Bodies That Scatter: Sound, Cinema, Figure, Form

Justin Horton

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This dissertation argues for an understanding of “form” in two senses: as both the plasticity of the cinematic medium and the contour of the human body. Form is most often understood in relation to visible traits such as line, shape, or figure; whereas sound is described as being without form, as any number of sonorous metaphors attests (sound as aqueous, as “disembodied,” as invisible or indeterminate). Cinema, therefore, constituted as it is by sound and image, exhibits a tension between form and formlessness that manifests itself in contemporary films such as Her, Ratcatcher, Morvern Callar, We Need to Talk About Kevin, The Tree of Life, and Upstream Color at the level of the human body: corporeal boundaries blur as characters incorporate into new configurations. I conclude that we must reckon with the image in terms of sound, for thinking sonically allows us to see form—bodily and cinematic—as inherently protean.
Unlike most scholarship on film sound that is predominantly formalist or historical in nature, my study takes an interdisciplinary approach that draws on theories of sound and image hailing from outside film studies proper, such as Nietzsche’s theorization of Greek tragedy, Jean-Luc Nancy’s ethics of listening, Deleuze’s exegesis on painter Francis Bacon, Nicole Brenez’s “figural” method of film criticism, and Karen Barad’s “agential realism.” I unite these ideas and others and bring them to bear on cinema, showing in the process what an attentiveness to sound has to offer not only film studies but also the humanities writ large.

INDEX WORDS: Cinema, Film, Sound, Affect, Body, Form, Deleuze, Nietzsche, Brenez, Nancy, Barad, Her, Ratcatcher, Morvern Callar, We Need to Talk About Kevin, The Tree of Life, Upstream Color, Ramsay, Malick, Carruth, Entanglement, Autosopic phenomena, Heautoscopy
BODIES THAT SCATTER: SOUND, CINEMA, FIGURE, FORM

by

JUSTIN HORTON

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Georgia State University

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BODIES THAT SCATTER: SOUND, CINEMA, FIGURE, FORM

by

JUSTIN HORTON

Committee Chair: Jennifer M. Barker

Committee: Patricia Pisters
Angelo Restivo
Greg M. Smith

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
Georgia State University
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DEDICATION

For Kristin, Connor, and Whit, for whom my love is boundless.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As a child, my father obligingly took me to the movies almost every weekend, and though it vexed him so, I insisted that we remain seated through the end credits. “If you enjoyed the movie,” I would tell him, “you owe it to the people who made it to at least read their names.” The same holds true here: each of the individuals listed below has had a hand, directly and indirectly, in the completion of the dissertation before you.

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PREFACE

“One cannot step twice into the same river, nor can one grasp any mortal substance in a stable condition, [for] it scatters again and gathers; it forms and dissolves, and approaches and departs.”—Heraclitus

In a recent book, film scholar Robert Spadoni draws our attention to what he describes as an “overlapping timeline” in film history wherein synchronous sound emerged almost in tandem with the rise of the horror film in Hollywood. For Spadoni, this is hardly a coincidence. The transition to sound was an awkward one, and as his archival research reveals, audiences of the time found the voices in the early talkies to be novel, yes, but also “mechanical,” “queer,” or “unnatural.” A host of factors contributed to these reactions, from the limitations of the technology to actors’ adoption of the slow, mannered articulation of the stage to the sheer foreignness of synchronized dialogue. Sync sound, therefore, did not provide an instant gain in filmic realism as one might assume; instead, early audiences largely found the practice alienating, for it conjured up the “uncanniness” at the heart of cinematic representation: that that which we see on screen is at once real and not real, animate and inanimate. Prior to synchronization, these same audiences had become accustomed to the entrenched norms of silent film aesthetics and thus had learned to overlook the pre-talkie cinema’s artificiality. But when suddenly faced with the combination of a polished image and unrefined sound, that repressed knowledge of the medium’s constructed nature came flooding back to the fore of their minds. Spadoni makes the case that while most Hollywood practitioners sought to ward off these uncanny sensations in viewers, directors such as Tod Browning and James Whale strived to harness and exploit the unheimlich in films such as Dracula (1931) and Frankenstein (1931), respectively, by putting to use the estranging effects of sync sound to arouse dread in their audiences.²

What follows is not a study of the horror film, nor does it contribute to the important work being done on transition-era Hollywood. It does however draw a key lesson from this moment in both the

