconscious" without regard to form or narrative.<sup>13</sup> By writing in such a way—that is, hurriedly, *automatically*—one bypasses the habits of mind that keep at bay her unconscious. The camera's mechanical automatism opens a similar window, thought Bazin, for the camera may capture things in the world that are outside the intent of the operator. Thus, the great benefit of shooting outdoors was not that it was inherently more "real" than the contrivance of a constructed studio set, but rather that it created the opportunity for contingencies to emerge. The Formalist school tends to conceive of the filmmaking enterprise a series of choices, one that seeks ever-tighter control of the circumstances before the camera. The realism that Bazin espoused was one of loosening the insistence on the "mastery" of the scene. Certainly a filmmaker can "bounce" the sunlight off a white card to better illuminate a face, but she cannot block the breeze that tosses a leaf into the frame. To shoot in such an "open" manner is to invite contingency (i.e., things that could have happened another way). Passersby, chipped paint, curious shadows: all details that one likely would not conceive to place into the *mise-en-scène* in a tightly controlled production, but yet may greatly enliven the shot. Furthermore, details such as these often lure the attention of the spectator away from the plot, such as when one stops attentively watching Ricci and Bruno in *Bicycle Thieves* (De Sica, 1948) and instead notices the hanging rugs, now soaked, in the rainy piazza. This is one of the profound ways in which the cinema differs from, say, the novel or the painting: in the latter arts, every detail is intentionally

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<sup>13</sup> Keathley, *Cinephilia and History*, 54-81.

placed there by the writer, every stroke calculated. The camera, by nature of its automatism, allows for the intrusion of unintended minutiae and moments.

Keathley argues that these moments are the very *stuff* of cinephilia in its *Cahiers du Cinema* heyday. The cinephile, he contends, maintains a posture towards the screen, a state of both concentration and distraction. The connoisseur of the cinema practices a mode of perception that Keathley calls “panoramic,” one whereby the spectator scans the frame for the marginal, affective detail.<sup>14</sup> Just as the camera is “open” to capturing these moments, so too is a certain type of spectator to noticing them. But why do these marginal objects so intrigue us?

Barthes suggests that the contingencies in a photograph are what often most greatly affect us. The “punctum” is that detail outside the narrative or intent of the image (the “studium”) that stirs us, that “pricks” us.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the most engaging elements of the photograph are quite often those that are there “by accident.” This is key, for what it suggests is that the photographer, no matter how skilled, could not have *created* the contingency. This higher order of affect is the product of something beyond our control, perhaps even our comprehension. Barthes describes it as being “outside” meaning, suspended from the customary signifier-signified relationship. The punctum is alluring because it is, in some sense, ghostly. It is, so to speak, the bottling of lightening by chance.

The belief in the camera’s automatism to pull the affective, contingent elements from the world unites not only the surrealists and Bazin, but Jean Epstein’s concept of *photogénie* as well. The photogenic is that which, like Barthes’ punctum, does not signify and cannot be “put there” by the filmmaker. Rather, it is something latent within its subject that can only make itself manifest with the aid of the camera—perhaps *je ne sais quoi*, in its most generic and clichéd

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<sup>14</sup> See chapter 2 of *Cinephilia and History*.

<sup>15</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howe (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982): 26.

form. The machine then *registers* the affective, ghostly, ephemeral, fleeting characteristic and, though later projection, *amplifies* it. The ordinary world may thus be transformed by the camera's photochemical processes, serving to upset the spectator's customary ways of seeing, to defamiliarize his everyday experience of the world.<sup>16</sup>

Just as automatic writing was thought to provide glimpses of the unconscious, the camera was believed to possess the potential to allow the instances of a-signification, bits of the world that don't contribute to the narrative, to arise. This is, of course, why Bazin so admired neorealism, for the post-war Italian films tended toward—though by no means as programmatically as is often described—an aesthetic of deep-focus cinematography and long takes, approaches that were consistent with the cinema's ontological predispositions. But shots in depth and takes in duration were not ends in and of themselves; rather, they operated in concert with very particular narrative techniques that more precisely constitute the radical departure from classicism that was neorealism—namely, ellipsis and episodic structure.

Bazin, by way of analogy, describes the classical film structure as a bridge over a stream that is constituted by bricks that are designed to be units within larger constructions. These bricks—shall we say “scenes” or perhaps even “shots?”—are then placed together in a continuous fashion so as to create a unified path. Rossellini's films, remarked Bazin, are structured around a different sort of unit—the stone. The rocks that jut above the surface of the water are not intended to be a pathway, though they certainly may be utilized in such a way.

Bazin writes:

[T]he big rocks that lie scattered in a ford are now and ever will be no more than mere rocks. Their reality as rocks is not affected when, leaping from one to another, I use them to cross the river. If the service which they have rendered is the same as that of the

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<sup>16</sup> See Jean Epstein, “For a New Avant-Garde,” in *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: New York University Press, 1978): 24-30.

bridge, it is because I have brought my share of ingenuity to bear on their chance arrangement.

He continues:

In the same way, the neorealist film has a meaning, but it is *a posteriori*, to the extent that it permits our awareness to move from one fact to the next, whereas in the classical artistic composition the meaning is established *a priori*: the house is already there in the brick.<sup>17</sup>

The classical and neorealist structures may begin on the same bank and end on the opposite, but what is most crucial about neorealism is that it requires an effort on the part of the spectator to “link up” the “facts” of the narrative. In the jump from one stone (event, moment) to the next, we may miss some information, but we are forced to contemplate our “footing” on these “facts.”

For Bazin, the narrative was not the preeminent feature of the film, for it could (and should) contain gaps, tangents, deviations from the typical course that is dictated by cause and effect. This de-privileging of narrative in favor of a more ambiguous yet personal, exploratory experience of film again returns us to surrealism, specifically to the spectatorial practice of André Breton, who would enter movie theaters mid-film and watch only until the narrative began to take shape. Once Breton’s viewing of the film was burdened by the intrusion of the plot, he would move on to a different theater for another already in-progress film.<sup>18</sup> For Bazin, Italian neorealism, it may be said, activates a particular type of spectatorship not unlike Breton’s, one that demands a level of engagement far different from that which is required of the more classical text. And Bazin, a “practicing Surrealist” as late as 1942, no doubt gleaned some of his preferences for episodic and elliptical narratives from practices such as Breton’s that “deform”

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<sup>17</sup> Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, 2:99.

<sup>18</sup> Adam Lowenstein, “The Surrealism of the Photographic Image: Bazin, Barthes, and the Digital *Sweet Hereafter*,” *Cinema Journal* 46 (2007): 62.



the traditionally-structured film by bracketing the episodes and establishing the gaps on one's own through spectatorship.<sup>19</sup>

It should now be clear that Bazin's concept of realism cannot be reduced to one defining feature. "For Bazin," writes Adam Lowenstein, "the photograph captures, and allows us to glimpse, a reality that eludes both perception and imagination by uniting mechanical objectivity [...] with affective subjectivity."<sup>20</sup> Here, Lowenstein unites the apparatus with the viewer, though he ignores a potential third term—the filmmaker(s). I submit that Bazin's realism links three distinct realms of the cinema: camera, director, spectator.<sup>21</sup> Put another way, the mechanical ontology of the cinematographic image allows for the affective elements of the real to intrude upon the text. This intrusion is aided by a filmmaker's loosened narrative structure, which activates and then *rewards* an active, probing spectatorship.

To isolate Bazin's conception of realism to one of its three facets leads, I contend, to a dead end. For instance, formalist scholars such as Christopher Wagstaff and Kristin Thompson have been quick to poke holes in the realism of the "Italian Spring," pointing out the conventions and methods that prop up the reality effect of these post-war films.<sup>22</sup> Yet, as we've already seen, Bazin was quite clear in his acknowledgement of the aesthetic nature of the cinematic endeavor, even despite the automatic processes of the camera. In a similar fashion, to focus on Bazin's ontology argument to the exclusion of the aesthetic is to again arrive at the notion of a transparent, "perfect" realism. But a perfectly "real" cinema ceases to be cinema at all, as Bazin

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<sup>19</sup> Dudley Andrew, *What Cinema Is!*, 14.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>21</sup> Dudley's *What Cinema Is!*, published after this thesis was drafted, divides its chapters according to a similar tripartite structure of recording, composing, and screening.

<sup>22</sup> See Christopher Wagstaff, *Italian Neorealism: An Aesthetic Approach* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007) and Kristin Thompson, "Realism in the Cinema: *Bicycle Thieves*" in *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988): 197-217.

plainly stated.<sup>23</sup> Bazin, borrowing his terminology from geometry, thought of the cinema as being an asymptote, a line that tangentially approaches a curve (in this case, the “real”) but never touches it. In fact, the closer we get to “the real,” the stranger it becomes.

In considering Bazin’s essay on *Nights in Cabiria* (1957), Angelo Restivo argues that Fellini, attempting to arrive at the always out-of-reach real, “overshoots” his destination, landing, as it were, on the “other side of things.”<sup>24</sup> And this other side is, indeed, a strange one, for Bazin acknowledges his own failure to adequately describe it, instead relying on the inexact and mystical designation of the “supernatural,” a word which “the reader may replace [...] with whatever he will—‘poetry’ or ‘surrealism’ or ‘magic’—whatever the term that expresses the hidden accord which things maintain with an invisible counterpart of which they are, so to speak, merely the adumbration.”<sup>25</sup> How can the current depiction of a “naïve” Bazin hold in light of a pronouncement such as this, one that suggests the emergence of a *supernatural* neorealism?

So we’ve seen that Bazin’s realist theories are indebted in some degree to surrealism. But what if this were not, in fact, a “one-way street?” The conventional view of both the realists and the surrealists might suggest that the former is concerned with the depiction of surface realities while the latter is more interested in the interior or the unconscious. It is easy to conceive of these clusters as standing on either side of the figurative line in the sand, and, to be fair, many members of the two camps would likely attest to the mutually exclusive nature of their endeavors.

Take, for instance, Luis Buñuel, perhaps the most well-known of the surrealist filmmakers. Writing in 1953, Buñuel is particularly dismissive of Italian neorealism:

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<sup>23</sup> See Bazin, “The Myth of Total Cinema,” in *What is Cinema?*, 1:17-22.

<sup>24</sup> Restivo, *Cinema of Economic Miracles*, 38.

<sup>25</sup> Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, 2:88.

Among modern tendencies of cinema, the best known is what is called “neo-realism.” Its films present to the eyes of the spectator slices of real life, with people taken from the street, and with real buildings and exteriors. With a few exceptions, among which I especially instance *Bicycle Thieves*, neo-realism has done nothing to produce in its films what is proper to the cinema, that is to say, the mysterious and fantastic. . . . The reality of neo-realism is incomplete, official and above all rational; but poetry, mystery, all that completes and enlarges tangible reality, is completely lacking in its working.<sup>26</sup>

And yet, on the very same page, Buñuel praises De Sica’s *Umberto D* (1952) and, ironically, he singles out precisely the same scene that Bazin argues epitomizes the triumph of neorealism, a scene that Bazin described as offering “a glimpse . . . of what a truly realist cinema of time could be.”<sup>27</sup> Writes Buñuel:

In *Umberto D*, one of the most interesting products of neo-realism, an entire reel of ten minutes shows a little maid performing actions which, a little while before, would have appeared unworthy of the screen. We see the servant enter the kitchen, light the stove, put a pan on the gas, throw water on a line of ants who advance on the wall in indian [*sic*] file, give the thermometer to the old man who feels feverish and so on. Despite the trivial nature of the situation, these activities are followed with interest and there is even a certain “suspense.”<sup>28</sup>

Here we have something of an unacknowledged overlap in admiration between the preeminent realist and the preeminent surrealist. It is worth emphasizing that this scene, an exception to the rule for Buñuel, is an indicator of what realism “could be”—a nod toward the future—for Bazin. And note the consistency in both language and tone between Bazin and Buñuel: “poetry,” “mystery,” “supernatural,” “magic.”

Bazin is not the only realist to be engaged in something of a surrealist project. Ian Aitken has cast Siegfried Kracauer, perhaps the only other advocate of realism to share Bazin’s stature, as likewise invested in cinema that mines the tensions of the realism-surrealism dialectic.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> “Cinema, Instrument of Poetry” in *The Shadow and Its Shadow*, Paul Hammond, ed. (San Francisco: City Lights Publishers, 2001): 68.

<sup>27</sup> “De Sica: *Metteur En Scène*,” in *What is Cinema?*, 2:76.

<sup>28</sup> “Cinema, Instrument of Poetry”, 68. Cf. Bazin’s essay on De Sica in which he describes in remarkably similar language the scene of the maid. *What is Cinema?*, 2:76-77.

<sup>29</sup> Ian Aitken, “Distraction and Redemption: Kracauer, Surrealism, and Phenomenology,” *Screen* 39 (1998): 124-140.

Kracauer valued a cinema—necessarily realist, to his thinking—that was equivocal, containing images with “indeterminate symbolism.”<sup>30</sup> This indeterminacy grants the viewer the ability to make associative leaps, to invest the vague image with personal meanings. This therefore “redeems” physical reality by restoring its inherent ambiguity, which has been obscured by modernity. And once again, a realist aesthetic is trumpeted not as an end unto itself but instead for the freedom it grants the viewer in relation to the image.

If we conceive of Italian neorealism as less about the customary “checklist” of location shooting, non-professional actors, and long takes and instead think of it much as the surrealists regarded the cinema in general, we arrive at a point of departure in which neorealism is about opening a way of seeing, of allowing a particular relationship between the world, the screen, and the spectator to emerge. Such a relationship was central not only to Bazin but also to Kracauer, Barthes, Deleuze and others.<sup>31</sup> In fact, I will contend that this way of seeing is profoundly tied to the central questions and paradoxes of the cinema and emerges out of the problems that have confounded and frustrated the discipline of film studies since its infancy.

I have begun here, with both Bazin and Italian neorealism, in order to frame what I consider to be a series of misconceptions about the ideas of the former and the possibilities and inheritance of the latter. This study, however, is not about neorealism proper. Rather, my larger concern is a growing body of realist films that have been produced in America within the last 10 years. By applying the existing paradigms of thinking about realism, we risk two mistakes. First, it is far too easy to dismiss these films as postmodern re-appropriations of older styles. Again, Bazin sees the search for realism as one that must undergo a continual process of reinvention as

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<sup>30</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 298.

<sup>31</sup> Barthes, however, was far more enthusiastic about photography than the cinema, as evidenced by the following: “Whenever I hear the word *cinema*, I can’t help thinking *hall*, rather than *film*.” Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989): 346.

innovations become stale and clichéd.<sup>32</sup> And its reemergence cannot be written off (instantly) as a stylistic simulation, for, as Bazin proclaimed, “history does not repeat itself; we have to get clear the particular form this aesthetic quarrel assumes today.”<sup>33</sup> This study aims to enter directly into this quarrel. Secondly, if, as I have argued, traditional conceptions of realism are flawed, then we perpetuate an incomplete theory by continuing to focus on the most convenient features of realist thinking and aesthetics. As a corrective, I will use Bazin as a springboard to a reconsideration of realism, one that will ultimately rely on a perhaps unlikely “bedfellow” for Bazin: Gilles Deleuze. This pairing might seem unusual initially; however, it is my contention that Deleuze’s theorization of the cinema best explicates and puts to use the intangible, irrational qualities of the cinema that have more often been lumped under the heading of “poetry” as opposed to “realism.” And, despite their numerous differences, both Bazin and Deleuze embraced “outlying” neorealist works such as *Voyage to Italy* (Rossellini, 1954) and, as previously discussed, late Fellini as firmly and unproblematically within the project of neorealism. Moreover, Deleuze shows a keen understanding of Bazin, arguing the point I’ve been making above in the very first *sentences* of the second and final volume of his foray into the cinema:

Against those who defined Italian neo-realism by its social content, Bazin put forward the fundamental requirement of formal aesthetic criteria. According to him, it was a matter of a new form of reality, said to be dispersive, elliptical, errant or wavering, working in blocs, with deliberately weak connections and floating events. That real was no longer represented but “aimed at.”<sup>34</sup>

In order to proceed, I will turn my attention to a film that is every bit as dispersive and elliptical as the neorealism Deleuze describes, though my example is a contemporary one. In so

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<sup>32</sup> See Restivo’s chapter “The Object Antonioni” in *The Cinema of Economic Miracles* (95-123).

<sup>33</sup> Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, 2:16.

<sup>34</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 1.

doing, I aim to show how in many ways Bazin's problem of realism is thought through and answered by Deleuze's cinema project.

“WHAT DO YOU SEE?”

David Gordon Green's 2000 feature debut *George Washington* proves a fruitful beginning point. Set and shot on-location in the rural American South, the film features a cast of non-professional actors who improvise large portions of their dialogue throughout the film's largely episodic structure. *George Washington*, much like notable neorealist pictures *Germany Year Zero* (Rossellini, 1948) and *Bicycle Thieves*, features children in roles of central importance. In short, it carries many of the hallmarks we've come to associate with Italian neorealism, and, as a result, the postwar Italian cinema is the model that is most often evoked in relation to it.<sup>35</sup>

To aid my analysis, I will be relying upon not just Bazin but Deleuze as well. Deleuze demonstrates early on in *The Time-Image* a profound understanding of Bazin's writings, noting how Bazin “showed that neo-realism did not limit itself to the content of its earliest examples.”<sup>36</sup> Deleuze's taxonomy of the cinema largely follows Bazin's periodization and the two often privilege the same films.<sup>37</sup> Most importantly, though, is the central position of neorealism to both of their endeavors. Bazin's legacy, for example, is inextricably linked to the post-war Italian cinema. Likewise, this same body of films bifurcates Deleuze's two books and marks the shift from the classical movement-image to the modern time-image. More crucial to my purposes is the way in which Deleuze's conception of the time-image provides both a vocabulary and

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<sup>35</sup> This is especially true in the realm of popular criticism. See A.O. Scott, “Neo-Neo Realism,” *New York Times*, March 22, 2009.

<sup>36</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 1.

<sup>37</sup> It merits mention that Deleuze's *Cinema* books are largely uninterested in the historical circumstances of cinematic production. Thus, the discussion of neorealism isn't simply the break between the two books, but it is also a significant shift in Deleuze's method, again underscoring the importance of post-war Italy to his philosophy.

methodology to address Bazin's later writings on the cinema that situate the realist filmic image in a liminal space between reality and dream, subjective and objective. In short, Deleuze provides an intervention into the problem of realism that, as we've seen, Bazin can only imprecisely label "supernatural."

And why then *George Washington*? First, as suggested above, it fits many of the customary realist criteria; if one were so inclined, she could easily apply the "naïve" writings of Bazin and, by focusing on the film's depiction of poverty and non-professional players, mount a critique from the well-beaten path. Yet there remains something more elusive at play in Green's film. In nearly the same breath that critics praise the movie for its fidelity to reality and its evocation of the particularities of the Southern, African-American experience, they likewise label it "dreamlike," "lyrical," akin to a "sleepwalk."<sup>38</sup> In short, the film is at once realist and impressionist, lucid and hallucinatory.

*George Washington* is confounding in the moments in which it deviates from the facile realist "checklist"—location shooting, non-professional actors, long takes, and the like. *George Washington* is sprinkled throughout with peculiar moments, such as a fedora burning in front of a church or a boy delivering a soliloquy while dressed in a dinosaur mask. Yet the largest anomaly—the one most frequently avoided by critics—is the film's odd climax, where a car crash is treated like a nuclear meltdown, a film crew (ostensibly Green's) is seen recording the protagonist, and our narrator, heretofore speaking in the past tense, breaks into the present tense and a different vocal register as she asks, over the image of the hero, "what do you see?" To

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<sup>38</sup> Peter Travers, Review of *George Washington*, *Rolling Stone*, December 10, 2000, 113; Jonathan Rosenbaum, Review of *George Washington*, *Chicago Reader*, <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/george-washington/Film?oid=1064655>; Peter Rainer, "Witch Craft," *New York Magazine*, November 6, 2000, <http://nymag.com/nymetro/movies/reviews/4020/>

answer this question is to raise a second one: how do we treat sleepwalks that become nightmares?

The narrator's question brings to the fore other problems that will become quite consequential to the remainder of this study. Specifically, to whom is the question addressed? The most obvious answer, as we shall see, is that it is "contained" within the diegesis, that the narrator is posing a rhetorical question. But what if it extends to the spectator? The indefinite nature of the pronoun *you* in this instance serves as a fitting metaphor for the problems that will become central in the following chapters, for, as will soon become apparent, it opens up our investigation into the realm between subjective and objective while simultaneously highlighting the power of a voice divorced from the image of its bearer. The interplay between image and sound that is introduced here will become central in chapters 2 and 3.