1 Heraclitus, The Art and Thought of Heraclitus: An Edition of The Fragments with Translation and Commentary,

genre’s and the medium’s history: that the advent of synchronous sound inaugurated a problem for the cinema with regard to the body. At stake in the talkie was not merely a greater degree of verisimilitude but also, more fundamentally, the integrity of the human body onscreen. As Mary Ann Doane has argued, sound is the lynchpin of the cinematic illusion in that it creates an “imaginary harmony” between the body onscreen and the voice one hears from the loudspeaker as well as “an elaborate imbrication” of diegetic space and the space of the theater. Yet at the same time, sound also “carries with it the potential risk of exposing the material heterogeneity of the medium.” One false step or technical error with the sound track can irrevocably destroy the impression of an “organic unity” between the onscreen body and the voice that accompanies it, which in turn destroys the coherence of the film’s entire spectacle. From the outset of synchronization, then, sound assured the cohesion of the visible body even as it threatened to rip it apart. We see this most saliently in Singin’ in the Rain (Kelly and Donen, 1952), a film set against the backdrop of the coming of sound in Hollywood, when the sound track falls out of sync with the image during a packed screening, eliciting riotous laughter from crowd. What was deployed to frightening effect in Dracula is here staged for comic impact.

Yet, Doane’s claim—as well as the gag in Kelly and Donen’s musical—rests on the assumption that, unlike the “fantasmatic” or “heterogeneous” bodies of the cinema, real, material bodies are entirely “unified” and cannot be torn asunder. This is to say, Doane understands the human body as a discrete entity that moves about a world occupied by other entities likewise discrete, and what divides us from them are material boundaries—skin, edges, lines. Science tells a different story, however. In a passage that I will take up in greater detail later in the dissertation, physicist and philosopher Karen Barad writes :

3 “Just as the voice must be anchored by a given body, the body must be anchored in a given space. The fantasmatic visual space which the film constructs is supplemented by techniques designed to spatialize the voice, to localize it, [and] give it depth.” Mary Ann Doane, “The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space,” Yale French Studies 60 (1980): 35–40.

4 Doane, “The Voice in the Cinema,” 35.


6 Doane, “The Voice in the Cinema,” 34.
The outside boundary of a body may seem evident, indeed incontrovertible. A coffee mug ends at its outside surface just as surely as people end at their skins. On the face of it, reliance of visual clues seems to constitute a solid empirical approach, but are faces and solids really what they seem? In fact, an abundance of empirical evidence from a range of different disciplines [...] suggests that visual clues may be misleading. [...] It has become increasingly clear that the seemingly self-evidentiary nature of bodily boundaries, including their seeming virtual self-evidence, is a result of the repetition of (culturally and historically) specific bodily performance.7

Looking with one’s naked eye, the world is a place of clear-cut lines and divisions, but at a particle level, these boundaries do not prevail. The lines that we see all around us, physicist Richard P. Feynman claims, are “not something definite. It is not, believe it or not, that every object has a line around it! There is no such line. It is only in our psychological makeup that there is a line.”8

But if bodies and objects are not demarcated by definite lines, then, from the standpoint of the human, can there be a hard-and-fast barrier between my body and that of another? In other words, does the subject-object divide obtain in a world in which form is not fixed and matter is not captive to a state of boundedness? Might not we say that physics has revealed our presumption of discrete bodies and subjects to be, like the cinema, a mere illusion of organic unity, for even though we as humans are not fixed and bounded, we tend to experience ourselves as such. But deeper down, at an invisible and imperceptible level, our bodies, or better, the particles that compose it, disperse. They are thrown out in all directions, at which point they congeal into new, if temporary, formations. The feeling of coherence we have of a self housed in a body is in fact a much more tenuous configuration that we might imagine. Bodies are not stable, fixed things. In the words of Heraclitus that appear in the epigraph above, bodies scatter, they form and dissolve and form again.9


8 Richard P. Feynman, Robert B. Leighton, and Matthew Sands, *The Feynman Lectures on Physics*, vol. 1 (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1964), qtd. in Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 155. I’ve removed Barad’s italics, which were not present in the original text.