*George Washington* follows the lives of a group of mostly African-American youths in a small town in North Carolina bound together by their poverty and playful explorations of their decaying locale. Green structures the film episodically, though bits of character and conflict emerge: Buddy (Curtis Cotton, III), a clownish performer, is distraught at his girlfriend Nasia's (Candace Evanofski) rejection of him in favor of the more mature George (Donald Holden), a quiet youth with a head deformity and a preoccupation with historic figures and heroic deeds. When careless roughhousing results in the accidental death of Buddy, George, along with the older, austere Vernon (Damian Jewan Lee) and elfish Sonya (Rachael Handy), inexplicably decide to hide the body and vow silence. Nasia provides the (unreliable) narration, believing that Buddy, heartbroken at their break-up, has run away. The film centers in its second half on the unusual responses of the alliance, as George attempts to literally become the hero he daydreams of being, Sonya intensifies her petty thievery, and Vernon bears the guilt of the group's actions.



The landscape of *George Washington* is a peculiar one, as the natural and man-made elements seem to have fought to a draw in a war of attrition. Falling-apart industrial facilities are covered in rust; the railroads, seemingly the only employer in the town, are likewise decrepit; trains rarely are seen coming or going, as the grass has grown over portions of the tracks, suggesting an economy that once flourished but now ceases to be. Green abstracts this landscape even further by frequently placing pieces of furniture in and around these industrial wastelands while later depicting trees breaking through the concrete floors of abandoned schoolhouses (see figs. 1 and 2). In this world, places of labor become playgrounds or lounges while interior spaces form unlikely greenhouses.



Figure 1. The “any-space-whatever”: a deserted yet inhabited space of post-industrial rubble<sup>39</sup>

<sup>39</sup> This and all subsequent images from *George Washington* are digital frame captures by the author. *George Washington*. DVD. Directed by David Gordon Green. 2000; New York: The Criterion Collection, 2000.



Figure 2. The contamination of inside and outside space

This contamination of outside and inside recalls the war-torn spaces of neorealism that Deleuze dubbed “any-spaces-whatever: deserted but inhabited, disused warehouses, waste ground, cities in the course of demolition and construction.”<sup>40</sup> The rubble-filled spaces of post-war Italian cinema inaugurated a “cinema of the seer” whereby the characters, as a result of the trauma of the war, suffer a breakdown of “the sensorimotor schemata,” resulting in their transformation from active, effectual characters to by-standing spectators stripped of their agency.<sup>41</sup> However, it is not war that has disrupted the ability to act in this instance but rather the town’s economic deterioration; its cessation of production has ushered in the trauma that has created the any-space-whatever, which is traversed by children who, to borrow Deleuze’s description of the youth of neorealism, are “affected by a certain motor helplessness, but one

<sup>40</sup> Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, xi.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

which makes them all the more capable of seeing and hearing.”<sup>42</sup> Deleuze’s description of the space of neorealism—note his absence of any discussion of studio or location shooting—helps to explain the unsettling features of *George Washington*’s landscape. Green creates a dreamlike, poetic, even hallucinatory realm, one where, to quote Deleuze, “we no longer know what is imaginary or real, physical or mental.”<sup>43</sup> Thus, Deleuze’s description of an ephemeral environment in neorealism clearly holds true in *George Washington*, which “feels” real, yet somehow heightened, at once too vivid and abstract.

*George Washington* is difficult to interpret precisely because it contains instances that cannot be said to “signify” in any rational way. For example, there is a brief scene in the film in which a fedora sits aflame on the grass outside a church. At no time before or after this scene do we ever learn to whom the hat belongs, who set it on fire, or how it got there. In short, the scene seems to be there for no good reason other than an expressionistic directorial flourish. Instead, we watch an object denied any significance burn in act that is likewise stripped of any symbolic meaning. By highlighting an object that fails to “connect” to the larger narrative, Green returns us to the notion of contingency that is so central to not only to Bazin but also to Barthes and especially to Kracauer. This hat needn’t be in the film, and yet it is. And as it smolders, we watch, suspended momentarily from an already loose narrative, free to ponder the hat’s “hat-ness.” Deleuze, by no stretch of the imagination a “realist,” still discusses objects such as this one in terms remarkably similar to how Bazin, Barthes, and Kracauer theorized the contingent detail in the mechanical image. In the pre-war movement-image era, posits Deleuze, “objects and settings already had a reality of their own, but it was functional reality, strictly determined by the

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 7.

demands of the situation.”<sup>44</sup> On the contrary, in the time-image of the post-war era, “objects and settings take on an autonomous, material reality which gives them an importance in themselves.”<sup>45</sup> What we are left with is a moment of intensity, revealing “a visual and sound nakedness, crudeness and brutality which make it unbearable.”<sup>46</sup> By denying select objects of the film a signifiatory “purpose,” Green forces the spectator into what Deleuze calls an “encounter,” a “limit circumstance”<sup>47</sup> in which the spectator establishes a “dreamlike connection through the intermediary of the liberated sense organs.”<sup>48</sup> This granting of autonomy to the object will extend, as we shall see, into the realm of sound and, ultimately, into the space between subjective and objective.

#### THE FREE INDIRECT AND THE LIMIT SITUATION

Green’s off-kilter approach to *George Washington*, which, as noted above, fits nearly every item on a checklist of neorealism as traditionally conceived, culminates in its most confounding sequence. George, remembering Buddy’s indifference to religion and (presumably) concerned that he may have been denied of an afterlife, removes the boy’s body from its well-hidden place and baptizes the corpse in a river. When the body is later found, Vernon and Sonya, fearful of arrest, steal a car and attempt to run away, thus beginning the film’s most startling shift in tone.

The sequence begins with George in full hero regalia surveying the wreckage of Sonya and Vernon’s stolen vehicle, which, according to Nasia’s narration, flipped during their unseen escape attempt. Workers in hazmat suits spray fire extinguishers at the still-spinning tires as various children attempt to summarize the events that transpired to a television news crew

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 4

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 3

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 6

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 4

already on site. George then proceeds to run away from the scene as Green cuts to a shot of Nasia stopping to tie her shoe in front of a railroad track, where she sees an injured Vernon and Sonya escaping on foot along the tracks. Back to George: he continues to run, this time turning to look over his shoulder. He appears frantic, weakened, as he moves towards the outer wall of an abandoned factory. From the apparent point-of-view of George, a news reporter and cameraperson sprint toward him as if seeking comment. George falls against the wall and slouches to the ground as his eyes roll back. From an extreme wide shot, we see a film crew (noticeably different than the news crew we just saw, as evidenced by the 35mm camera and boom microphone as opposed to the video equipment and reporter's handheld mic) recording (the sleeping, dead, unconscious?) George. Green next cuts to a shot of an unharmed George sitting in a chair, lavalier microphone pinned to his shirt, as an unseen interviewer asks what George considers the most important attributes of a hero and which of those he possesses to qualify.

Green provides some clues of sorts earlier in the film that allow me, with the aid of Deleuze, to stake an interpretative claim. During a scene in which George and Vernon discuss their respective diving abilities with younger boys in the locker room of the community pool, Nasia is seen peeking around a corner as if she were spying on the conversation taking place (see figs. 3 and 4). Here, Nasia is granted access into a privileged instance and space. It would be easily dismissed, however, if it weren't for a similar scene just prior to the climatic sequence. George, apparently alone on a rooftop, throws the helmet that protects his frail head to the ground (see fig. 5). Again, Nasia is seen standing behind a wall, watching. (see fig. 6) At no point in either of these two instructive scenes is she ever framed within the same shot as the boys or as George. She does not participate or interact with the other characters, nor do they appear to

be aware of her presence. Likewise, when we see Vernon and Sonya along the tracks, Green supplies us no master shot.

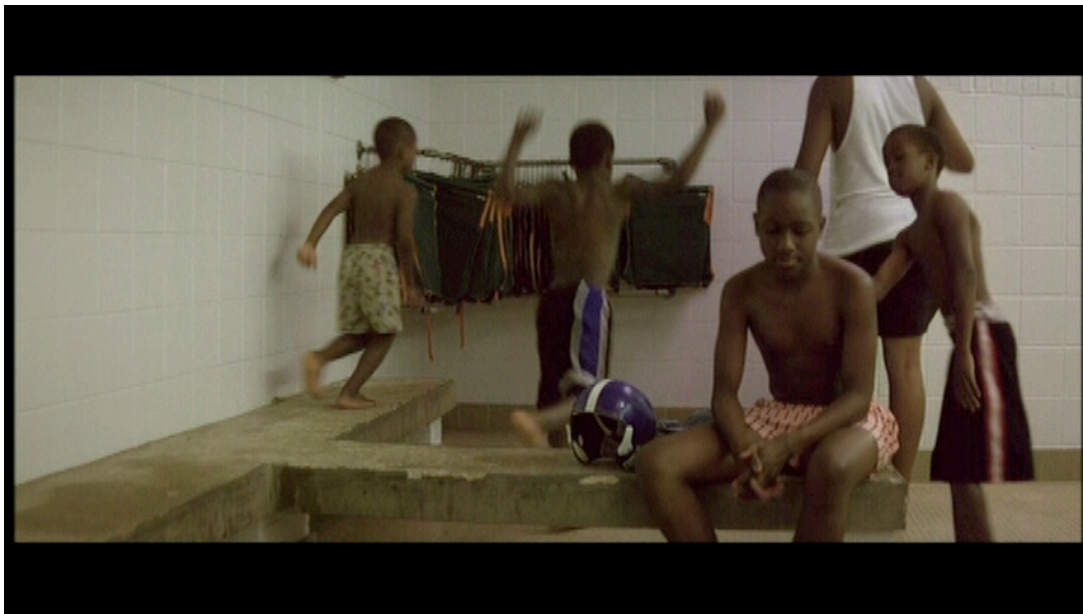


Figure 3. George (Donald Holden) in the boys' locker room



Figure 4. Next shot: Nasia (Candace Evanofski) peers from around the corner.





Figure 5. George casts his helmet off the ledge in an apparent private moment.

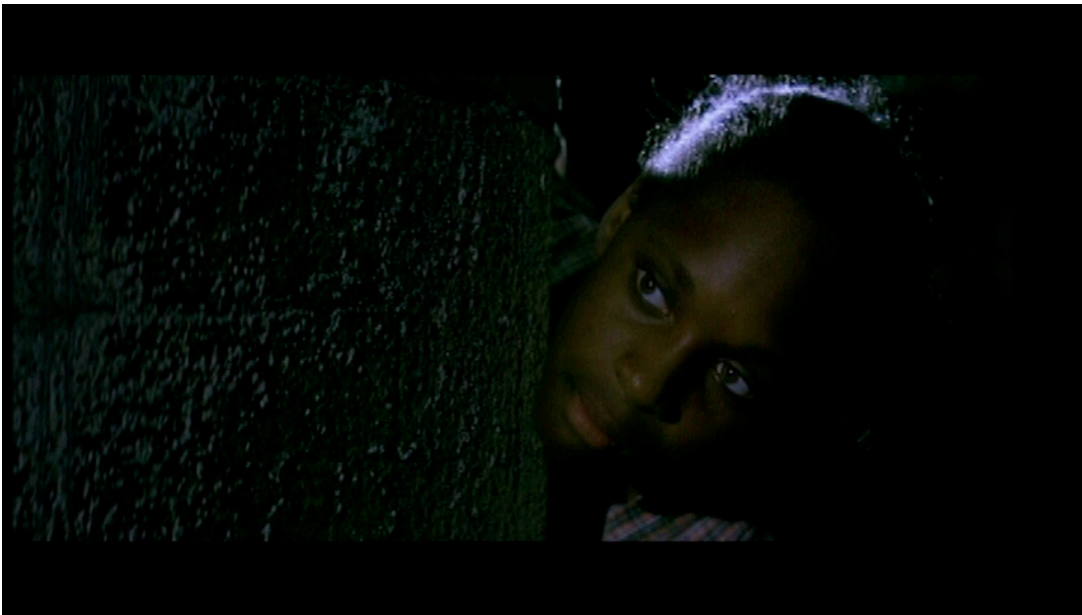


Figure 6. Nasia, once again viewing privileged instances

It seems unlikely that Nasia was actually present in either of these moments. What, then, might we make of her presence? Following Pasolini, Deleuze theorizes a free indirect style of cinematic enunciation, whereby the “distinction between what the character [sees] subjectively and what the character [sees] objectively [vanishes], not in favor of one or the other, but because

the camera [assumes] a subjective presence, [acquires] an internal vision, which [enters] into a relation of simulation with the character's way of seeing."<sup>49</sup> In the free indirect, we have a contamination of voices, a third position between subjective and objective that is not fixed, but rather marks the space between the two poles in a constant oscillation. Thus, Nasia, our narrator, attempts to tell the story of the summer we see in the film, but, reaching the limit situation, the indiscernible moment, switches gears. No longer able to make sense of the events that next took place, we enter into her subjective thoughts, but "spoken" *as if filtered through the consciousness of George*. At no other point in the film are we ever provided a shot that connotes George's subjective vision as we do in the shot in which the reporters run towards him, microphone in outstretched arms. It is my contention that what we are seeing is Nasia creating a fiction, an assumption, of George's state of mind, engaging in what Deleuze terms a process of "fabulation," of storytelling. Here, the narrator, confronting the limits of her own ability to understand the events of that fateful summer, begins to fill in the gaps. Thus, in the climactic scene, we shift between multiple positions: George's subjectivity; Nasia, at once as character within the story and again as supplier of the narration; and that of director Green, whose enunciative position forms the camera consciousness. Green's presence complicates the proceedings even further, as he "plays" George's unseen interviewer in the *denouement*. Hence, the director's voice literally enters into the film. The schizophrenic, hallucinatory nature of the ending of *George Washington* derives precisely from its polyvocality, as Nasia's memory and recounting of events collides with the spectator's (vis-à-vis Green's) entry into George's consciousness, all of which is further complicated by the seeming presentness of the depiction

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 148. It should be noted that, though he never addressed the topic in explicit terms, Bazin recognized and admired cinematic moments of the free indirect. For instance, in discussing Agnès Varda, Bazin writes, "Varda links her work to the intimate diary or better still to a kind of first person *récit* that for discretion's sake prefers to appear in third person." Quoted in Dudley Andrew, *What Cinema Is!*, 106.



before us. Are we witnessing fantasy, reality, dream, memory? In Deleuze, we find that there is no answer, for the real and virtual, the past and the present coexist. To consider this further, though, we must clarify two of Deleuze's key concepts—the crystal and the circuit.

Within the *Cinema* books, Deleuze does not distinguish between what is actual (i.e., real, tangible) and what virtual (e.g., mental images, dreams); in fact, the distinction is irrelevant to Deleuze, for both the actual and the virtual are two sides of the *same image*. That one is grounded in the material world is beside the point, particularly in the time-image, where the ability to discern between images is especially enfeebled. Deleuze suggests the fitting analogy of a mirror:

It is as if an image in a mirror [...] came to life, assumed independence and passed into the actual, even if this meant that the actual image returned into the mirror and resumed its place in the postcard or photo, following a double movement of liberation and capture.<sup>50</sup>

These duplicate images oscillate or alternate between one another, an alternation that Deleuze calls a “circuit.” In such a circuit

the real and the imaginary, the physical and the mental, or rather their images, continually [follow] each other, running behind each other and referring back to each other around a point of indiscernability. But this point of indiscernability is precisely constituted by the smallest circle, that is, the coalescence of the actual image and the virtual image, the image with two sides, actual and virtual at the same time.<sup>51</sup>

This smallest circuit forms the Deleuzian “crystal”: the exact point where the real, present moment fuses with its virtual double, which springs from the mind of the perceiving subject. In short, the virtual can be said to be always, already in the past, for it corresponds to an extent with human memory. Hence, with the crystal-image, we begin to experience time as it is: at once present and simultaneously past.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 69.

Thus, the mixing of voices and of enunciative positions in *George Washington* serves to cloud the distinction between the actual—in this case, what *actually occurred* within the diegesis of the film—and the virtual—that is, what Nasia *invents or fabulates*; the two cannot be distinguished. This circuit is made explicit with George’s actions in the scene in question. As we first see George, he runs as if responding to a call for help; upon our return to him, he appears to be moving to avoid capture. Thus, in one instance, we see an image of George and in the next, we see that image’s mirror opposite. Deleuze, speaking of both Hitchcock generally and more specifically of Visconti’s founding neorealist film *Ossessione* (1943), describes the time-image’s ineffectual hero as being “prey to a vision, pursued by it or pursuing it, rather than engaged in an action.”<sup>52</sup> We can easily see how these words map on to this contemporary example during George’s failed heroics (see figs. 7 and 8).

This oneiric climax, completely ungrounded in any “objective truth” or stable narrative point-of-view, would at first seem incompatible with a traditional conception of what realism is; yet Deleuze’s understanding demonstrates how such a sequence is fully in line with what he saw emerging in the post-war Italian cinema, for fundamental to neorealism are “subjective images, memories of childhood, sound and visual dreams or fantasies, where the character does not act without seeing himself acting, complicit viewer of the role he himself is playing.”<sup>53</sup>

The ending of *George Washington* is an unsettling one; for the bulk of the film, Nasia’s authority as narrator accompanies us as we, to return to Bazin’s analogy, leap from rock to rock, from fact to fact. Suddenly, with no warning, we experience a rupture in the narrative and find ourselves in a gap, a space in between objective and subjective, between dream and wakefulness, real and virtual. And there we are left with her question: “what do you see?” Nasia is incapable

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<sup>52</sup> Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 3. For an illuminating discussion of *Ossessione*’s place within the history of neorealism, see Restivo, 24.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.



Figure 7. The actual and virtual as mirror image



Figure 8. George, now retreating from an unseen threat. Deleuze: “he is prey to a vision, pursued by it or pursuing it...”

of answering, so at first she turns to her own fiction and then, finally, to us, for the answer.

George, at the beginning and the ending of the film, is enigmatic, awkward, suffering from delusions of grandeur. Nasia is our seer, not George, nor Sonya, nor Vernon, and, as such, Nasia

suffers from a paralysis of action. Nasia, like Ingrid Bergman in *Europa '51*, “has learnt to see.”<sup>54</sup> By seeing in this manner (the virtual and the actual, both past and present simultaneously), she points us back to Bazin, who saw in neorealism something beyond a goal of objectivity and verisimilitude. For Bazin, the camera produces “an image that is a reality of nature, namely, an hallucination that is also a fact.”<sup>55</sup>

I will argue moving forward that perhaps the greatest potential of the cinema—and why such a varied array of thinkers, theorists, and scholars have held out such hope for it—is that it holds out the promise of alternate ways of seeing *and* hearing, ways that might hone the normal human faculties that have been dulled by the proliferation of the image in the postmodern. Realism, to quote Bazin, rids us of “the piled-up preconceptions” and “the spiritual dust and grime” that obscure our experience of the world.<sup>56</sup> In short, the great stakes of realism that have run like a current underneath the bulk of theories of it, are the encounters with the ineffable, the uncanny—the limit situation of our own existence.

GREEN, *UN NOIR*

“[T]he people do not pass over to the side of the camera without the camera having passed over to the side of the people.”<sup>57</sup>—Gilles Deleuze

*George Washington* brings into play another idea crucial to Deleuze: the “powers of the false.”<sup>58</sup> In the movement-image, the cinematic “description” is “presented as independent of the description which the camera gives of it”; with the emergence of the crystal, we encounter a “second pole of consciousness,” which exposes the relationship between the real and the

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>55</sup> Bazin, *What is Cinema?* 1:16.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>57</sup> Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 154.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 126-155. Rodowick’s explication in the sixth chapter of *Gilles Deleuze’s Time Machine* is especially helpful in navigating this most tricky of concepts.

imaginary.<sup>59</sup> Neorealism, for Deleuze, is of paramount importance, not because of its seeming objectivity or its purported political project, but because these films “extract from [their locations] those pure descriptions which develop a *creative and destructive function*.”<sup>60</sup> This function is founded upon an idea that is not only crucial to Deleuze’s purposes but also to Bazin: the notion of contingency.<sup>61</sup> Deleuze, by channeling Leibniz, describes the coexistence of what would seem to be mutually exclusive results emerging from the same historical reality. For example, we may predict that the outcome of an upcoming event may be either *x* or *y*. If the result winds up being *x*, then it falsifies what was a truth in the past, that *y* was possible. By extension, if *y* was not a possibility, then *x* was, in a way, inevitable, and therefore not subject to factors that might have made it otherwise. In essence, we have (yet another) paradox, one that demonstrates that “when this present becomes past, we must choose between incongruous truths.”<sup>62</sup> Thus, *x* and *y* are “impossible”: not simply contradictory, but, oddly, equally valid and yet invalidated by the other.

The notion of impossibility proves foundational to what is perhaps Deleuze’s most complex and baffling argument in the *Cinema* books. Here, we have two positions that begin as truths that eventually have the potential to falsify the other. Neither, though, is intrinsically false. From this peculiar notion, Deleuze introduces the powers of the false, the ability of the cinema not simply to speak for colonized peoples but to “call a people into being.” Such a proclamation is curious on two levels: first, we tend to think, especially in relation to the postcolonial ethnographic cinema that Deleuze examines, that colonized identities are liberated by the truth

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 126-7.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 126, emphasis mine.

<sup>61</sup> Deleuze, *What is Cinema?*, 2:68.