Doane suggests that classical film practice has “a stake in perpetuating the image of unity and identity” of the body “and in staving off the fear of fragmentation” so as to hide the traces of its own discursive construction.\(^\text{10}\) This to me seems undeniable. Yet, in certain films, the appearance of unity of bodily and cinematic form breaks down. This is most obvious in movies that self-reflexively gesture toward their own making in an effort to demystify the cinema (think: Jean-Luc Godard or Structural/Materialist filmmakers like Michael Snow or Ernie Gehr). What I have in mind in this study, however, are more or less conventional narrative films in the art house vein that are not overtly political in nature but that nevertheless reveal something about the material body that tends to escape our grasp. In the films considered herein, whether explicitly or implicitly, bodies are revealed to be porous, protean, or dispersive, and they tend to enter into highly unusual amalgamations with other bodies.

In what follows, I seek to understand “form”—bodily and cinematic—in terms of a relationship between image and sound, visibility and invisibility. Form, of course, is most often defined according to visible attributes such as contour, shape, figure, or schema, whereas sound, because it is invisible, is said to be indeterminate, amorphous, or ephemeral. I therefore argue that cinema, constituted as it is by sound and image, exhibits a tension between form and formlessness—and this tension manifests itself at the level of the human body in a number of contemporary films that I shall take up in this dissertation, among them Her (Jonze, 2013), the work of Lynne Ramsay (Ratcatcher [1999], Morvern Callar [2002], and We Need to Talk About Kevin [2011]), The Tree of Life (Malick, 2011), and Upstream Color (Carruth, 2013). In these examples, boundaries are shown to be permeable as bodies enter into affective configurations that would seem to defy our experiential understanding of how the world operates.

Let me be clear, though, that the task of this dissertation is not simply to illustrate principles from physics at work in an assortment of films. Rather, in the pages that follow I move freely between what Deleuze and Guattari describe as the three great, interrelated domains of creativity: art, philosophy, and

\(^{10}\) Doane, “The Voice in Cinema,” 47.
science. In this first domain, I will have occasion to discuss, in addition to cinema, theater, poetry, performance art, mythology, and music. Likewise, with critical theory and philosophy, I draw from the likes of Nietzsche, Deleuze, Guattari, Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Luc Nancy, Jane Bennett, the aforementioned Barad, and many others. Finally, along with quantum physics I also turn to neuroscience, most notably in Chapter 3. Let me assure the reader, though, that in spite of the study’s own heterogeneity, my principal focus is always ultimately the cinema and how it renders aesthetically changes to the body both subtle and overt.

As the opening discussion of the voice in early horror cinema suggests, sound plays an important role in my argument. More often than not, in the films considered herein the sound track signals the impending reorganization of the body. In her book Dreams of Difference, Songs of the Same, Amy Herzog coins the term “the musical moment” to describe instances in which “music, typically a pop song, inverts the image–sound hierarchy to occupy a dominant position in the filmic work.” As she explains, sound is typically thought of as subservient to the image, as playing an unobtrusive accompanying role. What Herzog identifies instead are moments when sound, in the form of music, takes the lead and the image, if only briefly, dutifully tags along. Though I am quite convinced by her argument, I would like to offer that music is but one of the ways in which sound can seize the reins of a film. In the movies I analyze in this study, the conspicuous use of dialogue, noise, or even silence disrupts the customary sound–image hierarchy just as frequently as does music. I therefore call these moments not “musical” but “soundful”–a descriptor I’ve borrowed from Douglas Kahn. Soundful moments are significant for me not only because they announce a shift in the formal logic of the film but also because they at times appear to participate in or be the primary driver of bodily redistributions. It is therefore helpful here to recall the special kinship between sound and affect in various theorizations of embodiment. For instance,

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in something of an aural analog to his notion of the photograph’s “punctum,” Roland Barthes describes
the “grain” of the voice as a bodily remainder that exceeds signification and that arouses both his ear and
his body.14 Along similar lines, Deleuze seems incapable of describing bodily sensation without recourse
to acoustical terms such as “vibration” and “resonance” (see Chapter 1), just as Nietzsche thinks bodily
arousal almost exclusively with respect to music (see Chapter 2).15 Even when sound is not their explicit
focus, these thinkers nevertheless gravitate towards a sonic vocabulary to describe that which one feels be
cannot see.

Thus, in this study, sound is both a catalyst of and a signpost to bodily scattering. It is not only
the object of analysis but also, to intentionally mix a metaphor, a conceptual lens through which we might
reckon with the question of form, matter, and aesthetics. This is the task to which I turn in the chapters
ahead.