<sup>62</sup> D.N. Rodowick, *Gilles Deleuze’s Time Machine* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 97.

and conversely are caged by falsities. Secondly, how does the filmic medium, mere light collected and projected on a screen, *create* a people?

The answer to this riddle once again lies with the free indirect. Let us think of the “truth”—demonstrated earlier as being simultaneously true and false—of the colonized as one constructed by the colonizer. By dictating both the record of history and the tongue in which that history is recounted, the colonizer comes to manufacture the truth. The subjects then may counter this truth with another that in turn falsifies the original. This is not, however, a matter of correction, of substituting the actual reality for the one created and endorsed by the oppressors. Rather, through a process of storytelling, of fabulation, the colonized subvert the reality of the colonizers. This process of fabulation, though, is aided by the presence of an intercessor, one who provides the means by which the “invented” story circulates—in terms of the *Cinema* books, this intercessor is, obviously, the filmmaker. As describes Deleuze, in order to accomplish this complex subversion, the two parties in the creative endeavor must “become” one another: the filmmaker, a subject; the subject, a filmmaker. Deleuze, in speaking of Shirley Clarke and her *Portrait of Jason* (1967), writes that “the film she wanted to make about herself became the one she made about Jason.”<sup>63</sup> Thus, Clarke is as much the subject of the film as is the titular performer. As we will see, this sort of becoming finds articulation in *George Washington*.

Deleuze’s aim here is to undo the Cartesian subject, the idea that Ego=Ego, an equation that Rodowick describes as being “alien” to Deleuze’s entire philosophical outlook.<sup>64</sup> The traditional documentary in which an “outsider” explores another culture or group reinforces the differing status of the filmmakers and the film’s subjects. In short, it reifies the status of another as The Other, as filmmaker and subject of the film remain “separate.” The only solution to this

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<sup>63</sup> Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 154.

<sup>64</sup> Rodowick, *Deleuze’s Time Machine*, 140.

conundrum is for the two sides to approach one another in a becoming, a transformation, a metamorphosis. By the filmmaker speaking her thoughts through the language of the colonized, she becomes something other than herself—the “I is another” formulation that Deleuze takes from Rimbaud.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, the documentary subject, in constructing not what he was or is but, instead, what he might become, is engaged in a process of creation, of storytelling. Thus, both the documentary filmmaker and the subject of the documentary collectively craft a fiction. This fiction, a story of possibility, has the potential of awakening the sense of possibility in others similarly situated. The “objectivity” of the filmmaker is “corrupted” by his or her speaking in the manner of the subjects of her film. And by doing so, she assists in the falsification of history as dictated by the colonizer and, at once, to perpetuate a fiction, the performance of the colonized as film subjects.

How does this relate to *George Washington*? In short, the film is an exemplar of the powers of the false. I have already detailed its unusual story of a segment of the population who rarely garners such an empathetic, attentive lens: the poor black youth of the American South. Perhaps even more surprising is the fact that director David Gordon Green is white. The presence of the free indirect does not only create an indiscernibility of past and present or memory and dream, but similarly presents just this sort of fabulation, this co-falsifying narrative. Nasia, in the privileged position of narrator, speaks for her (and the film’s) hero, George, but in the manner in which she would *imagine* him to speak for himself. Recall the ending of the film, where George is first seen running towards the car accident, then away from it, and is last shown being

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<sup>65</sup> Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 153. This line comes from Rimbaud’s 1871 letter to Demeny, one that appears immensely influential on Deleuze’s work. Note the similarities in phrasing and the conceptual commonalities: “I witness the unfolding of my own thought: I watch it, I hear it. ... I say one must become a *seer*, make oneself a *seer*. The Poet makes himself a *seer* by a long, rational and immense *disordering of the senses*. ... Let him die charging among those unutterable, unnameable things.” Arthur Rimbaud, “Excerpt from ‘Lettre à Paul Demeny: Charleville, 15 mai 1871’”, trans by A.S. Kline, <http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/French/Rimbaud3.htm>; Rimbaud’s italics.

interviewed by a supposed news reporter about his heroism. Yet, what heroic act did he accomplish? We know that he arrived on the scene too late to prevent the crash, and we never again see Vernon or Sonya, so we may assume that George had no hand in their rescue or apprehension. Thus, into the fact of the car crash, Nasia inserts an imagined intervention by George, one that conforms to both her and George's hope that he would one day become a hero on par with his idols. Yet the visual narration contradicts Nasia's account by showing George retreating and collapsing. Both outcomes are mutually exclusive: each story falsifies the other, and both are aided by Green, who refuses to provide an answer and declines to clarify "what really happened."

How, then, does this fabulation invent a people? Postcolonial theory has taught us to extend the concept of colonialism and imperialism beyond the boundaries of nations and to apply it to marginalized groups, even (and perhaps especially) to those in the West. By framing the young characters of *George Washington* as subaltern subjects, we push free indirect discourse to its more politically engaged dimension. In the epigraph above that opened this section, Deleuze describes the process of fabulation as a crossing over of sides, an approach toward the opposite partner in the filmic endeavor. Green intentionally avoided making a film about the tribulations of his own (white, middle-class) and instead brought an ethnographic perspective to *George Washington*. "In America," says Green, "I think there's a certain economic level where race really stops being an issue, because everyone's already got enough going on just trying to put food on the table. Plus, I don't necessarily think 26-year-old white guys are that interesting. So why would I want to make another movie about their coffee shops and romantic pitfalls?"<sup>66</sup> By

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<sup>66</sup> David Gordon Green, "If I Ever do Anything Clever, Shoot Me," interview with Danny Leigh, *The Guardian*, 25 September 2001. Despite this proclamation, Green's second feature *All the Real Girls* (2003) tackles precisely this, the love lives of twenty-six-year-olds, though in an episodic, poetic style somewhat reminiscent of *George Washington*.



choosing to focus on poor blacks in the post-industrial American South, Green initiates the two-way process of becoming.

Green cast his film by visiting churches, youth groups, and playgrounds to find his cast of non-professionals. By adopting an episodic narrative structure and allowing the children to improvise their lines according to his loose scenario, Green was freed to organize his film around only those scenes that “worked,” for few scenes were crucial in terms of plot and were therefore expendable.<sup>67</sup> It is in this sense that the film clearly displays its neorealist inheritance as well as opening up the opportunity for the creation of a people, as it allows Green’s actors to “play” in a way that thoroughly aligns with Deleuze’s powers of the false. In order to proceed, we must first clarify some terminology. David Rodowick points out that the description of the word *fabulation* as synonymous with “storytelling” in Tomlinson’s and Galeta’s translation of *Cinema 2* loses some of the specificity of the book’s original French. Deleuze’s original term (*récit*) is “neither precisely a document nor a fiction, but a form of enunciation that gravitates between these two poles in a free indirect relation.” Rodowick describes fabulation as being “beyond” either narration or description, beyond the mimetic (i.e., showing or simulative) and the diegetic (i.e., narrative or telling).<sup>68</sup> For example, the camera directly represents that profilmic event and, thus, performs a mimetic function. At the same time, the selection and ordering of events via editing (and, to an extent, the inclusion and exclusion that is the framing of the shot) conforms to the dramatic or diegetic mode. It is apparent that these two modes function simultaneously in the cinema; with Deleuze, though, designating an element of the visual or audio tracks as a function of one or the other becomes quite difficult. We have seen in the case of *George Washington* that we cannot attribute the diegesis unproblematically to Nasia’s narratorial logic. Likewise, the

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<sup>67</sup> David Gordon Green Interview—No Budget Strategy [video]. (2009). Retrieved March 3, 2010, from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4h3tAMIqf3w>

<sup>68</sup> Rodowick, *Deleuze’s Time Machine*, 157.

mimetic event is complicated, for we cannot know if what we are seeing and hearing actually happened or if it is fantasy. Further, if it is indeed fantasy, to whom can we attribute this figment? Hence, *fabulation* refers not simply to “storytelling,” nor a blending of the mimetic and diegetic modes, but a fundamental disturbance between the two.

This disturbance is the key to *George Washington*. The disruption of the usual stable relationship between subjectivity and objectivity, sound and image creates a becoming, a mutual transformation in which real children play fictional ones and, through this process and with the help of Green, these fictions become real, lies becomes truths. And in so doing, Green relinquishes the position of director who passively or objectively records the “real” before him and, instead, becomes one of his subjects. The young children of *George Washington* do not sound a cry that is uniquely that of poor, black kids in the post-industrial South. Rather, they and Green create a highly specific collective enunciation that awakens those similarly situated in yet another becoming, thereby “calling into existence” those that might not have existed before. For this to occur, the children of the film had to step towards the camera to become they who tell their story. And David Gordon Green, the director, had to become a young black child, *un noir*.

It is in light of this becoming that the film’s title becomes especially significant: George Washington, having effectively founded the nation, is the signifier to which one points to unify the concept of America—as governmental seat, preeminent “founding father,” literally exchanged as currency. But whereas George Washington can be said to have called forth the white- and male-dominated nation, *George Washington* founds the “missing people,” those whose existence cannot be subsumed under the nation as signified by the film’s namesake.

What I’ve hope to demonstrate to this point is that to frame *George Washington* in the terms of an “objective” realist aesthetic is to overlook its most startling achievement—its

obliteration of the distinction between filmmaker and subject. Moreover, in placing us briefly within the interstice of the ostensible real and the obvious fiction, the film transiently grasps the irrationality that subtends the rational, coherent world that the traditional conception of realism took as its mission to depict. In so doing, it precisely locates that which I contend is what unites the cast of theorists (Bazin, Kracauer, Barthes, Breton, Buñuel, etc) that I put into conversation at the beginning of this chapter. That is to say, the cinema lends itself to the middle ground, of being between two registers: real and fantasy, subjective and objective, actual and virtual, diegetic and mimetic. The specific benefit of Deleuze is that he articulates a framework to approach these contradictory characteristics, these seeming paradoxes that have long been a conundrum for film theory. It is for this reason that Deleuze will remain central moving forward.

## CHAPTER 2

### STORYTELLING

We looked in the previous chapter at *George Washington*, for it seems to fit comfortably within the customary, rudimentary characteristics of a realist cinema with its location shooting, non-professional actors, and its depictions of impoverished youth (though these images are as oblique as they are bleak). More interesting to me, though, is how such an easy categorization is shot through with contradictions, contradictions that were acknowledged not only Bazin but also Barthes, Breton, Epstein, and others as being both exceedingly rare *and* yet essential to the filmic image. In this case, David Gordon Green's camera is, as Dudley Andrew might describe it, "open to the world" in such a way as to bring into view the irrational, the intersubjective, the oneiric.<sup>69</sup> In other words, that which subtends the real is brought forth, either "found" or "called into being."

I want to next turn my attention to another set of examples, this time from the recent movement of sorts known as "Mumblecore," for, like *George Washington*, it displays a similar set of incongruities. These instances certainly fit the common criteria, the checklist of the neorealist inheritance. And yet, the "real" in these films tends to evoke another realm altogether. This realm, one that Bazin labeled "poetic" and "mysterious," is situated on the other side of the "objective" real; these films, as we shall see, perch us somewhere in between worlds.

And though Mumblecore certainly aligns with my concerns from the previous chapter, these films also push our discussion into another register as well, for the majority of Mumblecore filmmakers shoot digitally. Thus, it raises both aesthetic and theoretical questions about the possibilities of realism in the age of ones and zeroes. For instance, how does the digital change

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<sup>69</sup> Dudley Andrew, *What Cinema Is!*, 98.

the parameters of the discussion of realism when the image is no longer photochemically derived? Furthermore, what do we make of a realist aesthetic that is simultaneously indebted to and critical of digital technology, its manipulability, and its contribution to the proliferation of the image in the postmodern? The texts in question in this chapter foreground their characters' complex relationships between themselves and the images they create. That these characters, we find, are played by their directors shifts the films at hand from a mere appropriation of older realist styles and into a meta-cinematic self-critique of the production of images and how we use them.

Let us consider generally, before moving into specific examples, Mumblecore as a whole. Mumblecore derives its name from its characters' tendency to mutter their words, a by-product of improvisation, scriptlessness, and the natural speech patterns of the non-actors cast in the roles. The Mumblecore group coalesced in 2006 at the South by Southwest Film Festival in Austin, Texas, when several films appeared in and out of competition that were marked by a similar aesthetic and a preoccupation with the love lives of post-collegiate twenty-somethings. Detecting a shared sensibility, these directors became friends and soon began to cast one another in their projects, leading *Filmmaker* magazine to comically create a flowchart of the various and multiple associations amongst the frequently intermingled group.

Prominent filmmakers within the collective include Joe Swanberg (*Hannah Takes the Stairs* [2007], *Nights and Weekends* [2008]), Andrew Bujalski (*Funny Ha Ha* [2002], *Mutual Appreciation* [2005]), The Duplass Brothers (*The Puffy Chair* [2005], *Baghead* [2008]) and Aaron Katz (*Dance Party USA* [2006], *Quiet City* [2007]). Though there are clear differences among them—Bujalski's French New Wave influences and his shooting on 16mm, Swanberg's

frank sexuality, The Duplass Brothers' commercial leanings, Katz' lyrical pillow shots—the communicative floundering of the characters remains Mumblecore's most salient feature. This enfeeblement extends itself, though, beyond the realm of talking, as these urban hipsters also suffer from emotional over-cautiousness and a paralyzing fear of action.

The inability to act or engage closely parallels with the passive protagonists Deleuze described in *The Time-Image*, those characters who, following the trauma of war, found themselves no longer the active and able protagonists of the classical “movement-image”; rather, we have a “new race of characters [...], kind of mutant: they saw rather acted, they were seers.”<sup>70</sup> As we've seen, this shift in agency that begins with neorealism is, according to Deleuze, fundamental to the emergence of the time-image, a new regime of the image in which the “sensory-motor linkage”<sup>71</sup> has been loosened, making way for “pure optical and sound situations.”<sup>72</sup> In this new regime, filmic characters passively record the world around them as opposed to affecting it in any measurable manner. In short, the protagonists have become “sleepwalkers.”<sup>73</sup> In the case of Mumblecore, love and relationships make up the most frequent dramatic crises of these films, yet they rarely resemble Hollywood romances, where the characters' desires are clearly laid out in the first act and the conflict resolves itself when the barriers to their couplings are either eliminated or proven insurmountable. Here, such a trajectory seems impossible, for in order to initiate an action, one would have to be able to articulate a desire. This proves to be the crisis of Mumblecore, for the desire is there, but the agency, the volition, is missing.

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<sup>70</sup> Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, xi.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 3.

These problems—of connection, of representation, of realism—are quite pronounced in the work of Joe Swanberg, the most prolific and controversial of the Mumblecore filmmakers. Swanberg, unlike Bujalski or Katz, fully embraces a digital aesthetic, one that seems to proudly showcase the technical limitations of his “prosumer” equipment. For instance, Swanberg utilizes the 1.33:1 aspect ratio native to the camera as opposed to masking it to replicate the more standard “cinematic” 1.85:1; likewise, he rarely “corrects” fluorescent lighting and pushes his camera to the brinks of its contrast range, resulting in a “blown out” image. Despite the highlighted low-fi visuals, Swanberg’s first feature, *Kissing on the Mouth*, draws my attention not for its look so much as its sound, which radically deviates from the typical deployment of voice-over narration, marks the film as within the regime of the time-image, and extends our discussion of the possibilities of the free indirect mode.

#### VOICELESS BODIES, BODILESS VOICES

“The cinema of each period gets the acousmêtre it deserves.”<sup>74</sup> —Michel Chion

Whereas films in the social realism mold tend to focus on the lower rungs of the socioeconomic ladder, Mumblecore films are almost without exception limited to a middle-class, post-collegiate *milieu*. Writes critic Amy Taubin, “these non-actors are perfect choices for these films because their insecurity and embarrassment about voicing their characters’ ideas, desires, and feelings is not merely symptomatic of their lack of technique, it dovetails with a defining characteristic of the particular cohort (white, middle-class, twenty-something) to which the filmmakers and their quasi-fictional characters belong.”<sup>75</sup> Taubin highlights what I consider to be one of the more interesting aspects of Mumblecore: the overlap between character and performer

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<sup>74</sup> Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, trans Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999): 57.

<sup>75</sup> “All Talk?,” *Film Comment*, November/December 2007, <http://www.filmlinc.com/fcm/nd07/Mumblecore.htm>

becomes so considerable that the fiction of the film is grounded to an extent in the reality of the actor.

The combination of, on the one hand, class and language and, on the other, director and character, returns us to the notion of free indirect. With Swanberg, however, we have not the Deleuzian becoming-other that characterizes *George Washington*, but rather a type of free indirect that is more akin to Pasolini's theorization that Deleuze himself modified. The fundamental difference between the two models of the free indirect is that for Deleuze, the filmmaker and the subjects of the film must be of a different social "type"—which, it must be noted, is not an equivalent term to "class" for the philosopher—from one another so that they may undergo a mutual transformation. Pasolini, though, believed that the free indirect mode was only possible when those in front of and behind the camera were of the same (middle) class, that they must all be "exquisite flowers of the bourgeoisie."<sup>76</sup> It may be said then that the stakes of the free indirect for Pasolini is the awakening of class consciousness; for Deleuze, it is the obliteration of the boundaries of subjectivities. Swanberg's *Kissing on the Mouth* is a particularly interesting case in that relationship between filmmaker and his subject aligns with Pasolini's theories of the free indirect while producing an effect closer to that of Deleuze's.

Before delving more into the free indirect, we must first differentiate the work of Swanberg from some of his Mumblecore compatriots. As hinted at above, Swanberg is a controversial figure for his frequent and graphic depictions of what appears to be non-simulated sex. The director contends that this is not the gratuitous deployment of skin we see in, say, teen exploitation films; rather, Swanberg has suggested that *Kissing* was conceived as a rejoinder to

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<sup>76</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, "The Cinema of Poetry" in *Heretical Empiricism*. Trans. Ben Lawton. Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1988. 184. See Louis-Georges Schwartz's excellent explication of free indirect discourse. "Typewriter: Free Indirect Discourse in Deleuze's *Cinema*," *SubStance* 34 (2005): 107-135.



the Mumblecore progenitor, Andrew Bujalski's *Funny Ha Ha*. Bujalski's film concerns a young woman, Marnie, who pines for various men in her post-collegiate life, though few respond to her diffident flirtations. As Marnie finds herself in something of a hesitant love quadrangle, the most explosive "sparks" tend to be a stolen, awkward or misaligned kiss. Though both *Kissing* and *Funny Ha Ha* are concerned with the *anomie* of middle-class, Caucasian, hipsters, Swanberg latches on to precisely that which is elided in Bujalski's film—sex. In *Funny Ha Ha*, sex is a subject that both the director and his characters seem to hesitantly dance around; with Swanberg's characters, sex seems more "natural" than their conversations, which are often uncomfortable, clipped, evasive. Whereas the verbal exchange is fraught with peril, sex is at least a fleeting moment of shared interest or intersecting intention, of intercourse as discourse.

Swanberg immediately cues the viewer that sex is on the agenda, that he is depicting the flip side of Bujalski's chaste coin. First, the director ironically deploys the title *Kissing on the Mouth* for its association with callow hierarchies of intimacy (as in the clichéd baseball analogy—first base, second base, etc). Secondly, before any dialogue is exchanged in the film, we are presented with first a man and a woman kissing, then a close-up shot of a condom being unrolled onto an erection. The title card of the film then appears over the characters in mid- and apparently non-simulated lovemaking. Clearly, Swanberg is dealing with something other than the sexless sweetness of Bujalski.

It would be easy to write off Swanberg if his adoption of a realist aesthetic were merely an attempt to elevate the pornographic to the art house—as many, in fact, have charged.<sup>77</sup> Sex is, after all, one of the more "artificial" (that is, "unnatural") of events in the cinema, calculated and

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<sup>77</sup> Amy Taubin is one of the most outspoken critics of Swanberg, whom she describes as a "clueless [narcissist]" whose "greatest talent is for getting attractive, seemingly intelligent women to drop their clothes and evince sexual interest in an array of slobby guys who suffer from severely arrested emotional development." See Amy Taubin, "All Talk?" *Film Comment*, November/December 2007, <http://www.filmlinc.com/fcm/nd07/mumblecore.htm>

choreographed to show some actions while obscuring other inactions. A facile consideration of realism might address the love scenes in such a manner. However, what is most important about how Swanberg presents sex is that he does so in the same matter-of-fact manner that he depicts, for example, the washing of dishes. “We tried,” says Swanberg in an interview, “to make no separation between the way we filmed a body and the way we filmed a computer or a table. We left the imagination plenty of room to wander around when thinking about other elements of the film, but we did not think the imagination deserved anything in regards to the body.”<sup>78</sup> In *Kissing*, graphic sex scenes are often followed by a character painting a room, taking out the garbage, or brushing his or her teeth. This tempering of the more explicit elements of *Kissing* with the quotidian and the commonplace connects Swanberg’s contemporary techniques to a long history of realist approaches, like the famous scene of the maid in *Umberto D* and, in perhaps an overt intertextual reference, the more contemporary work of Chantal Akerman. The use of *temps morts* has long been something of a cornerstone of realist cinemas, for it subverts the tendency of the classical (movement-image) film to insist that every scene or moment contribute or connect to the narrative arc. It is such a reliance on the banal that, as discussed in chapter 1, invites the spectator to productively experience boredom, to scan the frame for marginal details, to feel time passing.<sup>79</sup>

And yet, what is most unusual about *Kissing on the Mouth* is neither its sex scenes nor its banalities. Rather, what intrigues me is how Swanberg utilizes sound in the film, for he grants

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<sup>78</sup> *Kissing on the Mouth* and Everywhere Else: Intimacy in the Digital Age,” Interview, BraintrustDV, <http://www.braintrustdv.com/interviews/kissing.html>

<sup>79</sup> As we’ve seen, this distracted spectatorship demonstrates the inextricable connection between realism and surrealism, between Bazin and Kracauer, on the one hand, and Bunuel and Magritte on the other. See also Ivone Marguiles, *Nothing Happens: Chantal Ackerman’s Hyperrealist Everyday* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).

the soundtrack a degree of autonomy from the visual and demonstrates possibilities in realist cinema that have yet to be fully considered.