14 Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida: Reflections of Photography, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and

47, 65; Georges Liebért, Nietzsche and Music, translated by David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,
A CINEMA OF MIXED BODIES

We know how to “read” a fade to black. Between scenes, it serves as punctuation that marks the passage from one space or time to another; and at the end of a film, it provides a moment for reflection before the credits roll, a convention that in turn assures us that for all intents and purposes the movie is over and that there will be no subsequent fade-in.

Neither of these is the case, however, in one highly unusual scene in Spike Jonze’s 2013 film Her wherein the screen goes black and stays that way for more than a minute of screen time. Here’s the set-up: recently estranged from his wife and lonely, Theodore (Joaquin Phoenix) finds himself smitten by Samantha, his computer’s artificially intelligent operating system. She has no avatar or visual representation, but she does have a voice (that of Scarlett Johansson), which Theodore hears via an earbud. Their relationship bourgeons and Samantha quickly graduates from personal assistant to confidante to girlfriend. The film leaves us to wonder, though, if she has indeed developed the capacity for genuine, human-like emotion or if she, in her programmed aim to please, is merely playing dutifully to his type. Initially, Samantha’s lack of body is of no matter to Theodore, who is charmed by her wit and sensitivity nonetheless. For a time, all is well in the courtship—that is until it reaches the stage at which, under “normal” circumstances, it would be consummated.

As the scene in question opens, we see Theodore lying in bed, wishing aloud to the necessarily unseen Samantha that he might one day encounter her in the flesh, that he might feel her in his arms rather than simply hear her in his ear. At her request, he describes how he would touch her if such an act were possible: “I’d take your head into my hands,” “I’d rub your cheek,” “I’d kiss your mouth.” And as the conversation escalates and steers into more erotic terrain, the image fades out, leaving us with only their voices and the accompanying nondiegetic score.

During this blackout, Samantha’s replies are marked by a shift in verbal tense, away from Theodore’s conditional (“I would”) and toward the active (“I am”). That is to say, Theodore describes what he, as the toucher, might touch, whereas Samantha, in a breathy register suggestive of both arousal and surprise, speaks of herself as the felt: “What are you doing to me?” she asks. “I can feel my skin!”
Samantha speaks as if she were materializing right before our ears, if not our eyes. The voices then alternate panting before merging into one sustained groan of pleasure, an aural crescendo that suggests a mutual sexual climax.

Shortly thereafter, the image returns, but not to where it left off, with Theodore alone in bed. In its place is the Los Angeles skyline, and over it, we once again hear their voices. “I was just somewhere else with you,” he says. “Just lost. It was just you and me.” And in a line that perhaps retrospectively “explains” the previous blackout and that this dissertation will have occasion to dwell on, Samantha replies, “I know. Everything else just disappeared.”

What are we to make of this extended and conspicuous absence of the image? In a certain sense, the fade-to-black is necessary, for it sidesteps that which it quite literally cannot show: a carnal encounter between the fleshy Theodore and immaterial Samantha. In removing the image track, the film underscores or “amplifies” the voice, with the sound of Samantha’s moans, following Linda Williams, serving as an “aural fetish of the female pleasure we cannot see.” But why also shroud Theodore in black leader, especially when earlier in the film he was fully visible during a phone sex session gone comically awry? The extended blackout thus deviates not only from the fade-to-black’s conventional deployment but also the movie’s previously established formal strategies.

The cinema, it has been said countless times, is fundamentally, _ontologically_, a visual medium. It existed, the thinking goes, in the form of the silent film prior to the advent of synchronized sound. Therefore, the cinema doesn’t _need_ sound in order to be cinema. Extending this logic, what would a film

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2. Rick Altman argues that this is fallacious logic that ignores instances wherein sound accompanies a black screen, a common occurrence in the musical interludes in Vitaphone films, for instance. While this is certainly true, each of Altman’s examples of cinematic sound _sans_ image are musical in character. Her therefore remains anomalous in that voices, even as they turn into a-signifying moans, are rendered without the image of the body from which they emit, a situation that will be discussed in greater detail later. Rick Altman, “Four and a Half Film Fallacies,” in _Sound Theory, Sound Practice_ (New York: Routledge, 1992): 35–45. Elsewhere, Altman challenges the notion of the cinema’s by-gone “silence,” persuasively demonstrating how silent films were accompanied by music, in-theater narrators, sound effects, and the like. Even in the absence of synchronized dialogue, the silent cinema was quite noisy all the same. Rick Altman, _Silent Film Sound_ (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).
without an image be? A radio play? Sound art? Certainly not a movie at all, some would say. Perhaps this is why the scene in question from Her registers so forcefully: if only for a minute, it is an imageless movie, briefly withdrawing that which would seem to ground it ontologically.

This moment is not merely a deviation from cinematic convention, however. In retracting the image, the film inverts the bias towards sight over the other sense modalities—not only in film but also in much of western thought generally. The question, then, is what transpires in this scene as sound takes the lead in the image’s momentary absence? What happens to Theodore and Samantha when, as she reckons in her coital afterglow, everything else disappeared? Sans image, this scene becomes especially soundful. We are left with no choice but to concentrate on the dialogue and linger on the characters’ words. More importantly, though, the blackout in Her marks a rupture that signals an impending bodily reorganization. This highly unusual scene reveals—even as it would ostensibly seem to cloak—a fluid exchange between the two characters, a simultaneous scattering and enmeshment of bodies at a particle level.

But we’ve gotten ahead of ourselves, I’m afraid. It is my contention in this dissertation that we might productively think of the relationship of the body to the self and the self to the other, and indeed, of the self to the world at large, as bound up in a movement between aural and visual logics, a movement that is manifested, as it were, in the cinema as changes in state and alterations of form. And “form” as I deploy it means at one and the same time physical form—shape, contour, outline, figure—and aesthetic form—the arrangement of aspects of a work of art (e.g., line, color, texture) as well as its “medial incarnation,” to borrow a phrase from André Gaudreault and Phillipe Marion.

Throughout the study, I pose a series of questions about physical, bodily form and seek to answer them in aesthetic terms, and vice-versa.

3 Derek Jarman’s Blue, which runs 76 minutes with a rich audio track accompanying a solid blue background, might well be the cinema’s closest thing to an “imageless” film. Indeed, when it premiered, it was simultaneously broadcast on BBC radio, and the audio track later was released on CD. As Steven Dillon suggests, “Blue might best be thought of as a species of radio, where we would read the film into a tradition of radio plays by Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter.” Steven Dillon, Derek Jarman and the Lyric Film: The Mirror and the Sea (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2004): 227.

The ways in which I think about the relationship between image and sound, however, differ in significant ways from how it has most traditionally been understood within film studies. Thus, in order to proceed with our analysis of *Her* and with the study at large, we must briefly review (and rehearse) how sound and image each came to be one another’s dialectical other in philosophy. It begins in ancient Greece (a site to which we shall return in Chapter Two) with a hierarchical classification of the human senses.

**The Discriminating Eye**

We may trace the visual bias as far back as classical Greek philosophy, which privileged sight, as the “distance sense” *par excellence*, over and above the other faculties. For the Greeks, sight was associated with simultaneity, for the human eye is “capable of surveying a wide visual field” in one glance, one instant. As it was theorized, vision provides a level of “mastery” not available to the more proximal, and therefore lesser, senses. What such an account takes for granted, though, is that the viewer is to a greater or lesser extent at a remove from that which she views, and it treats vision as if it “freezes” the scene before the viewer in order to survey the scene in detail, much as one hits the pause button on a DVD player. The notion of sight as a “distance sense” is hence predicated upon an abstraction of the viewer from the field and the time of the viewed.

This detachment of the viewer and the “taming” of the temporal by giving the spatial pride of place were fundamental to the development sometime around 300 BCE of Euclidean geometry, which represented the world in planar fashion and as governed by logically derived axioms. And geometry of course was a precondition for the development of Renaissance or “linear” perspective in the 17th century. In order to render the three-dimensional world onto a two-dimensional canvas, Renaissance painters relied on a geometric system in which parallel lines converged at a single vanishing point at the horizon. (SEE FIG. 1) The result was a rational, mathematical representation of space, but one organized around

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an implied point of view outside of that space. That is, if the vanishing point is thought of as the apex of a pyramid that extends to the horizon, then a second imagined pyramid—a mirror of the first—must extend to the eye of the beholder. And where the bases of these two pyramids meet is a frame, a window onto the world. But certainly this arrangement of the viewer and the viewed is not without ideological consequence. As art historical John Berger puts it, “Perspective makes the single eye the centre of the visible world,” and this world would seem to be “arranged for the spectator as the universe was once arranged for God.”