Just as Swanberg announces his intentions to redress the staid lustfulness in Bujalski in the opening sex scene, he follows it in the subsequent scene with the introduction of a formal device that marks what I consider to be the film's most striking deviation from our prototypical realist text. Swanberg, who plays the character Patrick in the film, is seen connecting audio equipment to his laptop computer. He sets a microphone on a table and begins interviewing someone else in the room, someone who remains off-screen. As we cut away from the interview scene, the voice of the subject carries over into the next. The identities of Patrick's interlocutors (a total of four by movie's end) are never revealed throughout the proceedings. This appears to be an intertextual reference to Godard's *Masculin-Féminin* (1966) in which Jean-Pierre Léaud, playing a pollster, is off-screen peppering a young beauty contest winner with questions about politics and sex. Interestingly, Swanberg inverts the seen-unseen dynamic by showing only Patrick the interviewer and keeping the interviewees unseen. These lengthy responses are heard exclusively in the form of voice-over narration, though they never seem to "link up" to the film's visual content or relate in any evident fashion to the narrative. In short, these voices form a running sound track to the visual that seem to only tangentially and in a thematic way relate to the visual track and its story.

We soon ascertain that Patrick is compiling something of an audio documentary, a series of interviews with people that, from what we can gather, are of a similar disposition as Patrick: middle-class, mid-twenties, college-educated, (most likely) white. In an interesting instance of reality intruding upon the fictional narrative, this audio was produced by Swanberg's fellow filmmaker and co-star Kris Williams for a non-fiction project of her own, one that pre-dates the

beginning of production for *Kissing on the Mouth*. Swanberg appropriates this audio for his film, allowing it to “contaminate,” to use Pasolini’s term, the visuals. This, then, inverts Michel Chion’s concept of the “acousmètre,” the voice that is heard but not seen in film. Chion attributes a number of “powers” to the acousmatic voice, such as a god-like transcendence that marks the voice as omniscient, transcendent.<sup>80</sup> The acousmètre attains its power by being “present” despite being “not-yet-seen”;<sup>81</sup> yet, in *Kissing on the Mouth*, these voices *never* reveal themselves and are, thus, not visually linked with their physical sources. In this regard, they more obviously pair with the conventions of documentary narration, whereby an authoritative voice “issues from a space other than that on the screen, an unrepresented, undetermined space.”<sup>82</sup> By disallowing these voices the status of third-person, omniscient narration and withholding the “de-acousmatization,” Swanberg denies them any of the powers associated with the acousmètre or the authority ceded to the documentary narrator. Joan Copjec would no doubt call these “intemporal voices: they cannot be situated in—nor submitted to the ravages of—time or place.”<sup>83</sup> In short, these voices hang in limbo.

Thus, unlike conventional voice-overs, the audio and the visual elements of the film achieve a certain level of independence from one another; the voices that float over the images are not there to serve as interior monologue or commentary, nor do they align necessarily with the dramatic situations of the narrative (and when they do, it seems more serendipitous than by design). Instead, sound and visual operate as equals, neither subservient to the other.

And this is precisely the type of sound-image disjunction that intrigued Deleuze, as the de-linking of the sound and the visual is a crucial characteristic of the “pure optical and sound

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<sup>80</sup> Chion, *Voice in Cinema*, 18-25.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>82</sup> Joan Copjec, “The Phenomenal Nonphenomenal: Private Space in *Film Noir*,” in *Shades of Noir*, ed. Joan Copjec, (New York: Verso, 1993), 184.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

situations” of the time-image. The shift from silent to sound cinema allows, according to Deleuze, the presentation of “direct” character speech (i.e., speech that is heard and synchronized with the moving lips of an actor, not speech conveyed via title card, which is an indirect method). Only when the sound film had overcome its early unsteady experiments did the speech-act “[turn] in on itself” for “it [was] no longer dependent on something which is part of the visual image; it becomes a completely separate sound image; it takes on a cinematographic autonomy and cinema becomes truly audio-visual.”<sup>84</sup> By being discreet and autonomous elements of a larger whole (i.e., an image), audio and visual attain the possibility of entering into a free indirect relationship with one another. It will become apparent in this and the following chapter the fundamental possibilities (not only cinematically but philosophically) that are opened up by this liberation of the sound from the visual. What’s more, these possibilities perhaps best illuminate the motivation for Deleuze’s foray into the cinema in relation to his larger philosophical project.

We can chart the accretion of sound autonomy by tracing certain stylistic developments in film history. For instance, at its inception, the talkie locked the sound of the voice to the movement of the lips, and therefore shot selection and editing rhythms were dictated by who was speaking and when. Bit by bit, though, filmmakers began to free themselves from this limitation, this tethering of words and shots. Consider: the devices of the voiceover, which I’ve already alluded to, or the sound bridge, in which a character’s voice or a sound effect (a ringing school bell, say), heard at the conclusion of one scene, carries on into the next, one that may take place in a different spatial or temporal location. Instead of employing visual signifiers of transition (i.e., the wipe or the lap dissolve, to name but a few), we have the audio taking the lead, momentarily overcoming its general subordination to the visual.

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<sup>84</sup> Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 243. It bears repeating that for Deleuze everything is image. The term is not restricted to a visual representation, much as it is not limited to a single shot. A single image may be a series of shots, an entire scene, a whole film.

Deleuze identifies in the time-image an even greater degree of flexibility, as the aural component gains more than a brief “first-chair” status and instead becomes independent of the visual. This becomes evident for Deleuze with *Last Year in Marienbad* (Resnais, 1961), for it marks a point where “the talking and the visual were no longer held together, no longer corresponded, but belied and contradicted themselves, without it being possible to say that one rather than the other is ‘right.’”<sup>85</sup> This passage is key for two reasons: first, it assigns neither the visual nor the aural a place of supremacy; secondly, the two components may contradict or falsify one another. Thus is born the “sound image” or “sonsign” which exists on either side of “a fault, an interstice, an irrational cut between” sound and image.<sup>86</sup> This interval is, for Deleuze, the power of the cinema, for this space between is a locus of possibility, the site of viable becomings. Unlike the voice-over of an omniscient narrator that (usually) can be trusted, the sound image exists in an indiscernible, irrational relationship with the visual image.

This irrationality is crucial to our understanding of the interview audio in *Kissing on the Mouth*. We have grown accustomed to the voice-over providing information, commentary, or otherwise framing that which we see, but this authoritative voice is, in the vast majority of cases, a diegetic one, part of the fictional world and often either the protagonist herself or a secondary character. In the film in question here, Swanberg utilizes “real” documentary audio and then places it in counterpoint to the fictional, visual world. The film self-consciously aligns reality with fiction and subverts the customary authority of the disembodied voice of the acousmètre. What I call subversion, however, Deleuze describes as a necessary trade-off:

Entering into rivalry or heterogeneity with the visual images, the voice-off no longer has the power which only exceeded these in so far as it defined itself in relation to its limits: it has lost the omnipotence which characterized it in the first stage of the talkie. It has ceased to see everything; it has become questionable, uncertain, ambiguous [...] because

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 250.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 251.

it has broken from its moorings with the visual images which delegated to it the omnipotence which they lacked. The voice-off loses its omnipotence but by gaining autonomy.<sup>87</sup>

In short, two autonomous fields (sound, vision) transform one another through their combination, their becoming.

Therefore, a film such as *Kissing on the Mouth*, which so fundamentally breaks with the conventional use of sound and its interplay with the visual image, requires a different sort of spectatorial engagement in order to make heads or tails of it. The at times contradictory nature of this interplay creates what Rodowick calls a “set of contingent possibilities,” numerous in this instance: the interviews are irrelevant to the images, or they are marginally related commentary, or the documentary audio somehow inspired (called forth) the visuals, or perhaps vice-versa.<sup>88</sup> The film, then, becomes akin to trying to simultaneously train each of one’s eyes on different phenomena in the same space: at one moment they are discreet events, another, as the eyes inevitably “cross,” they bleed over into each other. The film becomes what Deleuze termed a “lectosign,” an image that has become legible, a “space for reading: seeing and hearing as decipherment rather than following an action.”<sup>89</sup>

The unusual relationship between the visual and aural is not simply a formal anomaly or stylistic device, either. In fact, the “conflict” between the two becomes doubly inscribed, as it is made manifest in the characters of Patrick, our audio collector, and Chris (Kevin Pittman), a photographer, both of whom vie for the affection of the evasive Ellen (Kate Winterwich). Patrick not-so-secretly longs for Ellen, his roommate, who has recently rekindled a relationship with Chris, her former boyfriend. Initially, Ellen hides her trysts with Chris from her prying friend,

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 250. Note that the French *voix-off* subsumes both the English voice-off (i.e., a character within the scene who speaks but is not seen, as in, say, a reaction shot of the other party) and the voice-over, which is, in effect, a disembodied voice, one detached from the scene yet privileged to speak.

<sup>88</sup> Rodowick, *Deleuze’s Time Machine*, 75.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

Patrick, aware of both his disapproval and affection for her. Nevertheless, Patrick finds film negatives of a nude Ellen from a recent photo session with Chris, letting the proverbial cat out of the bag. Ellen makes it clear to the disapproving Patrick that she is bored and lonely and intends her new involvement with Chris to be of a purely sexual nature. However, Chris soon desires more of Ellen than sex, such as the ever-so-complicated Mumblecore obstacle of conversation.

Though it is tempting to disregard the creative occupations of Chris and Patrick as tropes of this mumbling hipster genre, I contend it is more productive to instead think of them in terms of the shared ontological nature of their respective artistic media—that is, methods of capture or containment. Chris, a nascent fashion photographer, is seen on multiple occasions photographing models whom he painstakingly orders into just-so positions. Thus, our photographer dictates both the pose and framing before “freezing” the moment, halting time and space and his model within it. Unlike the loosened approach of the filmmakers discussed in this study, Chris attempts to eliminate contingency by creating the most tightly controlled of environments.<sup>90</sup> It is especially significant that Ellen initially rebuffs his attempts to photograph her and, as we gather, never agreed to pose during their original, more traditional courtship. By acquiescing, though, Ellen is “pinned down” via representation in a way that she staunchly refuses in “reality”; yet, in submitting to Chris’s lens, she becomes, in a sense, a possession, locked into an ideal pose and according to his preferences.<sup>91</sup>

These photographs become for Ellen a two-fold predicament: primarily, they incorrectly signal to Chris her desire to engage in a *bona fide*, sincere relationship; consequently, by Patrick exhuming them, she submits to his prying gaze and badgering demands to defend her actions.

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<sup>90</sup> Cf. the photographer in Antonioni’s *Blow-up* (1966) who, upon venturing outside his studio, finds the world of contingencies cannot be molded to fit his ideal narrative.

<sup>91</sup> The fantasy elements of photography, posing, and possession will also be central to Swanberg’s second feature *LOL*, where one character forgoes a relationship with a “real” woman in favor of a virtual relationship with an online amateur porn star.



Moreover, being that Ellen has no interest in either a short- or long-term physical relationship with Patrick, the pictures become for him a particularly stinging reminder of the unattainability of the object of his desire. But might there be another way for Patrick?

Much as Ellen does with her relationship with Chris, Patrick keeps secret the interviews he is compiling, which suggests that he is embarrassed for Ellen to know about his preoccupation with love and sex that colors his project. However, mirroring Patrick's discovery of the nude photos, Ellen finds and then copies the files that Patrick leaves open on his computer, thereby surreptitiously gaining access to his covert collection of voices that flow throughout the film. At the conclusion of *Kissing*, Ellen finds herself unexpectedly hurt by Chris rejection of her in favor of one of his other "models." Echoing our first glimpse, we see Patrick in the final scene again setting up his microphone and prompting yet another unseen interviewee to tell him about her "last relationship." Over the ending credits, we hear (but do not see) Ellen begin to tell the story of her affair with Chris. In so doing, she submits to the second of her suitors, this time in voice and not in image or in body. It is Patrick who now "possesses" Ellen's voice, her thoughts, in a recording that is permeated with the type of intimacy that Chris sought and that Ellen was unwilling to give. And thus, the voice of Ellen, a fictional character, joins the chorus of the "real" voices that contaminated the film from the beginning; the "real" Kate Winterich and her character Ellen effectively switch positions.

The importance of this late-film shift is, of course, two-fold. As we've seen, the acousmatic voices of the film are paradoxically both inside and outside the diegesis, for they've been incorporated into the narrative despite having been recorded before the genesis of *Kissing on the Mouth*: the voices are therefore *outside of* and *prior to* the fiction of the film. Consequently, we may align the realm of these disembodied voices with the "real world" while

designating the film's visuals as the scripted fiction. Ellen, by becoming invisible, contaminates and, in Deleuze's framework, *falsifies* the realm that had heretofore been coded as real. Thus, just as the voices heard throughout the film belonged to both realms, so too does the fictional Ellen. This impossibility is achieved only through sound and image being detached from the other in autonomy.

“WHAT DO YOU WANT SAID?”

“[C]inema must press forward into the new century, by taking into itself the subject matter that surrounds it, increasingly a new media culture.”<sup>92</sup> —Dudley Andrew

Among academics, critics, journalists, and practitioners, the arrival of the digital to the realm of cinema was seen as an ambiguous harbinger: on the one hand, the possibility of affordably owning the means of production was trumpeted by some as the coming of the great utopian moment for “indie” filmmaking, while on the other, many bemoaned the death of the medium with the almost certain obsolescence of celluloid and its concomitant obliteration of the Bazinian ontology. Mumblecore is positioned directly between these two discourses, for the bulk of the films associated with the movement were made without outside financing and still managed to find theatrical and/or DVD distribution. At the same time, most Mumblecore films adhere to a realist aesthetic, eschewing green screens and CGI for a more traditional art cinema approach. But how might we approach the digital as not just a technology—a means to an end—but as a logic?

Premiering on the festival circuit in 2005 along with *Kissing on the Mouth*, Arin Crumley's and Susan Buice's *Four Eyed Monsters* proves an instructive example, for it foregrounds the digital in terms of aesthetics and as an approach to the world. In so doing, the film opens a path for us to consider Deleuze's time-image in relation to the digital, a technology

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<sup>92</sup> Dudley Andrew, *What Cinema Is!*, 94.

that he only briefly (and perhaps presciently) discusses in the *Cinema* books. “The electronic image,” writes Deleuze,

that is, the tele and the video image, the numerical image coming into being, either had to transform cinema or to replace it, to mark its death. We do not claim to be producing an analysis of the new images, which would be beyond our aims, but only to indicate certain effects whose relation to the cinematographic image remains to be determined.<sup>93</sup>

The conflict between the analog and digital image that Deleuze presaged as germane to his project only came to a head after his death. These numerical images are precisely those that I wish to pursue here. However, before we may tackle the problem of the digital, we must first consider how *Four Eyed Monsters* operates within Deleuze’s framework. I will return to the question of digital cinema at the conclusion of this chapter.

*Four Eyed Monsters* is, on its surface, a broadly-pitched autobiographical romantic comedy about the “real life” courtship of its filmmakers Crumly and Buice, who, prior to the success of the film, were, in keeping with the artistic inclination of Mumblecore characters, a struggling freelance videographer and painter, respectively.<sup>94</sup> The title derives from a voiceover that opens the film, where couples are referred to as monsters with four eyes, eight limbs, two mouths. In the romantic partnership, two people become one entity, fleetingly resurrecting the primal beings Aristophanes described in Plato’s *Symposium*, the unified bodies that were split by Zeus’ bolts, which ultimately initiates the longing for wholeness that may only be achieved through a coupling, a unification. The film’s over-arching metaphor sets up something akin to a Deleuzian becoming, a metamorphosis in which separate entities make one by becoming the other. According to the filmic narrative, Crumly and Buice met on a social networking website and upon finding face-to-face interaction awkward, vow to only communicate via non-verbal

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<sup>93</sup> Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 265.

<sup>94</sup> Being that the filmmakers play characters who share their names, I will throughout this analysis refer to the directors by the surnames (Buice and Crumley) and their narrative counterparts by the first names (Susan and Arin) in an effort to avoid confusion of the “real” and the “fictional” individuals.

forms: text messages, emails, video diaries, and hand-written notes passed between them on subway trains. Thus, the film aligns with the Mumblecore preoccupation with communicative shortcomings. However, something far more interesting is at stake here, for it conceives of a particular type of free indirect discourse that is outside Deleuze's formulation. More importantly, this sort of indirect relationship is abetted by the digital technologies that are embraced by the characters and put to use by the filmmakers.

*Four Eyed Monsters* announces its formal ambitions early in the film by shifting between live-action scenes of Buice and Crumley playing themselves and animated sequences that seem to accomplish the task of depicting moments that were either too expensive to "re-create" on such a small budget or that serve to convey Susan's or Arin's interior thoughts without resorting to voice-over narration or the clumsy secondary character-as-sounding board of romantic comedy convention. However, these glimpses of character interiority are immensely complicated by the dual authorship of the film, for they beg the question of which of the directors/characters we can attribute the information conveyed. For instance, the film imparts to us that Arin, prior to meeting Susan, was sexually inexperienced; this is evinced by a *faux*-web profile that displays the avatars of three women, each of which takes turns explaining, as if being interviewed on the topic, Arin's sexual foibles (premature ejaculation, performance anxiety, etc). In this instance, it is most likely that Crumley is using the obviously fictional interviews as a novel approach to character exposition. Yet, this same technique is deployed later in relation to Susan, but in this instance authorial attribution becomes much muddier. Following a shot of Arin, we cut to a leather-bound sketch book, one which whimsically flips itself open to reveal the interior pages, each dedicated to sketches of former boyfriends of Susan. These pages "cue" a video interview, where the men recount the demise of their relationships with our protagonist. A high school

partner describes having sex with Susan in a number of unusual locations (teacher's desk, a friend's back yard, etc.) which seems to speak to Arin's anxiety and inexperience. Thus, it might be assumed that Crumley is still the dominant point-of-view, the enunciator of the cinematic utterance, despite the association between Susan and pencil drawings established earlier in the film. Yet, this same *beau*, while smiling and laughing, recalls how Susan's parents took out a restraining order against him. It is at this point that the interview takes a pronounced turn into darker territory. The boyfriend confesses that Susan's parents didn't like him "even before [he] hit her." He goes on to matter-of-factly—chuckling, even—describe his battery of her: "Yes, I beat her up, split her lip, gave her a black eye." The film's visuals suggest at first that Buice is helming this sequence, but this is then called into question by the interviewee's volunteering of information that contributes to Arin's sexual unease. Then again, the clashing of tone between what might be Arin's comic imagining of the sexual prowess of Susan's former partner alarmingly shifts into a far too cavalier admission of assault. Surely Arin wouldn't "invent" such a disquieting backstory, nor would Susan (or Buice) supply it so off-handedly.

Thus, we have arrived once again at the notion of free indirect discourse, where, in Deleuze's theorization, the director speaks through the character, though in the character's dialect. With *Four Eyed Monsters*, the question then becomes *which of the characters* or *which of the directors*; no simple answer exists, for the two characters and the two filmmakers are, ultimately, the same people. Thus, the distinguishing factor between Pasolini's account of the free indirect (director and subject occupying the same or similar "anthropological type" or class) and Deleuze's (difference) becomes obliterated by Buice and Crumley turning the camera onto themselves. As a result, we cannot with any degree of certainty attribute the "utterance" of these interviews to either author or either protagonist. It may be said, then, that Susan and Arin, the

characters, and Buice and Crumly, the directors, have entered into a free indirect relationship with themselves.

By creating falsifying narratives about one another, Buice and Crumly make manifest the process of crossing over from sides of the camera that signaled for Deleuze the political power of the cinema. In the final moments of the film, as the couple attempts to come to grips with whether their relationship exists as a romantic partnership or as a communicative experiment, Arin scribbles a note to Susan, one that is especially ironic given the nature of the film's digital recording—"I'm going to film it." We then see a montage sequence that drastically re-organizes our perception of what transpired previously. In reverse time-lapse photography, shots that were displayed earlier in the film are disassembled before our eyes: the restaurant where Susan supposedly waited tables is revealed to be a crude set constructed in a loft apartment; in a slow track out, the couple dismantle the loft bed we earlier saw them share; Crumly and Buice are depicted eating lunch while editing the raw footage that became scenes from the first two-thirds of the film. Over a shot of the directors constructing a storyboard, we hear Crumly in voiceover say "we've got all the writings, and the drawings and the videos, so let's make this into something." Therefore, what initially appears as a loose autobiographical retelling of their relationship becomes a blending of staged events, animation, and documentary footage—"primary sources" of their odd, albeit "real," courtship. And yet, in retrospect (and even in subsequent viewings) we cannot be entirely sure which images were recycled, which were re-enacted, and which were simply "made up" to help the narrative cohere. The film is at once "real" and simultaneously "fiction", and though these two realms are discreet, we cannot discern their differences. In short, the entire narrative falsifies itself.

Deleuze describes a remarkably similar process to that which transpires in *Four Eyed Monsters* in relation to Godard's *Masculin-Féminin*, wherein "the fictional interview with the characters and the real interview with actors mix together so that they seem to be speaking to each other, and to speak for themselves, by speaking to the filmmaker."<sup>95</sup> He goes on to say that

It is under these conditions of the time-image that the same transformation involves the cinema of fiction and the cinema of reality and blurs their differences; in the same movement, descriptions become pure, purely optical and sound, narrations falsifying, and stories, simulations. The whole cinema becomes free indirect discourse, operating in reality.<sup>96</sup>

It would seem, then, that Deleuze sees the concept of simulation in a far more positive light than his contemporary Baudrillard, whose *Simulacra and Simulation* was released in France in the same year (1985) as Deleuze's *The Time-Image*. The very possibility of free indirect discourse is predicated upon a mimetic appropriation of the speech of another; hence, this simulation is not, as Baudrillard might claim, the postmodern death of the referent at the hands of its copy but is rather the birth of (the potential of) a becoming.

According to Deleuze, the powers of the false are unleashed when the filmmaker becomes his subject and the subject becomes the filmmaker in a constant oscillation. Such a shifting of positions is made manifest in *Four Eyed Monsters*' concluding montage. In one particular shot, we see the reenactment (or perhaps the *document*?) of an earlier scene's creation. Crumly, standing in the bathroom, removes his t-shirt as Buice sits below training a video camera at him. Thus, this shot contains two cameras—the one visible in Susan's hands and the one implied by the frame (see fig. 9). (The shot purports to be a documentary of the film's creation, a "behind-the-scenes" featurette, if you will.) This *mise-en-abyme* is repeated later in the sequence, this time with Crumley recording Buice, camera number one and the implicated

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<sup>95</sup> Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 154.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

second that defines the outer frame present once again. Thus, the two authors of the film literally *shift positions* in one sense, as they take turns as actor and as camera operator (see fig. 10). In another regard, they always remain the subjects of the shot, fitting since their coupling *is* the subject of the film.



Figure 9. Buice (right) plays herself recording Crumly in a simulacrum of a shot that does not exist.<sup>97</sup>

Thus, the film's reliance on these simulacra, these copies of copies that may or may not have "originals," are fundamental to the falsifying narratives of Buice and Crumley. What's more, this literal proliferation of images within the film mirrors the ever-growing ubiquity of the visual image in the postmodern. That the two filmmakers were compelled to operate according to a logic of representation—a series of emails, video journals, self-portraits—is symptomatic of the larger postmodern image culture. It becomes, then, part and parcel of their everyday experience of the world. Thus, it is impossible for Buice and Crumly to tell their story without relying upon the methods by which they communicate amongst themselves.

<sup>97</sup> This and all subsequent images from *Four Eyed Monsters* are digital frame captures by the author. *Four Eyed Monsters*. DVD. Directed by Arin Crumley and Susan Buice. 2005; New York: self-distributed, 2006.





Figure 10. Buice (left), in a role reversal from the previous shot, now acts while Crumly (back right) records.

This is not to say, however, that the oscillation between Crumly and Buice in the role of originator of the cinematic enunciation is an “even” exchange. In fact, perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the film is the tension that exists between Crumly’s naïve optimism and Buice’s insistence on littering the proceedings with brief flashes of her past (and even current) victimizations that momentarily rupture the otherwise bubbly, sentimental film. These momentary breaches serve to subvert the narrative flow that seems at times to be dominated by Crumley.

I remarked above of the alarming revelation of Susan’s abuse at the hands of an ex-boyfriend. This is but one example of her backstory that pushes against the romantic tone of the rest of the film. Early on, when Arin first contacts Susan via email requesting additional pictures of her, Susan suggests instead that he simply come to the restaurant where she waits tables to see her in person. Arin obliges, but, overcome with anxiety, he departs from the eatery without even saying “hello.” He does, however, stake out the restaurant waiting for Susan’s shift to end. He

then follows her with his video camera in hand, recording her trek home from behind garbage cans and bus stops. Arin emails his clandestine documentary under the heading “Stalking Susan” to his video’s subject, who, instead of being repulsed, finds it charming. Despite her implied history of physical abuse, Susan, surprisingly, welcomes a self-designated stalker into her life.

The free indirect nature of Susan and Arin’s relationship creates a number of moments within the narrative when Susan’s “true” feelings become ambiguous. For instance, soon after the couple first sleep together, Arin discovers a wart on his genitals that is later diagnosed as herpes. Given his limited sexual experience and Susan’s implied extensive number of intimate partners, Arin confronts her (by scribbling on a pad, of course), accusing her of transmitting to him the disease. Following a two-shot of the couple “talking,” we cut to a fantasy sequence in which we see Susan, dressed in black leather and an abundance of mascara, seductively straddle and then lick a subway pole, all the while facing the camera to break the fourth wall. This sequence is intercut with images of cockroaches crawling across a table, one of which is later shown pinned beneath a drinking glass. To whom do we attribute these images? The easy answer is Arin, whom we can assume is turned off by the “tainted” Susan. But what if this sequence was cued by Susan in response to Arin’s rejection of her?

Susan, if read in relation to her abusive past, becomes a far more enigmatic figure than she at first appears. Consequently, throwaway lines and anomalistic behaviors can be seen as the briefest of glimpses into her subjectivity, glimpses which help explain her curious attachment to Arin and her willingness to go along with his “experiment.” Take, for example, Susan’s confessional video sent to Arin where she explains her fear that she is not an artist and will thus be stuck in her table-waiting job forever. Susan, doubly boxed in by a tight close-up of a camcorder’s viewfinder replaying her video diary, initiates a litany of annoying questions she

typically receives at the restaurant, some of which sync with her lips and others that are disjointed and emerge as if out of the ether. All the while, digital time code counts upward, obscuring her face (see fig. 11). These banal questions are juxtaposed with far more crude queries: “Can you steam my broccoli with no oil and no butter?” “Do you have herpes?” “Can I get that with cheese?” “Can I see what kind of underwear you have on?” “Can I get that with dressing on the side?” “Would your pussy get wet if I touched it?” In each instance, the more coarse questions do not emanate from Susan’s mouth; instead, they emerge from the soundtrack between the visible utterances, speaking aloud the otherwise unspeakable.



Figure 11. Buice’s video journal where her spoken banalities are juxtaposed with crude, asynchronous come-ons

This is not to propose that Susan can be summed up as suffering from a “victim mentality.” Rather, I merely posit that the film offers us enough evidence to suggest that Susan’s participation in the production of *Four Eyed Monsters* is an act of acquiescence. But in going along with the more dominant Arin, Susan provides momentary flashes of commentary that subvert Crumley’s control over the film and, thus, over Susan/Buice as well. For the briefest of

instants, Susan presses back against the narrative that has been constructed around her. With Crumley behind the camera and Susan in front, our heroine resists easy categorization and, in a sense, refuses to let Crumley speak his words through her. Their collective enunciation of their own true story is momentarily subverted or falsified by one of its authors. Buice, it might be said, provides enough discordant notes to allow for an alternative reading that cuts against the grain of the film's light comedic tone.

Susan's resistance, usually quite subtle, appears in its most pronounced form in the rapidly-cut, concluding montage. Susan, in what appears (though we cannot be certain) a non-staged event, cries while speaking to Arin offscreen. "I feel like such an asshole," she says, "for not just making a decision on my own, but I don't know how to." The sequence ends on an image of Arin and Susan sitting before a microphone in a sound studio. The couple are arguing over the proper way to record an introduction to the DVD version of the film, which, raising questions of digital exhibition that this study cannot hope to pursue, contains in its finished form this exact altercation. Crumley instructs Buice to lean into the microphone, to hold back her objections, and speak in a calm manner into the mic. In response to his coaxing, Buice replies, in a clear shift from Susan the actor to Buice the co-director, "Arin, I'm talking to you right now. I will do whatever it takes to get this stupid fucking intro out there. So what do you want said?" These final words are key, for with them, Buice acknowledges quite literally the free indirect nature of their authoring/acting relationship. Crumley speaks his words through Buice, furnishes her with the utterance. If *Four Eyed Monsters* marks a mutual becoming between Susan and Arin, as both romantic partners and authoring co-directors, it is to some extent, a reluctant one.

*Four Eyed Monsters* is certainly an unusual case, for it moves our discussion to the question of the digital. Against the falling-sky notion that digital technologies would be the death

of cinema, we find here what Deleuze might describe as a “mutation of form,” one that presents to us a “new image,” one that owes itself not simply to its method of recording but also its content, the logic by which it comes into being.<sup>98</sup> The omnipresence of cheap, unobtrusive means of recording (cell phones, digital camcorders), disseminating (email, YouTube) and storing (hard drives, the celestial “cloud”) have abetted a particular urge that finds articulation in *Four Eyed Monsters*, an urge to archive on the one hand and to narrativize, recombine, or “mash-up” on the other. The proliferating technologies of vision have contributed to, as Benjamin might say, the “aestheticization” of our day-to-day lives. Thus, the rise of the digital exacerbates a number of the characteristics we’ve come to associate with the postmodern.

Though much of Mumblecore has been derided as solipsistic navel-gazing on the part of its filmmakers, these films are significant if for no other reason in that they are among the first to depict characters who are so firmly entrenched in the digital realm as to suggest that this realm is perhaps the only arena in which they can cope with their material world. While critics bemoan the Mumblecore films as too insular and narrowly-focused on the world of white, middle-class, urban hipsters, it is precisely this lack of breadth that allows us to isolate this particularly acute symptom of the postmodern condition.

Pasolini, whom, we will recall, Deleuze borrowed heavily from in his own theorization of cinematic free indirect discourse, locates within Godard’s work a perhaps similar set of circumstances that is arising in Mumblecore. In his “Cinema of Poetry” essay, Pasolini singles out Godard’s characters’ emerging middle class sensibilities as the “birth of a new anthropological type,” a type characterized by a “dominant condition” of neurosis.<sup>99</sup> Pasolini, a steadfast Marxist, suggests that this birth is the result of economic modernization and the

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 265.

<sup>99</sup> Pasolini, “Cinema of Poetry,” 181.

establishment of a consumerist middle class. Amid this historical reconfiguration, Godard's particular brand of free indirect discourse was able to take shape. Deleuze, however, locates the historical shift that predicates the free indirect mode not as economic in nature but rather with the destruction that accompanied the Second World War.

Despite their disagreement as to the "cause" of these new images, what is crucial is that both ground them in historically determined events. Quite surprisingly, though, the term "new anthropological type" predates both men, for Adorno, in a still unpublished manuscript, was using the phrase as early as 1942, thereby highlighting a similar set of concerns. Writes George Cavalletto, summarizing the largely unseen document:

Adorno wrote that the historical and psychological changes of recent history were so massive that they constituted a veritable anthropological change in the historically conditioned "nature" of humankind. With the downfall of entrepreneurial capitalism, he asserted, came "a new anthropological type," a fundamentally new type of human being, with new social functions and a new type of psychic formation. In the case of this new anthropological type, the role of repression in the formation of psychic structure had been replaced by the immediate gratifications of mass culture.<sup>100</sup>

Though we cannot know for certain whether the latter thinkers had read Adorno's words on the matter, what is most important is that they all three point to a similar condition, a similar shift in human subjectivity.

We've seen that, even despite the complaints of amateurish production values, the Mumblecore films under analysis here are nevertheless novel in their modifications to the free indirect mode as practiced by Antonioni, Godard, and others. Might we then say that, amid such a highly specific social *milieu*, these characters (played so often as they are by the filmmakers themselves) are constitutive of a new anthropological type? Further, might we owe these new images to the shifting historical circumstances surrounding their production, specifically the

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<sup>100</sup> George Cavalletto, *Crossing the Psycho-Social Divide: Freud, Weber, Adorno, and Elias* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), 142.

advent of the digital as both method of image capture and as an alternative, virtual space, one that, to adopt Adorno's words, allows for "new social functions" and "the immediate gratifications of mass culture"? That these films are quite explicit in their meta-cinematic preoccupations while simultaneously grappling with the problems of realism, I contend we can trace yet another of Deleuze's "mutations," evolutions of the filmic image to the "numerical image coming into being."<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 265.

## CHAPTER 3

## INSIDE, OUTSIDE, IN BETWEEN

“The sounds and voices that are *neither entirely inside nor clearly outside* are those that interest me most ... because it is with these sounds and voices left to wander the surface of the screen that the real and specific power of the cinema comes into play.”<sup>102</sup>—Michel Chion

There is a scene at the midpoint of Gus Van Sant’s *Last Days* (2005), a long take that is indeed its centerpiece moment, bravura in its simplicity.<sup>103</sup> Nearly five-minutes in length, this scene epitomizes much of the director’s stylistic approach in what I will call his late realist phase. The shot begins outside the window of a castle-like house as Blake (Michael Pitt), a fictional approximation of the late rock icon Kurt Cobain, coarsely begins to play a guitar. As the camera initiates a track in reverse, the musical notes repeat continuously despite the fact that Blake has now put down the instrument. We see the waifish blonde figure move to the opposite side of the room where he grabs a second guitar; a different riff rings out, ceases briefly, then begins again. It becomes apparent that our Cobain stand-in is playing the roles of conductor and orchestra, “looping” these disparate sounds to play end-on-end. He moves to the microphone and, in a marked change from his incoherent, heroin-hindered mutterings in the film’s first half, unleashes a guttural wail that, too, cycles on with the other repeating instruments. Next at the drum set, Blake bangs out an unsteady rhythm, which, once looped, manages to bring these fragments of noise into a crude coherence. Blake, heretofore dazed, expressionless, meek, is now at his most intelligible and expressive. All the while, though, the camera has continued its movement away, so that as the shot concludes we can no longer see inside the window. When the enigmatic ghost of Cobain is most open to our curious gaze, we are too far removed to catch

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<sup>102</sup> Chion, *Voice in Cinema*, 4; emphasis in original.

<sup>103</sup> Daniel Cockburn has treated this scene at greater length and in dazzling fashion. My reading is very much informed by his. Daniel Cockburn, “Random Sample,” *Reverse Shot* 21 (2006), [http://www.reverseshot.com/article/last\\_days](http://www.reverseshot.com/article/last_days).



a glimpse. But the grievous song remains as present to the ear as it was four-and-a-half minutes earlier, as if we were front-row, crouched in front of Blake's squealing amplifier.

This distanced approach to his characters has long been a trait of Van Sant's work. Take, for instance, the blank, ambivalent Mexican boy Johnny (Doug Cooyate) in *Mala Noche* (1985), the young hustlers in *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), the murderous misfits in *Elephant* (2003): all are confounding, alluring, begging to be "figured out," and yet Van Sant leaves them as riddles. We may track this tendency throughout his career, but it is most pronounced in the late realist phase that to which I've alluded. Van Sant lends himself to such periodizations, for few careers can be mapped in such divergent directions: New Queer Cinema (*Mala Noche*, *My Own Private Idaho*), "indie" (*Drugstore Cowboy* [1989]), Hollywood "A-list" (*Good Will Hunting* [1997], *Milk* [2008]), and, in perhaps his greatest *auteurial* oddity, his near shot-for-shot remake of Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1998).

Though a curious career choice, Van Sant's *Psycho* is, in Janet Staiger's estimation, entirely in line with his unique *modus operandi*: namely, his penchant for repetition and recombination, tactics she describes as common among postmodern minority authors.<sup>104</sup> In fact, Staiger regards much of the director's corpus as a series of remakes: *My Own Private Idaho* can be read as a remake of Orson Welles' *Chimes At Midnight* (1965), itself an appropriation of *Henry IV*. Similarly, *Finding Forrester* (2000) is Van Sant remaking his own *Good Will Hunting* and *Elephant* a take on Alan Clarke's 1989 BBC film of the same name, and so forth.<sup>105</sup>

It would seem, then, that Van Sant is clearly operating within the "logic of the simulacrum," trafficking in images and texts in an effort to grasp an impossible-to-remember

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<sup>104</sup> Van Sant is openly gay.

<sup>105</sup> Janet Staiger, "Authorship Studies and Gus Van Sant," *Film Criticism* 29 (2004): 1-22.

past.<sup>106</sup> While Van Sant is an avowed postmodern practitioner, there exists a conflicting tension within his work.<sup>107</sup> Absent is the borrowing from other texts “randomly and without principle” that so characterizes the postmodern.<sup>108</sup> Rather, Van Sant’s pillaging is quite purposeful, for it puts his work in conversation with the past as he attempts to grapple with some of the cinema’s oldest problems. That is to say, there exists within Van Sant’s films twin and contradictory tendencies—on the one hand, a penchant for ironic distantiation and, on the other, a probing curiosity towards his subjects. These two impulses, I will argue, come to a head in Van Sant’s “death trilogy”—a trio of films (*Gerry* [2002], *Elephant* [2003], and *Last Days* [2005]) that marks his return to the art house after his Hollywood phase. More importantly, this trilogy also signals Van Sant’s reverting back to a more realist approach that characterized his debut film, *Mala Noche* (1985). In returning to his roots, so to speak, Van Sant concomitantly arrives at an aesthetic crossroads that once again raises the question of the limitations of realism. However, with *Paranoid Park* (2007), his first post-trilogy feature, Van Sant, I will argue, overcomes the subjective-objective tension that plays itself out within the trilogy. In so doing, Van Sant positions himself within a scarcely recognized tradition of realist cinema that concerns itself not with social realities but psychic interiors, the inside of things.

In this section, I will read closely both *Paranoid Park* and *Elephant*, for their similarities are many: a focus on high school characters, a cast of non-actors, fractured chronology, atmospheric visuals, and an inventive, idiosyncratic use of sound. However, *Elephant*, much like its fellow trilogy members, keeps its characters at a distance, never lets us in. Thus, in *Elephant*, Van Sant slams against the hurdles that he ultimately clears in *Paranoid Park*. Following a

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<sup>106</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991): 18.

<sup>107</sup> Staiger, “Authorship Studies,” 9.

<sup>108</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism* 19.

similar pattern as the films in the two preceding chapters, the “solution” lies not simply in the image, but in sound, in noises, in voices.<sup>109</sup>

## LANGUAGE IN/AND CRISIS

Much like Van Sant’s *Last Days* is a rumination on death inspired by the suicide of Kurt Cobain, *Elephant* is a fictional take on an actual event, the 1999 Columbine High School massacre. Van Sant follows (both figuratively, as in a chronicle, and literally with his camera) several high school students in the moments just prior to and during the shootings. These characters, perhaps borrowed from the John Hughes playbook, are all archetypal: Nathan (Nathan Tyson), the popular jock; Carrie (Carrie Finklea), likewise popular, pretty; John (John Robinson), the shaggy-haired blonde misfit, an apparent riff on Jeff Spicoli; Elias (Elias McConnell), the artsy photographer; Brittany (Brittany Mountain), Jordan (Jordan Taylor), and Nicole (Nicole George), a triumvirate of vacuous bulimics; Michelle (Kristen Hicks), the “invisible” nerd; and, finally, Alex (Alex Frost) and Eric (Eric Deulen), the unpopular kids who ultimately open fire on their teachers and fellow students *à la* Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris of Columbine infamy.

*Elephant* is structured as a series of loops: characters are followed in long tracking shots as they wander the hallways of their suburban Portland high school in the moments prior to the start of the attacks. Van Sant conveys that these walks are occurring simultaneously by carefully planting anchoring points throughout the film—conspicuous events that will be seen again in order to signify the repetition of the moment, though from another

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<sup>109</sup> For another take on *Elephant* that begins from a similar premise (neorealism) but arrives at a far different conclusion, see Thomas Stubblefield, “Re-creating the Witness: *Elephant*, Postmodernism, and the Neorealist Inheritance,” in *Italian Neorealism and Global Cinema*, eds. Laura E. Roberto and Kristi M. Wilson (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007), 226-241.

perspective.<sup>110</sup> Let us return to by-now familiar theoretical ground: these anchors make manifest Deleuze's crystal-image, for they form the shared point of multiple trajectories. We see this most explicitly when Michelle, Elias, and John pass each other in the hallway, an event that, in a sequential conception of time, occurs only once; in *Elephant*, this occurrence is repeated three times, in a tracking shot "attached" to each of three characters. Their steadicam-accompanied walks are each facets of the film's crystal, facets that momentarily, through intersection, share a point or a line before diverging in differing directions.

We have, then, a quite interesting variation on the long-take aesthetic; in most cases, to follow one character is to the exclusion of all others. However, with *Elephant*, we trail every character, both major and minor, in (and through) approximately the same portion of time. One might think that by having every angle available to us, every inch of the school corridors traveled, the tragedy would lay itself bare for our understanding. This formal strategy of repetition, however, fails to illuminate the situation. Instead of parallel montage which conveys a spectatorial mastery of space and time—here in the library, meanwhile, in the cafeteria—, we are given a collection of viewpoints, viewpoints which cohere to give us the sequence of events but never a master narrative or interpretation.

There are certain formal consistencies within these loops or facets. First, with few exceptions, the performers lead the tracking camera, the spectator largely watching them from behind. This approach is characteristic of Van Sant's holding at arm's length the characters of the trilogy, as we are rarely granted close-ups and, when we are, the face is generally obscured; we see them moving through space, but are not granted a clear position from which to regard their reactions. Second, the roving hallway sequences are largely shot in shallow focus; the *mise-*

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<sup>110</sup> *Elephant* marks Van Sant's first use of this technique, one which he returns to in his two subsequent films *Last Days* and *Paranoid Park*.

*en-scène* of the halls is recognizable but not whole, much like a sketch (see fig. 14). This serves to make generic the school: it is once a specific place yet this specificity is withheld in favor of a vague sense of the spatial boundaries and the characters within them. Finally, and in contrast to the last point, on the occasions when the camera does depart from the school building, exteriors are shot in deep focus. This variation in visible depth of field is schematic, for, ironically, the spectator gains no greater insight to the shootings than would one who looks upon the school from behind police tape or on CNN: in other words, the space inside the school building, soon home to such unthinkable carnage, cannot be fully seen or comprehended. However, from the outside, the appearance of the world is more complete. The interior of the high school is therefore only partially available to us.



Figure 12. Nathan (Nathan Tyson) and Carrie (Carrie Finklea) in one of several behind-the-back tracking shot loops in *Elephant*. Note the extremely shallow focus, which contributes to the mystery of the high school interior.<sup>111</sup>

<sup>111</sup> This image from *Elephant* is a digital frame capture by the author. *Elephant*. DVD. Directed by Gus Van Sant. 2003; New York: HBO Home Video, 2004.

Just as Van Sant subverts our expectation that the ever-reliable realist convention of the long-take will provide to us the “truth,” so too does he play off our awareness of Columbine by offering up characters who may be able to prevent the attacks that we know are imminent, characters who might re-write history through their interventions. One such character is Benny (Bennie Dixon), whose tracking shot loop is withheld until after the gunfire begins and who was previously only seen at the edges of the frame during a touch football game at the film’s opening. When Van Sant finally follows Benny, he is “swimming upstream,” moving *towards* the sound of the shots while other students run past him for the exits. He appears unfazed, unrushed, even curious, as he calmly enters a classroom and helps a female student exit a window. Singling Benny out from the other characters by both his late arrival and his race (African-American, whereas the other members of the ensemble are all white), Van Sant seems to tempt us to hope for his counter-strike. However, he, too, is unceremoniously shot and killed, no face-to-face confrontation with his killer ever permitted.

Even more conspicuous is the case of John, who witnesses the killers enter the school building and is therefore the most equipped to prevent or mitigate the carnage by calling for help. Van Sant introduces John in such a way that one might reasonably assume him to be a conventional movie hero. We first see him negotiate the wheel away from his drunken father as their car careens and pinballs off parked vehicles. Moreover, unlike the film’s other characters, John is given a considerable amount more exposition: we come to know his struggles with his father’s alcoholism, his relationship with girlfriend, his seeming cross-clique popularity. John comes across as concerned, responsible, selfless. Furthermore, he is granted both the greatest amount of screen time and degree of mobility in and around the school. Again, we first see John off the school grounds, next outside the building, and then, camera lingering after, walking the

hallways, before he exits once more. It is while outside the building that John is forewarned of the upcoming attacks. Alex and Eric, entering the building in camouflage fatigues with duffel bags of weapons, explicitly tell him “Get the fuck out of here and don’t come back. Some heavy shit’s going down.”

John, despite possessing specific knowledge of the impending attacks, behaves not as the classical hero he is coded to be. Instead his inaction echoes the lack of volition that Deleuze, some twenty years prior, marked as the defining characteristic of the modern protagonist, a protagonist born in post-war Italy. With unsettling ineffectuality, John initiates an exterior loop, circling the perimeter of the school building in an attempt to dissuade others from entering. But note the vagueness of his warnings: he pleads with his fellow students and teachers to not enter the building—ever polite (“excuse me sir, don’t go in there, please!”)—, but he never explains *why*, never identifies with any specificity the threat within. Rather, when asked the question, he simply reiterates his initial directive: “Just don’t go in there, please.” John does not call for help, does not pull the fire alarm, does not convey the urgency of the knowledge he possesses and meekly attempts to share. Granted the type of concrete visual evidence of the impending attacks that the actual Columbine students and faculty apparently did not have, John cannot muster any adequate counter. His failure, though, cannot be construed as one of agency; rather, his deficiency is at the level of language, the deployment of the appropriate signifier of imminent danger. Like the inarticulate characters of Mumblecore, John is afflicted with a communicative chasm that he cannot overcome, a floundering of language. Words fail.

I wish, then, to frame *Elephant* around the central problem of language. Teachers speak over and around the students, never overcoming the gap in the sender-receiver model. The students, likewise, speak but exchange nothing in the process. Surely it cannot be arbitrary that

our two teenage madmen designate the school's language lab as their base of operations during their attacks, since school administration and students "don't use it anymore." How fitting then that, amidst a futility of language, words literally become background noise. As Eric and Alex wander the halls of their high school picking off students one-by-one, we hear something of a droning hum. Listen closer: this escalating buzz, a *musique concrète*, is a collage of recorded voices stacked upon one another until the words become indiscernible and their meanings lost. It is but a cacophony—sound, fury, signifying nothing.

#### BEYOND IMAGES AND NARRATION: FREE INDIRECT SOUND

*Elephant*, visually lush and stylishly shot, features a remarkably rich sound design, something of a signature of its *auteur*. The voices of the students, for instance, reverberate differently against the walls of the various spaces of the school: in the locker room, muffled voices carry over the tops of lockers; in the hallways, voices ping-pong off the dense walls. While these sounds help contribute a certain verisimilitude to the film—a sonic realism—it is the moments in which Van Sant breaks the unity of sound and image that are most intriguing.

The opening moments of *Elephant* cue us immediately that sound and image will not necessarily be tethered. The film begins with a low-angle shot of a power line. The clouds float across the screen, right to left, at what appears an impossible speed before slowing down to a more appropriate rate, only to ramp up once again. Gradually, the daytime light fades, turns blue, then black. A street lamp flickers on. A time-lapse establishing shot such as this is by no means a new device; however, what Van Sant chooses to accompany it is: we hear what sounds like children playing—laughter, the trampling feet of an athletic contest of some sort, the faint clapping hands of cheerleaders. Voices, though largely indistinct, are audible: they proceed at a "normal" rate. Thus, while the soundtrack saunters in real time, the image sprints.



This appears to be the inauguration within Van Sant's *oeuvre* of a technique he will come to use more frequently in *Paranoid Park*. This granting of autonomy to the soundtrack allows it to break the customary marriage of sound and image. Thus, as Deleuze would describe it, we have at once *two* images: the visual- and the sound-image. This is not to say, however, that in *Elephant* the audio and the visual are unrelated. On the contrary, they are closely affiliated. What is most unusual is that the sound *predicts* or *calls forth* the visual, inverting the teleological conception of sound as secondary to the visual. Van Sant deploys the aural component of film in a similar fashion as does Joe Swanberg in *Kissing on the Mouth*, only here the sounds do not simply run autonomously and concurrently with the visual. Rather, sounds take the lead.

Another example: over the early phys-ed scene, we hear the strains of Beethoven. At first, this appears a curious choice. Clearly, 18<sup>th</sup> century classical music does not “fit” a present-day high school and seems at first blush an aural counterpoint, an ironic anachronism that breaks the customary “teenpic” soundtrack. Jameson would no doubt call this “that pure and random play of signifiers that we call postmodernism.”<sup>112</sup> He would be partly right: Van Sant's intertextuality is marked by a degree of playfulness, but the use of Beethoven here is neither random nor simply nostalgic. Rather, the eventual killer Alex is aligned later in the film with Beethoven. Van Sant inverts one of the theses that journalistic discourse and pop psychology supplied for the “cause” of the Columbine attacks: instead of heavy metal and Marilyn Manson, Alex prefers Beethoven, and, in one scene, practices “Moonlight Sonata” on the piano in his living room.<sup>113</sup> Thus, I contend when we hear Beethoven throughout the film, Van Sant is “speaking” as Alex would. He is, in short, engaging in a free indirect relationship with the

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<sup>112</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 96.

<sup>113</sup> Manson, the heavy metal musician who, in his hubristic showmanship, calls himself the antichrist, was frequently cited as a catalyst for Klebold and Harris. This assertion is humorously dissected and dismissed in Michael Moore's interview with Manson in *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), released one year prior to *Elephant*.

character. We can see, then, that the emergence of “Moonlight” over the opening credit sequence is a harbinger of the attacks, one that (retrospectively, upon subsequent viewings) suffuses the film with a sense of impending doom, even more so when juxtaposed against the faint giggles and cheers. Beethoven’s (and, by extension, Alex’s) piece is heard even before the shooter is ever seen, echoing the child murderer’s whistle in Lang’s *M* (1931) which announces his looming presence before the visual image confirms it, only in this instance the lag time between sound and image is far greater.

It may be said then that Van Sant’s use of sound in *Elephant* is not simply contrapuntal, but that it complicates sound at the level of its enunciation. As we’ve seen, Alex’s bloody peregrinations throughout the high school are, in a manner of speaking, “scored” by the character (or as the character might have scored a film of his exploits). Thus, Van Sant, having entered into a free indirect mimesis with Alex, pulls the strains of the German master from its earlier context and applies it to the film’s opening and its climax. And yet there remains another level of friction, not simply between sound and image but between and among the multiple sounds within the same scenes. Take, for instance, the moment when Alex, stalking the corridors, quotes *Macbeth* (“so foul and fair a day I have not seen”) while accompanied by “Moonlight”: an atonal ring is faintly heard, one that accretes, grows louder, announces itself to be the squealing feedback of an electric guitar. We have two sets of music, one (Beethoven) that floats between diegetic and non-diegetic, and another that is quite obviously sourced outside the fictional world of the film. Alex’s score rubs against Van Sant’s, both competing for a sort of enunciative eminence.

In the opening of this chapter, I characterized Van Sant’s *modus operandi* as one of distance, both physical (i.e., between lens and subject) and emotional (i.e., avoiding character

interiority). And yet here, in the middle of his tripartite rumination on death, he provides us momentarily glimpses into one of his most opaque characters. In so doing, Van Sant breaks briefly from a more traditional realist strategy of “objectivity” and invests in an intersubjective space (that is, between himself and his character) as well as an intrasubjective realm (that is, an interiority, *within* the character). We might conceive of the death trilogy as, following his foray into commercial Hollywood, a late-career return to the art film, one specifically buttressed by a concomitant revisiting of a realist aesthetic that was apparent from his first feature, *Mala Noche*. It is as if these three films (*Gerry*, *Elephant*, and *Last Days*) explore the “problem” or “limits” of realism, much as Rosellini and Fellini did at the waning moments of the neorealist period. But the use of the free indirect mode, what Pasolini called the “poetic” mode, that surfaces ever so briefly in *Elephant* is placed front-and-center in *Paranoid Park*, Van Sant’s first feature film following the trilogy. Whereas the quintessential shot in the trilogy was wide and in-depth, *Paranoid Park*’s is tight, shallow. Instead of leaving the viewer to speculate on the interior states of his characters, Van Sant allows the protagonist to speak in voice-over, as did the liquor store clerk Walt in *Mala Noche*. Rather than follow his young male characters through the any-space-whatevers—a desert (*Gerry*), a high school (*Elephant*), a castle (*Last Days*)—Van Sant focuses his attention on an altogether different space: his character’s subjectivity.

#### “THE BOUNDARIES OF REALISM” AND “THE OTHER SIDE”

[With Fellini] we reach the boundaries of realism . . . [though he] drives on further still, takes us beyond them. It is a little as if, having been led to this degree of interest in appearances, we are now to see the characters not *among* the objects but, as if these had become transparent, *through* them. I mean by this that without our noticing the world has moved from meaning to analogy, then from analogy to the supernatural.”<sup>114</sup> – André Bazin

Much like the recording session scene in *Last Days*, there is a moment in *Paranoid Park* whose centrality to the film cannot be overstated, a moment that establishes the film’s motifs, its

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<sup>114</sup> Bazin, *What is Cinema?* 2:88; emphasis in original

stakes, its style. Alex (Gabe Nevins), a sixteen-year-old boy, enters the empty house of his best friend. He tosses his clothing into a garbage bag, crawls across the floor so that no one may see him through the living room window, and heads towards the bathroom. He strips and enters the shower. The water cascades down his face, which we see in slow motion. The sound of the water, however, carries on in “real time,” irrespective of the accompanying visuals. Alex acts out the movie cliché of the cleansing shower that removes not just the dirt from the skin but internal guilt as well. Yet Alex does not emerge “clean,” for his actions (which have yet to be fully disclosed by this point within the film’s fractured chronology) continue to haunt him. This scene does, however, reinscribe the relationship between sound and image hinted at in *Elephant* though pushed now into another direction. While this approach tells us a great deal about Alex, it equally illuminates Van Sant. Many of the aesthetic preoccupations and thematic tendencies that have emerged over the course of Van Sant’s career coalesce in this film, fuse in a film dominated by the time-image. Recall, for the sake of comparison, Deleuze’s comment on Shirley Clarke: “The film she wanted to make about herself became the film she made about Jason.” This is the case, I argue, with Van Sant and *Paranoid Park*: as much as the film is obviously “about” Alex, it is just as much about Van Sant.

I shall return to the shower scene momentarily. First, some necessary plot summary: Alex, a meek and disaffected teenager who suffers under a hen-pecking girlfriend and recently-separated, feuding parents, finds refuge at a dingy skateboard park located under an overpass in Van Sant’s hometown of Portland, Oregon. He is but a novice skateboarder, but the allure of the older kids from the wrong side of the tracks proves too much to resist. He befriends one older man named Scratch who offers to teach Alex how to jump freight trains. While doing so, they are chased by a security guard whom Alex swings at with his skateboard. The guard falls

backwards onto the opposite track and is severed in two by an oncoming train. Here, as in *Elephant*, tragedy occurs, though in this instance, Van Sant offers a glimmer of hope that the traumatic events that take place might be overcome, that the indescribable might be mastered or somewhat contained by words.

Van Sant opens on the image of the St. John Bridge in Portland in much the same manner as he began *Elephant*. In time-lapse, cars rush over the Willamette River. We hear, though, not vehicles, but Nino Rota's theme from *Juliet of the Spirits* (Fellini, 1965). Rota is deployed on several occasions throughout the film as Van Sant mines Fellini for a thematic mirror to his coming-of-age tale. Rota is not the only bit of the cinematic past that Van Sant borrows. In fact, he appropriates most heavily from his own body of work. For instance, over *Paranoid Park*'s final scene, we hear Elliott Smith's song "Angeles," which, not coincidentally, concludes Van Sant's own *Good Will Hunting*. Furthermore, Alex, our protagonist, obviously shares the same name as one of the gunmen in *Elephant*.

Alex's story and Van Sant's autobiography coincide most prominently in the previously mentioned shower scene. The allusions are numerous, both visual and aural. Van Sant infamously remade Hitchcock's *Psycho*, and he apes the look of both versions in *Paranoid Park* by playing off Alex's long, wet locks, which, much like Janet Leigh's in the original incarnation, adhere to his face as he slides down the wall of the shower. Furthermore, the musical accompaniment sounds at first like ambient noise, though it is in actuality Frances White's "Walking Through 'Resonant Landscape' No. 2", a song that was also featured in *Elephant*. This unique bit of self-referentiality is complicated further by a free indirect oscillation between the visual-image and the sound-image. Van Sant shoots Alex in profile and close-up as White's ambient song wells up. The at-first low hum builds to a frenzy—no pun intended—in which we

hear birds chirping. Van Sant then cuts to Alex against the shower wall, where the wallpaper (a print featuring birds) is framed prominently. It is as if the soundtrack, which I have described as being “ahead” of the visuals, calls forth the birds that appear in the film’s *mise-en-scène*. And the use of the bird is hardly arbitrary, for it, too, refers back to another of Hitchcock’s films, *The Birds* (1963). Thus, one signifier (“bird”) signifies a film, a song, a film that featured the song, and another film by Van Sant who once remade a film by the maker of *The Birds*, all of which is embedded in an overt reference to *Psycho* (see fig. 13).

Alex’s position as narrator of the film, though, destabilizes our ability to attribute the source of a particular sound or visual element by blending four enunciative positions: 1) Alex as protagonist of the film, or the “objective” depiction of him; 2) Alex as writer/narrator, whose avoidance of confronting his role in the security guard’s death motivates the non-linear structure



Figure 13. Director Gus Van Sant references his and Hitchcock’s versions of *Psycho*, *The Birds*, and his own *Elephant*. Gabe Nevins as Alex/Janet Leigh.<sup>115</sup>

<sup>115</sup> This and subsequent images from *Paranoid Park* are digital frame captures by the author. *Paranoid Park*. DVD. Directed by Gus Van Sant. 2007; New York: IFC Films, 2008.

and the multiple ellipses throughout the film; 3) Alex as suspect, who, while being questioned by Detective Lu (Daniel Liu), contradicts the information we attain from 1 and 2 above; and 4) Van Sant, the director. Being that the narrative is constructed as a recollection, it becomes at times impossible to discern from which position a specific element emerges. For instance, in one unusual sequence, Alex sits on a bench near the beach, writing his confession in his journal, where his words are heard in voiceover. He first describes his fascination with the titular skate park upon his first solo visit (“I could’ve sat there all night”) over the image of him perched at the top of a half-pipe. During this shot, the sound of skateboard wheels on concrete is introduced, which blankets the scene in white noise. Alex then begins to recount the troubles of his recent home life in light of his parents’ separation accompanied by an image of Alex at the dinner table with his younger brother; all the while the rumble of the wheels continues. Very faintly, an acousmatic voice (male, older) shouts “hey, kid.” Next shot: Alex back at the park, peering out at the skaters as his voiceover continues. We then cut back to the ostensible present (the beach), the place and time of the narrational utterance. The rush of the waves in the distance blends with the skateboard drone and forms a blended layer underneath the voiceover. As Alex writes, we twice again hear “hey, kid.” On each occasion, Alex lifts his eyes from his notebook *as if hearing this call*. In fact, on the final yell, he turns his eyes, searching, to the upper-right corner of the frame (see fig. 14). Off this glance, we cut back to the skate park, where this unseen, unknown voice de-acoustamatizes: Scratch, the older skater who is later with Alex during the security guard’s accident, approaches the teenager after calling for his attention.

We of course have come to expect brisk shifts in time and space in films with non-linear chronology. What is most disconcerting though in *Paranoid Park* is the bleeding over of the sound elements. The rumble of skateboard wheels (from the already past event) combine

seamlessly with the ocean waves of the film's supposed present. And further, Alex, recounting his first encounter with Scratch, *hears his voice* in a space and time in which Scratch is most obviously absent. This aligns with Deleuze's serial formation of time, a non-successional arrangement in which past, present, and future coexist and open the possibility of becoming. In this sequence, Scratch's voice is not a simple recollection or narrative description. Rather, this past event exists in simultaneity with the diegetic present of the film, so much in fact that Alex hears what is ultimately an impossibility.



Figure 14. The past contaminates the present as Alex (Gabe Nevins) is distracted from his writing by the absent skater Scratch shouting “hey, kid!”

In this sequence, a scant 45 seconds, we experience a fundamentally different sense of time, image, and sound than that of *Elephant*. Van Sant's *Columbine* film is organized around the repetition of movement; *Paranoid Park* is governed by the pure image of time. Most crucial to my purposes, the moments that most reveal the time-image in this film are often the ones most readily dismissed as mere postmodern playfulness.



Analogously, Van Sant's freewheeling deployment of music and sound might be viewed as ironic commentary or simple intertextuality. Yet, the free indirect of the time-image especially problematizes even cut-and-dry formalist theories of sound. We have become conditioned to view the non-diegetic elements of the cinema as "outside" the film, "excessive." Though the non-diegetic is certainly a manipulation on the part of the filmmaker, it cannot be so easily dismissed as contingent or mere external element. Take, for instance, a sequence in *Paranoid Park* in which Alex is seen driving his mother's car. As the sequence begins, Alex is seen bobbing his head to a hip-hop song that is apparently emanating from the car's stereo system. Alex's movements coincide with the rhythm of the track, suggesting that he is hearing what we, the audience, hear. In keeping with some cinematic conventions, this audio is especially present; that is to say, it does not suggest the proximity of the source in relation to the camera position but instead emits "through" the image. Yet Van Sant jump cuts from Alex's synchronized bouncing to a shot of him sitting behind the wheel, pale, as Beethoven—who, as we recall, was central in *Elephant* as well—is heard at the same volume and apparent proximity as the previous song. Nothing in the film suggests that Alex would indeed listen to such music, so the conjunction of it with the image breaks the assumption of a diegetic source previously held. Alex appears dazed, nervous, in shock even. Could the abrupt shift from the buoyant hip-hop song to a more forlorn section of Beethoven's Ninth signify that the latter is taking place after the security guard's death? Perhaps. What is certain, though, is that this choice is not deployed arbitrarily or as simply extra-diegetic commentary on the part of Van Sant. Take the subsequent jarring cut as evidence: off his stunned countenance, we next see Alex ordering a hamburger from a drive-thru window (which deviates considerably from the sequence of events he describes to Detective Lu where he claims to have visited a sandwich shop) followed by him once again driving. This

image is accompanied by a somber country and western song that features the refrain “there’s a time to run, a time to stand / I can’t beat him, I’ll die like a man.” Here, Van Sant speaks from two enunciative positions over the course of three shots: the unlikely symphony is most likely the director’s ironic remark (“Ode to Joy” associated with the guard’s death), while the fatalistic country ballad is equivalent to Van Sant supplying a song that reflects not his own commentary on the event but rather one that “speaks” in terms that Alex might himself use (“die like a man”). Alex suffers from the same inarticulateness that plagues the characters of Mumblecore, so he would thus see his contribution to the death of an innocent man in the black-and-white, irrevocable terms of the classical western. In other words, in his interpretation of the events, Alex does not consider his role in the guard’s death as an accident or as self-defense. Rather, he views it in terms of moral absolutes: Alex dons the black cowboy hat to the guard’s (sheriff’s) white.

As I posited above, *Paranoid Park* features four enunciative positions, four sources to which we can attribute the cinematic information or visual-aural utterance. The sequence in the car, however, does not contain what we may call Alex’s direct address, his voiceover that would ground the sounds and images we see. Instead, we are within the domain of the indirect, which, of course, contributes to the complexity of this short minute-and-a-half sequence. Six shots, three musical passages, and an oscillation of enunciation wedged somewhere in between the film’s author and his character.

By entering into a free indirect relationship with his character and providing for Alex something of a late-film redemptive moment, Van Sant appears to have overcome the encumbrances of his realist aesthetic.<sup>116</sup> Remembering that Van Sant began his career in a realist mode (*Mala Noche*) and then returned to it with his fatalistic death trilogy, one can see in *Paranoid Park* its director coming to terms with his own aesthetic tendencies of distantiation

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<sup>116</sup> The complexion and consequences of this redemption I will address in the following section.

from his characters. Locked into the confines of an “objective” approach, which Bazin in this section’s epigraph characterized as the “boundaries of realism,” Van Sant seems to circle his characters with his probing camera, unable to arrive at any understanding or illumination of the men who so intrigue and baffle both the director and his viewers. Yet with *Paranoid Park*, Van Sant, by delving further into a peculiar aural-visual interplay that he experimented with briefly in *Elephant*, arrives at a place similar to the one Bazin described Fellini having landed—on the “other side of things.”<sup>117</sup> Like Fellini, Van Sant overcomes the “boundaries of realism.”<sup>118</sup> This surmounting of the barriers of realism is only possible through the free indirect mode—which is unlike, however, the “delirious aestheticism” of Antonioni that is enacted visually through the characters’ relationship to the setting.<sup>119</sup> Van Sant’s intersubjective interaction with Alex is most profoundly actualized through the director’s use of sound and music, which highlights for us both the benefits of the study of film sound as well as the doors that are opened by Deleuze’s rethinking of the supposedly “settled” issue of filmic realism.

#### BEARING WITNESS

In addition to their director, formal similarities, and *milieu*, there is another unifying factor between *Elephant* and *Paranoid Park*: the role of the witness and the problem of the first-hand account. Both films prominently feature characters who in the midst of a crisis are compelled to document, archive, or otherwise make sense of the senseless events that transpire around them. Indeed, we can see such a character emerge in a number of guises in all the films that have been considered in this study. Nasia, in *George Washington*, cannot fathom the death of her friend and her playmates involvement in it, so she tells her story in voiceover, crafting a fiction that fills in the gaps of her knowledge. In Swanberg’s *Kissing on the Mouth*, an

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<sup>117</sup> Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, 2:88.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Schwartz, “Typewriter,” 126.

interviewer seeks to answer the riddle of love by collecting oral testimonies from friends. With *Four Eyed Monsters*, the detritus of the couple's actual conversations scrawled on notepads are collected and collaged into the story of their odd love affair. It becomes apparent, too, that in the case of the Mumblecore films, these collectors are both characters and directors, with Swanberg, Buice, and Crumley all playing either themselves or very close approximations within their own movies. Though Van Sant does not act in his films, we can certainly "see" him in them, as he often places a surrogate for himself into the narrative, one who is compelled to document, to gather, to compile, to narrate, to write.

Staiger explains that minority authors often create an "alter ego" within their films. Van Sant is a problematic case, for, though openly gay, he resists the moniker and has in interviews aligned himself not with his queer characters but instead the straight, white, middle class individuals who populate his texts, as their background is more consistent with his upbringing. Staiger suggests, however, that Van Sant "has mostly posed himself as a voyeur to alien cultures he finds intriguing to watch."<sup>120</sup> Obviously, associating a character with an author's personality is fraught with the problems of *auteurist* criticism. Nonetheless, the two films in question here provide characters who play roles similar to Van Sant's as director, which provides a productive position from which to consider many of the larger problems that this study has sought to address.

I wish to consider first the character of Elias in *Elephant*. At the most obvious level, Elias, the photographer, functions much as Van Sant does, for they both are creators of images. Consider: Elias is first seen wandering the park near the high school and approaches two strangers to pose for him. He instructs them how to stand, how to move, what emotion to convey

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<sup>120</sup> Staiger, "Authorship Studies," 10. It bears noting that, despite having been published after the theatrical release of two-thirds of the death trilogy, Staiger halts her analysis with *Finding Forrester* and primarily focuses, as so much of the scholarship on Van Sant does, on *My Own Private Idaho*.

(“be a little happier”): like Van Sant, Elias approaches amateur “real” subjects and *directs* their performances. Secondly, Elias, exceeded in this regard only by John, is afforded a freedom to move within various social cliques throughout the school. He easily wins the cooperation of the “punk” kids outside the school and interacts easily with the similarly mobile John. This mirrors Van Sant’s remarkable capacity to navigate within the art house and commercial realms of American cinema and his being equally at home casting in shopping malls and skate parks. The most obvious similarity, though, is that both Van Sant and his character wield a camera.

My choice of the word *wield* here is not an incidental one. In a film so saturated with weaponry as is *Elephant*, it must be noted the interchangeability of the jargon of firearms and that of the photograph (and, by extension, the cinema): one “loads” the camera (often with a “magazine”), “points,” “aims,” and “shoots.”<sup>121</sup> This relationship between the camera and the gun are made more explicit late in the film. In one of the iterations of the tragic events of the film, Eric and Alex are seen entering the library, where Alex takes aim at someone offscreen. He loads the chamber and begins to squeeze the trigger. Instead of a gunshot, though, we cut to an earlier time and altogether different space—Eric entering a shower to join Alex for a tentative sexual encounter (“I’ve never kissed anyone before, have you?”) prior to the morning of the attacks. The anticipated noise of the gunfire is replaced by the benign “click” of the door latch in a sound bridge that momentarily moves ahead of the visual. This moment in the library, though, is later repeated, but this time we see Alex’s target. As Alex loads the gun, we cut to a shot of Elias, who does not run in fear, but instead lifts the camera around his neck and places his eye to the viewfinder, framed to break the fourth wall and implicate the viewer in the ensuing act of violence. The “click” we heard previously was not actually “attached” to the shower door, as the

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<sup>121</sup> We might connect this terminology to the earliest moving image cameras. I’m thinking here specifically of Étienne-Jules Marey’s primitive camera that was modeled after a rifle, complete with barrel, trigger, and stock.

visuals would lead us to believe, but rather the shutter of his camera. Elias' morbid curiosity trumps his instincts of self-preservation and as a result he becomes the very first victim of the massacre (see figs. 15 and 16).

This shower scene proves an illuminating contrast to the one already discussed in *Paranoid Park*. In *Elephant*, the camera maintains its position from outside the doorway: we hear the conversation between the two boys, but the kiss remains unseen, obscured by the pebbled glass of the stall door. Therefore, in the Columbine film, Van Sant's fractured chronology equates three distinct events: the unseen kiss in the shower, Elias' desire to see (i.e., record or document), and Elias death at the hands of one of the boys from the shower. Thus, the character whom we can align with the director is the first one to die, his desire to witness mapping onto Van Sant's desire to *see into the shower*. That the centerpiece scene of *Paranoid Park* is in tight close-up of Alex from the other side of the shower curtain again marks Van Sant's shift in approach between the two films, for, in the latter text, he allows himself to see, as it were, into the shower. In other words, the Alex of *Elephant* remains hidden while the Alex of *Paranoid Park* is fully visible.

We may also discern quite a bit of Van Sant and the idea of surrogacy by evaluating how he "treats" certain characters within his body of work. Van Sant often fashions himself as a tourist, one not indigenous to the foreign culture that his camera analyzes. Van Sant is frank in his own self-appraisal: "I'm hanging out on the streets, trying to get to know this clandestine scene, but I'm really just a Waspy white kid who has no business there."<sup>122</sup> For each of the alien scenes, there exists a character—generally young, scruffy, and male—who garners the lion's share of Van Sant's empathy. In *To Die For* [1995], one could argue it is Jimmy (Joaquin

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<sup>122</sup> Quoted in Staiger, "Authorship Studies, 9.

Phoenix), in *My Own Private Idaho*, it is Scott (Keanu Reeves).<sup>123</sup> In fact, Van Sant likens his



Figure 15. Shot: The sound of the offscreen shotgun being cocked cues us that Alex (Alex Frost) has taken aim at Elias in *Elephant*.



Figure 16. Reverse Shot: Elias (Elias McConnell) “aims” and “shoots” back.

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

late career technique as resembling that of Pasolini, what with his focus on non-professional, gay street kids as his subject.<sup>124</sup>

Van Sant displays a greater empathy for Alex in *Paranoid Park* than perhaps any other character in the latter half of his career. As discussed above, Van Sant avoids much of the distance with Alex that so characterizes his attitude towards characters in the series of films that preceded it. But how much of Van Sant has made its way into the film? Amy Taubin reads *Paranoid Park*'s train scene as a homosexual initiation, an interpretation she poses to Van Sant in an interview; the director neither confirms nor denies. So what if the traumatic incident at the train tracks—so obscured by ellipses, lyricism, and the free indirect—was not only the accident but also the awakening of Alex's desire?

In my analysis of the “hey, kid” sequence, I noted how Alex seems to hear Scratch's voice and even responds to it as he writes his confession. Note also how Scratch's calls interrupt the portion of Alex's narration where he is remarking on his pushy girlfriend Jennifer (Taylor Momsen). As he recollects the events of the accident, Scratch, imbued at that moment with the stirring power of the acousmêtre, tears Alex's thoughts away from Jennifer and returns them wholly to him. Watch also how Van Sant shoots the introduction of Alex and Scratch: Scratch asks Alex if he can ride his skateboard as two of his friends fall in behind him. Scratch invites Alex to go with him to “ride a train and get some beer.” In the subsequent shot, Van Sant pans in slow motion from right to left from a close-up of Alex, past the two other new arrivals in very soft focus, to Scratch in close-up, smiling. In terms of lighting, framing, and editing, Scratch is by no means a minor character. However, in Alex's narration, he is never mentioned by name or description at all, and is only seen twice, each time briefly.

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<sup>124</sup> Gus Van Sant, “Roll Forever,” interview with Amy Taubin. *Sight & Sound*, August 2007.



In his journal/narration, Alex is evasive and intentionally avoids the incident at the train yard. However, late in the film, he reveals what to that point had only been insinuated (“I had tried to put this part out of my mind...”). As he picks up the story of his time with Scratch, Alex jumps from the park to the tracks, eliminating anything that may have occurred during the walk over. This ellipsis, coupled with Alex’s sex scene with Jennifer (which occurs chronologically *after* the security guard’s death but prior to its depiction within the narrative), suggests that one event is more privileged in Alex’s mind.

Throughout the film, Jennifer nags Alex to purchase condoms so that they may sleep together in what ostensibly would be each their first time. When that moment arrives, Jennifer, in a wordless exchange, grabs Alex’s hand at a party and leads him upstairs, camera following behind in a shot eerily reminiscent of those in *Elephant*. Van Sant shoots the ensuing love scene with no direct audio, in slow motion and tight close-up of either Alex’s or Jennifer’s face, though her long blonde locks obscure both. Throughout, Alex is disinterested, bored even. Afterward, Jennifer immediately retires to the bathroom to call her friends to inform them of how amazing her first time was, as Alex remains motionless on the bed, as passive now as he was during their lovemaking moments earlier. Has there ever been another male-female sex scene in which the teenage male was as disinterested?

The contrast could not be more stark: the alluring skate park and the dangerous Scratch preoccupies Alex, far more so than his popular, petite, blonde, sexually-eager, cheerleader girlfriend, who in any other film concerning the coming of age of an adolescent male would undoubtedly be adored. Here, she is reviled, broken up with in unceremonious fashion under the football field bleachers as Van Sant drowns out her protests with the music of Nino Rota.

Recall, again, Deleuze on Shirley Clarke's *Portrait of Jason*: "the film she wanted to make about herself is the film she made about Jason." Can we not make a similar, albeit speculative, statement about Gus Van Sant in relation to Alex? Van Sant, who admits to being fascinated by the marginal punk boys of society, invests himself in a character who likewise finds the danger and freedom of the Portland subculture alluring. Alex looks on at the young men of *Paranoid Park* much as Van Sant does—with fascination, with attraction.

A figure who has already factored prominently in this study who shares a similar preoccupation with alluring, marginal boys is Pasolini, who, coincidentally, hosted Van Sant and other students during his filming of *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1975).<sup>125</sup> Van Sant acknowledges their similarities in terms of subject matter (captivating street kids, frequently non-actors, often gay), but, most interestingly, he regards his late career as a turn towards Pasolini with regard to his approach—"working backwards," in Van Sant's description.<sup>126</sup> So if we might isolate Van Sant's homoerotics as a central thread that runs throughout his work, what is the "change" that is associated with this late embracing of Pasolini beyond mere subject matter? Angelo Restivo, in pinpointing *Accattone* (1961) as the prototype for what he dubs the "international youth film",<sup>127</sup> posits that the centrality of repressed homosexuality (for Pasolini's characters and others within the genre) is paradoxically an assurance that they are "doomed by the social order and yet at the same time filled with 'unknown possibility.'"<sup>128</sup> In other words, the suffocating realities of their impoverished lives are mitigated by the very (slight) chance that

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<sup>125</sup> Gus Van Sant, Interview with Scott Tobias, *The AV Club*, 5 March 2007. <http://www.avclub.com/articles/gus-van-sant,13800/>

<sup>126</sup> Gus Van Sant, "Roll Forever"

<sup>127</sup> Restivo locates this genre within nations undergoing modernization, so, clearly, it does not map cleanly onto a late capitalist text such as *Paranoid Park*. That being said, one of the defining characteristics of the international youth film is a "pedagogic" function, a "documentary" impulse, that, I think, can be similarly located within the work of Van Sant, whose neorealist techniques and focus on wayward youth fit productively within Restivo's formula. See Restivo, *Cinema of Economic Miracles*, 152-158.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

within the homosexual encounter—either between the director and his characters or between the boys and the audience as an activation of a nostalgia—lies liberation, escape. But within Van Sant’s death trilogy—a designation that suggests a fundamentally different attitude towards sexuality when compared with Pasolini’s own “trilogy of life”—homosexuality offers no hope of escape, no suggestion of a possibility other than death.<sup>129</sup> In *Gerry*, the homoerotic tension between the two stranded men (Casey Affleck and Matt Damon) resolves itself in one’s murdering of the other. As we saw with *Elephant*, the two assailants share a kiss in the shower on the morning of the attacks: the possibility of overcoming their repressed desires, though, does not quell their greater lust for revenge. In *Last Days*, the androgynous Cobain character sees no option other than suicide. But with *Paranoid Park*, there exists, as a result of Alex’s largely unacknowledged attraction to Scratch, a way out of the caging demands of his girlfriend and the failed model of his parents’ marriage. By experiencing a dual initiation (first, into adulthood upon coming to terms with his role in the death of the guard, and second, from the tryst with the older skater punk), Alex arrives at a newly-found self-awareness, modest though it might be. In the death trilogy, each film results in the perishing of one or more of the films’ protagonists. In the film subsequent, death leads to an awakening. Thus, Van Sant, who on the surface was always operating within Pasolini’s terrain (the streets and the kids who populate them), arrives, by “working backwards,” not at certain doom or death, but rather a contradictory predicament of incarceration and freedom: we know that Alex’s skateboard, the “smoking gun” used to attack the guard, has been recovered by the police, and, therefore, his arrest is nearly certain. But his journaling that forms the voiceover amounts to a two-pronged confession, one of his role in the guard’s death and also as an admission of his same-sex encounter. Yet, in the film’s final image,

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<sup>129</sup> Pasolini’s trilogy is comprised of *The Decameron* (1971), *The Canterbury Tales* (1972), and *Arabian Nights* (1974).

Alex, page-by-page, burns the testimonial pages from his notebook, retaining both of his secrets.

One of these secrets is assuredly “out”; the other, however, is not.

## CONCLUSION

## THE INVISIBLE THREAD

“The evolution of film follows an invisible thread.”<sup>130</sup>—Andre Bazin

“The visual image will thus never show us what the sound image utters.”<sup>131</sup>—Gilles Deleuze

Amy Taubin, in her review of *Paranoid Park*, astutely locates the key paradox of the film, a paradox which I have argued runs throughout all the films that have been under discussion in this study. She first deems the film “an exceptionally delicate, refined, and affecting piece of neorealism,” one that manages simultaneously to “defy codes of film realism.”<sup>132</sup> Her appraisal certainly resonates, as Van Sant adheres to many of the tenets of the post-war Italian films—shooting on location, casting real people as opposed to actors, narratives structured around elliptical fissures, etc. Of course, Van Sant also breaks with this prototype, for he concerns himself not so much with the material realities of poverty, nor is his aim the awakening of a class consciousness. Instead, Van Sant seems more intrigued by the blank, opaque face of a teenaged boy, the way that scruffy skateboarders defy gravity and linger briefly in the air like clouds, or how the eyes of youthful inexperience can transform the mundane space of a shopping mall into something altogether different, ethereal. In another shrewd observation, Taubin isolates precisely what are the larger stakes of Van Sant’s realism: “[T]he aesthetic problem that Van Sant is grappling with here is . . . how does the artist represent the exterior so that it speaks to the mystery of the interiority? And whose interiority—the artist’s or the subject’s?”<sup>133</sup> This is the question that this study has pondered.

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<sup>130</sup> Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, 2:90.

<sup>131</sup> Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 279.

<sup>132</sup> Amy Taubin, “Portrait of the Artist?” *ArtForum* 46 (2008): 107.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

As I recounted in the Chapter 1, there is a long tradition of thought on realism that envelops that which is often today considered outside its normal purview. For instance, we've seen that surrealism and its embracing of the irrational is fully imbricated with one of its root words: *realism*. This irrationality, this lack of any concrete object or characteristic to which we can point, is likewise fundamental to a number of other theoretical arenas. Bathes' theorization, for one example, of the *punctum*, that element within a photograph that is outside of meaning and that touches or bodily affects us, is founded upon an unintended detail that nevertheless is harbored in the image, holding the potential to overwhelm the intention or narrative of the arranged elements. Similarly, Jean Epstein sought just such an affect in the face of the actor, one which was latent within the individual but only made manifest from its wresting from the world via the camera, its "caging" on celluloid, and its subsequent "liberation" when projected. And these two are but a slim sampling. Touching upon a smattering of thinkers, Paul Coughlin concisely lays out the overlapping philosophical and theoretical preoccupation with the concealed irrational that is suddenly made visible:

Martin Heidegger labels it the moment of vision, Walter Benjamin the shock of sensation, Jean Epstein categorises it as *photogénie*, Paul Willeman suggests it is cinephilia and Walter Pater simply calls it the sublime moment. The *it* that each of these theorists is referring to is that indefinable moment in modern life or art when sensation consumes the spectator with an overwhelming and indescribably profound intensity. The overriding effect of this experience is the inability to verbalise or rationalise the encounter with any certitude. The sublime moment is individual, personal, and subjective, suggesting that it cannot be defined absolutely or resolved conclusively.<sup>134</sup>

From this passage, we can imagine something of a Venn diagram that can accommodate such a group of disparate theorists and theories from an array of disciplines and across history. The mutual, irrational phenomenon that unites them all forms a core of hope or promise for the cinematic image to lay bear that which is mysterious and, ultimately, most crucial in the world.

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<sup>134</sup> Paul Coughlin, "Sublime Moments," *Senses of Cinema* 11 (2000), <http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/00/11/sublime.html>

This core, this central concern, brings us to Bazin, cinema's preeminent theorist of filmic realism. As we've seen, Bazin was widely rejected as naïve in the post-1968 political turn in film studies, for his insistence on a realist ontology of the cinema ran counter to the growing consensus that the medium was in fact defined by its illusionism. A closer look, though, reveals that the indexicality of the cinematic image was not for Bazin an end in and of itself, but a means to an encounter with the sublime and the irrational. This "mystic" Bazin deployed a number of vague terms to describe such encounters: "mystery," the "supernatural," "poetry," "magic," "surrealism." Regardless of the label, it is clear to see that Bazin, late in his too-short life, had moved beyond objectivity and indexicality and into far different territory.

That Bazin never rigorously defined his terms opens up the discussion to someone who attempted such an elaboration on the irrational image—Deleuze. Though the philosopher is by no means a realist, he is, however, very much attuned to the simultaneity of the real and the virtual, the past and the present. Deleuze provides us in his taxonomy a perhaps more useful set of terms to address the problems that Bazin and others brought to the fore. Specifically, this study has made use of Deleuze's conception of the interval or interstice, the irrational "gap" between two terms that the cinema may briefly cast us into.

I have relied here primarily on two such intervals: the actual-virtual and the subjective-objective. Central to my project has been Deleuze's elaboration on the notion of free indirect discourse, or a director's "speaking" through his characters but in their specific dialects. The free indirect is key here, for it allows for the presence of what Deleuze called "falsifying narration," or, perhaps more simply, the coexistence of mutually exclusive ("impossible") outcomes. Further, Deleuze seized upon the free indirect mode as one of the greatest powers of the cinema, for it involves a mutual "becoming" on the part of the filmmaker and his subject: the subject,

through a process of storytelling or “fabulation,” can call a people into being; However, this process must be necessarily aided by a filmmaker, one who “crosses over” to the other side of the camera to become one of his subjects. Thus, the free indirect mode puts the film (and its maker, its subjects) into an oscillation, one that serves to obliterate the distinction between subjective and objective, for though the two are distinct, they are, in the regime of the time-image, indiscernible.

Each of the five films in this study has showcased some *variation* on the free indirect model as outlined by Deleuze. The inclusion of deviations from the philosopher’s model is by design, for, much like Bazin, Deleuze sees the cinema as subject to a constant evolution or metamorphosis. To such an end, Deleuze asks in relation to the modern cinema: “What are the new forces at work in the image, and the new signs invading the screen?”<sup>135</sup> If, as Deleuze persuasively argues, the post-war Italian cinema inaugurated a new kind of image, a modern image, then what types of images might we see subsequently in the postmodern? What mutations might they undergo? By looking at the contemporary cinema through Deleuze’s lens, we can attempt to plot these evolutions.

In order to do so, we first must consider the narrow spotlight I’ve used here. By focusing on contemporary American cinema, I’ve limited the discussion to cinemas that exist within a late capitalist framework. The reasons are numerous: first, by considering a realist cinema far removed from the Italian high-water mark, we engage with the question of the usefulness of that model as well as the continued inheritance of the neorealist moment. Secondly, whereas Deleuze was concerned with the modern cinema, I’ve looked exclusively at the postmodern. What better ground to consider the “new forces at work” than in a fully postmodern, late capitalist nation so defined by the inundation of images? Third, we have dealt with films decidedly within the art

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<sup>135</sup> Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 271.



house context that have emerged in the country that originated the worldwide dominant Hollywood model; thus, what do these marginal, minor cinemas have to say about this particular historical moment, this smaller than ten-year-window I've delimited?

Aside from the realist paradigm to which all of my examples are obviously indebted, the unifying element to this project has been Deleuze's elaboration of a cinematic free indirect mode. We can therefore look back briefly at each of this study's texts to see how the free indirect becomes the core innovation in this "new" realism I've focused upon. Secondly, through such a recap we can consider the host of other problems and questions that emerge from these texts, such as the role of the digital in the contemporary cinema, the complexities of authorship, and, most crucially, the use of sound, an area within the discipline that has experienced increased scholarly attention but which is nevertheless still inchoate.

With *George Washington*, we saw a peculiar free indirect relationship, one characterized by the addition of a third term to the director-subject binary. Nasia, the narrator, hitting the limits of her comprehension of the tragedy around her, begins to invent a story of heroism for her boyfriend George, a story not unlike one that he might in his dreams have crafted for himself. Nasia is the intercessor in George's story, and Green her accomplice, though the director's images at times belie and run counter to Nasia's narration. The free indirect, therefore, is doubly inscribed: Nasia engages in a free indirect *récit* about George, and Green crafts his story by incorporating Nasia's "dialect": Green speaks indirectly for Nasia who speaks indirectly for George. The free indirect discourse in this instance is not a falsification in two parallel directions but rather is *triangular*.

We see a similarly complex variation at work in *Four Eyed Monsters*, for the filmmakers and the subjects of the film are, in fact, the same. We have then a story that is ostensibly true but

peppered with bursts of fiction and instances of impossibility. *Four Eyed Monsters* is a particularly interesting case in that it profoundly complicates Deleuze's free indirect by its dual authorship, as Buice's and Crumley's collective enunciation is undercut by Buice's *resistance* to speaking Crumley's words. In short, Buice's contribution to the film is one that subtly attempts to subvert the narrative that is dominated by her partner. In light of the film's central metaphor for love (the "monster" of the title that is derived from two being unified into one), it might be tempting to consider Buice's and Crumley's free indirect relationship with one another a becoming, an exemplar of Deleuze's powers of falsification. This becoming, though, is not a "clean" one. Buice, clearly a willing accomplice in this collective enunciation, nevertheless defiantly pushes back, refusing to allow her backstory to be negated or brushed aside by Crumley's colonizing authorship. By offering to us images of "uncertain utterance"—do they originate with Crumley or Buice or both?—*Four Eyed Monsters* presents a free indirect discourse that complicates Deleuze's model while still arriving at two core characteristics of the crystalline regime: impossibility and indiscernability.

Within Deleuze's crystalline formation is a phenomenon that is of crucial importance to my purposes—the de-linking of sound from the visual. This plays itself out in film history as the audio being at first a "component" of the image and later gaining autonomy, becoming a "pure act" unto itself, a separate entity that may be put into play with the film's visual. As a consequence, sound and vision may enter into a free indirect interplay amongst themselves. This marks a contrast with, say, Antonioni, whose use of the free indirect was key to both Pasolini's and Deleuze's theorization of the device. With Antonioni, the free indirect is largely a visual manifestation, for his *mise-en-scène* begins to mimic the neurotic state of mind of his characters, producing a landscape that is colored and imbued with his character's subjectivity, what

Schwartz calls a “delirious aestheticism.”<sup>136</sup> What I’ve sought to uncover in this study has been how a similar relationship between character and environment in Antonioni might be made evident between character and soundscape. With our first example, *George Washington*, it was the contradiction between what the voiceover narration tells us and what the visuals show us that alerts us to Nasia’s fabulation. Thus, her *voice* becomes a crucial component in this instance of the free indirect. The voiceover narration is also put to use in curious ways in *Kissing on the Mouth*, wherein “real” voices abound over the images of fictional characters, thereby contaminating the narrative with documentary audio. Moreover, the film makes manifest the powers of the false, for Ellen’s fictional story becomes a truth by film’s end, for her voice, her testimony, joins the chorus of real acousmatic voices that suffuse the film. In the logic of *Kissing on the Mouth*, one is either real or fiction, embodied or disembodied. Ellen’s existence within both the film’s discreet realms signals her achievement of the transient oscillation made possible through falsification. Once again, Deleuze, with his distinction between the visual-image and the sound-image, provides us with a taxonomy to account for this radical departure from convention.

The three primary concerns of this project (the question of realism, free indirect discourse, and the disjunction of sound from image) come to a most productive synthesis with the work of Gus Van Sant, a synthesis that also allows us to continue to interrogate the notion of authorship begun in our discussion of *Four Eyed Monsters*. Van Sant, despite such a heterogeneous career, deploys a systematic insistence on maintaining his characters’ psychological opacity throughout much of his work. However, there exist in *Elephant* momentary breaks from this *auteurial* tendency. We can begin to recognize that sound and image achieve a unique interplay in *Elephant* that grants us *entrée* into the mental spaces that had been previously off-limits. By granting the audio elements of the film a degree of autonomy from

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<sup>136</sup> Schwartz, “Typewriter,” 126.

a strict tethering with the visual, Van Sant opens his distanced *modus operandi* to an intersubjective realm by initiating a free indirect relationship between sound and image, one that will lead to the most “interior” film of his career, *Paranoid Park*. With this film, the type of character (unreadable, wayward boys) that has so attracted Van Sant’s attentive yet “distanced” camera becomes not just a curiosity traversing about his any-space-whatever *mise-en-scène*; instead, Van Sant overcomes the barrier that kept his protagonists at arms’ length in earlier films and begins to explore the “mystery of the interiority” that Taubin proclaimed.

Thus, we have within one narrowly defined place and time a realist cinema that adheres to the neorealist prototype of casting non-actors, shooting on locations as opposed to sets, elliptical narrative structure, etc. However, by exploring these films, we’ve arrived at the opposite pole of the pervasive conception of realism that began the study. That is to say, rather than an “objective” record of a phenomenon (such as poverty, labor, the immediate aftermath of war, etc.), we’ve instead found ourselves lodged between that world and the realm of the subjective. What’s more, this subjectivity is often multifaceted: with *George Washington*, we have filmmaker, narrator, and a third enigmatic character; with *Kissing on the Mouth*, it’s a filmmaker playing a filmmaker, one who prods his friends and potential lovers to allow him entry to their subjective space; in *Four Eyed Monsters*, a pair of lovers-turned-filmmakers attempt to tell a fictionalized version of their romance, but their voices clash as they attempt to arrive at an objective rendering of their actual past; finally, with *Paranoid Park*, we have a film that, despite all the trappings of its realist inheritance, is so firmly rooted in its subject’s interiority that we begin to fully experience the coexistent temporalities that Deleuze describes: the visuals move at one speed, sound at another, and all the while, the past seeps into the present, and the present bleeds into the past. What’s more, Van Sant can only arrive at his young hero’s

interior by mapping himself onto the endeavor. Can we not once again evoke Deleuze's words on Shirley Clarke (with appropriate modifications, of course): the film Van Sant wanted to make about himself became the film he made about Alex.

So are these above variations of, as Deleuze describes the incipient modern cinema, "new signs invading the screen"? Or, better yet, might we adopt here Bazin's words to describe the emergence of neorealism? Bazin likens the pre-war cinema to a river, one that had attained "equilibrium." Yet this equilibrium, this stasis, can be disrupted:

But if any geological movement occurs which raises the erosion level and modifies the height of the source, the water sets to work again, seeps into the surrounding land, goes deeper, burrowing and digging. Sometimes when it is a chalk bed, a new pattern is dug across the plain, almost invisible but found to be complex and winding, if one follows the flow of the water.<sup>137</sup>

In other words, the cinema becomes stale or staid, then some event or change occurs, one that sets a new course for the medium. This, of course, is why Bazin is present on page one of *The Time-Image*, for Deleuze has, in a rare historicist moment, isolated the war and neorealism as markers of the fundamental shift.

Might we conclude, then, that the shifting river bed here reflects not only the larger symptoms of postmodernism but a particular moment, one in which not only has the image proliferated (via film, television, advertising, etc.) but that consumers now increasingly contribute to their production? This seems most certainly a factor with the Mumblecore films (particularly *Four Eyed Monsters*), wherein nearly every character is a producer of images of one sort or another, images that they then exchange, recombine, manipulate, and/or traffic in. With the possible exception of *George Washington*—which aside from a few references to George H. W. Bush contains little to place the film within any specific time period—the films under consideration in this project all feature a failure of images or symbolic interaction on a number of

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<sup>137</sup> Andre Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, 1:31.

fronts. With Mumblecore, the spoken word is the source of a particularly postmodern brand of *ennui*. But note the other intermediary forms that also fail: the characters of *Four Eyed Monsters* cannot overcome their suspicion of speech through animation, painting, photography, or drawing. Chris, the photographer in *Kissing on the Mouth*, attempts to possess his female models through the image, momentarily locking them into place when they prove far less bendable to his will when the camera is no longer in his hands. Likewise, the still image experiences its most damning failure in *Elephant*, where Elias counters a rifle with his camera and is promptly killed. Finally, in *Paranoid Park*, Alex's voiceover is attributed to his rather "old-fashioned" letter, one that allows him to confront the trauma of the guard's gruesome death, but only long enough for him to in turn burn the pages. Amid a glut of images, of methods of symbolic exchange, all seem to fail.

There is, though, one exception: sound. An example: *Kissing on the Mouth*'s Patrick cannot "have" Ellen in any tangible sense, though he achieves a modest success—if we may call it that—in his recording of her, which disembodies her but nonetheless makes her present at his whim. While Patrick's fetishization of the voice is certainly no victory that we can applaud, it highlights what is most crucial about sound—that it is at once "there" and yet always to an extent absent, invisible. In Chapter 1, we discussed realism as being about far more than objectivity. Its stakes, I have argued, were to pull out from the world that which subtends our lived experience, to make manifest that which is obscured or hidden away by the "spiritual dust and grime" of our day-to-day habitus.<sup>138</sup> But what if what continues to elude us is that which *can never be visualized*, which would necessarily subsume the voices that remain acousmatic, the sounds we hear within the confines of the movie theatre that envelop us but might never be "sourced" on the screen? How ironic then that upon its introduction, synchronous sound was thought to be the

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<sup>138</sup> Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, 1:15.

death of the seventh art, for it is sound that pushes us past the limits of vision and points us towards the sublime, that which is always there yet always absent. In a passage that suggests the “boundlessness” of the Kantian sublime, Chion describes the lack of any limit or barrier to sound that corresponds to the rectangular frame of the image. He writes: “For sound there is neither frame nor preexisting container. We can pile up as many sounds on the soundtrack as we wish without reaching a limit.”<sup>139</sup> Sound, then, occupies a peculiar place within the cinema, for it may contribute a certain verisimilitude to, or, in contrast, *disturb* the reality effect of the visual. Moreover, it may “fill in” the image, make it “whole,” but only by subtending the visible image with yet more of that which cannot be seen. We can likewise find an echo of such a sentiment in Buñuel in a passage quoted at length earlier, wherein he contrasts realism with that continually alluded-to classification of cinema that speaks to a “beyond”—“poetry.” This more proper register of cinema is, according to Bunuel, comprised of “all that completes and enlarges tangible reality.” Is this not what our examples here have accomplished? More generally and more pertinently, is this not what sound does—“completes” reality while making it something altogether more “open” than it was?

The primary aim of this study has been to examine a body of contemporary films within a singular cultural context and cast them as realist works. The most likely objection might be that they are *obviously* realist in that they adhere to the neorealist model of non-professional actors, location shooting, elliptical narratives, and the use of the long take. While these production techniques and stylistic conventions are certainly at play, it is how these films deviate from the “cut-and-dry” neorealist model that most intrigues me, for, as I have shown, these “mutations” are quite in line with Bazin’s realism (or the realism he foresaw). What Bazin and others were

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<sup>139</sup> Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Film*, Ed. and Trans. Claudia Gorbman, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 67.

seeking in the filmic image was always something more mysterious and ethereal than mere objectivity. Thus, I've sought contemporary examples for two reasons: one, to claim these films as *continuations* of an ever-evolving realist impulse and not simply postmodern stylistic mimicry (though they are certainly postmodern films); and two, to sufficiently broaden the conception of realism to encompass films that might even be rejected on the grounds of these deviations—the concern with character subjectivity, *auteurial* “expressionism”, and/or radical departures from an “objective” camera style. Crucial to this conception of realism is that which is *not* on the screen—that which, due to the cinema's asymptotic relationship to the real, *cannot* be rendered via representation and thus remains invisible. In Dudley Andrew's recent reconsideration of Bazin, he notes precisely this point by elucidating what it was that Bazin was seeking: “For years it has been said that Bazin's naïve realism took the visible to be the real, the epiphanic image reached after solving or dissolving the maze of narrative, whereas it was ever the soul of the mummy that he sought through what appears on the screen.”<sup>140</sup> For Bazin, it was never what was on the screen that truly mattered, but what was just outside the camera's reach, that which resides as concealed in the world that is likewise *beyond* the image.

So if the term *realism* proves indeed to be so flexible, then is it still useful? Daniel Morgan astutely notes that, once we've overcome the “thin and impoverished picture” of Bazin that has gained such traction, the issue becomes not that a Bazinian realism accounts for but a small fraction of the films produced, but that the number is, in fact, overwhelmingly large.<sup>141</sup> “The problem,” writes Morgan, “is not that [Bazin's framework] is too restrictive, that it is founded on and so only recognizes a limited set of similar styles. Instead, realism now seems

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<sup>140</sup> Dudley Andrew, *What Cinema Is!*, 10.

<sup>141</sup> Morgan, “Rethinking Bazin,” 445.



applicable to any and every film.”<sup>142</sup> I agree here with Morgan’s premise, but not his conclusion, for the necessary component of Bazinian realism is, as I’ve contended, the co-presence of the irrational with the seemingly rational whole, a condition what is not often found in commercial cinema. It is for this reason that Deleuze is such a crucial interlocutor for Bazin, for his cinematic theory embraces in explicit (and, at times, confounding) terms this paradoxical characteristic.

Perhaps we should find a more suitable term for this type of cinema that intrigued not only Bazin but also Buñuel, Epstein, Deleuze, Kracauer, Benjamin, and any number of other prominent thinkers from the previous century. Dudley Andrew has argued that Bazin’s attention shifted late in his life from his early preoccupation with realism to a greater concern with adaptation—in both the literary and the evolutionary sense.<sup>143</sup> In light of this shift, Andrew, too, alters his terminology, substituting for what I’ve here called Bazinian realism with a simpler term—*cinema*. Though we frequently use the terms *film* and *cinema* interchangeably, Andrew is quick to caution that, though all that falls within the category of “cinema” is most certainly a “film,” not all that is film is “cinema.” Cinema, in Andrew’s argument, “aim[s] to discover, to encounter, to confront, and to reveal.”<sup>144</sup> But is this not what Deleuze is describing in *The Time-Image* with the interval, the point in between the actual and the virtual which engenders new thought? Despite Deleuze’s insistence that the cinema is non-representational, he nevertheless acknowledges the existence of an external, tangible world, one to which we can only “link up” with, amid the ever increasing flux of images, via the very type of thought that the cinema can initiate. The cinema, describes Deleuze,

affects the visible with a fundamental disturbance, and the world with a suspension, which contradicts all natural perception. What it produces in this way is the genesis of an

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 480.

<sup>143</sup> See the final chapter of Dudley Andrew, *What Cinema Is!*, 98-141.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., xviii.

“unknown body” which we have in the back of our heads, like the unthought in thought, the birth of *the visible which is still hidden from view*.<sup>145</sup>

Deleuze elaborates on this “fundamental disturbance” further, tying it precisely to the type of disjunction of sound and image that we’ve considered in this study. “There will . . . be a relation between [image and sound],” claims Deleuze, “a junction or contact.”

[...] And the irrational cut between the two, which forms the non-totalizable relation, the broken ring of their junction, the asymmetrical faces of their contact. This is a perpetual relinkage. Speech reaches its own limit which separates it from the visual; but the visual reaches its own limit which separates it from sound. So each one reaching its own limit which separates it from the other thus discovers the common limit which connects them to each other in the incommensurable relation of an irrational cut, the right side and its obverse, the outside and the inside.<sup>146</sup>

Within the body of American films in the project, we see just such a relation: a limit situation, an irrational contact between an autonomous sound- and visual-image, one that connects the outside (the “objective” world) and the inside (subjectivity). This junction produces what Deleuze calls a “perpetual exchange” between the two, a flow of one into the other and back, a space between real and virtual, subject and object. Bazin, in the epigraph that opens Chapter 1, posits that realism “can take a thousand different routes.”<sup>147</sup> This study, I hope, has explored and plotted one such route.

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<sup>145</sup> Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 201. My emphasis.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 279.

<sup>147</sup> Bazin, *Jean Renoir*, 85.

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