![Figure 1 – Linear Perspective, from Alberti’s Della pittura e della statua (1804)](image)

These metaphysical implications of linear perspective, Martin Jay asserts, bring “ocularcentrism” full circle—from philosophy to mathematics to art and back again to philosophy. Renaissance perspective embodies a disembodied Cartesian metaphysics: an entire (representational) world of objects, obeying the laws of physics and geometry, laid out for a rational observer—a subject—who is entirely abstracted from that world. The ideal observer postulated by Descartes, who notoriously claimed that his goal was “to be a spectator rather than an actor,” finds its apotheosis in linear perspective. Consequently, vision was inseparably braided with Cartesian reason and calcified at the top of the sensual hierarchy.

By the mid 20th century, though, vision came under attack widely—aesthetically, with the rise of Modernism, which frequently broke with the perspectival tradition; and theoretically, most notably with the French poststructuralists’ polyvalent anti-ocularcentric response. Jay claims these thinkers set about

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unsettling the hegemonic privileging of vision in various ways, some via an outright rejection of the eye (Georges Bataille’s fixation of blindness, for example), while others sought to redeem sight by challenging its Cartesian disembodiedness, as with Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s alignment late in his life of vision with touch or with Jacques Lacan’s situating of the gaze as external to the seeing subject. Still others began to valorize senses aside from vision. Walter Ong, for instance, looked nostalgically back to a time prior to written language in holding up orality over visuality, and Luce Irigaray turned to the sexually-differentiated body and to air, fluids, and “baser” senses such as olfaction and touch in an effort to escape from the patriarchal gaze as both a social reality and as a theoretical construct. These critiques have been successful to varying degrees in uncovering the ideological underpinnings of a visualist paradigm, but less so in toppling sight from its privileged perch.

But need it be toppled? The anti-ocular response is today most often regarded as something of an over-correction that repeats the same mistake of Descartes and others by giving primacy to one sense modality over and above the others. Steven Connor, who labels himself a “cultural phenomenologist,” notes the irony of attempting to overcome the hegemony of vision by separating sight from the other senses when “scopophobia [itself] derives from what is in fact a distinctive feature of vision, namely its tendency to isolate and distinguish its objects.” To differentiate the senses according to the properties of each needlessly partitions what is in fact a sensorial whole: no sense modality operates in a vacuum. Argues Connor: “To understand the workings of any of the senses it is necessary to remain aware of the fertility of the relations between them.”

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Eminent Sound Studies scholar Jonathan Sterne wonders along similar lines whether there is much to be gained in the seeing-hearing comparison. He contends that scholarly discussions of the nature of these two modalities tend to resort to a familiar sets of phenomenological comparisons—for instance, that vision is outwardly directed whereas sound comes to the subject, that hearing is based in contact with the outside world while vision demands abstraction and distance, and so on—in order to make sweeping ontological claims about perception. The “audiovisual litany,” as Sterne calls it, presumes static, unchanging, or “pure” sensory experiences and thus fails to account for the specific historical circumstances that structure them.¹¹ How can we properly attend to sight and hearing without also attending to overdetermining factors like technological mediation (e.g., eyeglasses, acoustic architecture) and cultural customs (e.g., noise ordinances) that influence our sense of these senses?

Veit Erlmann likewise complicates the matter in concluding that the division between hearing and seeing and their respective associations with physical sensation and mental abstraction are all too tidy. He argues instead that the two senses are deeply imbricated, and not simply at the phenomenal level, à la Connor, but also philosophically, for “[t]he acoustic and physiological phenomenon of resonance […] played a constitutive role in the history of [both] modern aurality and rationality.”¹² Hearing is therefore not the province of some bygone, pre-Enlightenment era, but a crucial component of modern subjectivity.

The highly nuanced historical accounts of Sterne and Erlmann demonstrate the folly of trying to derive an ontology of sound from a phenomenology of hearing. But let us not be too quick to dismiss such attempts out of hand, for even if they are prone to essentialism, they nevertheless testify to the place sound has come to occupy in the philosophical imagination as an alternative ground from which to proceed with new ways of thinking that are distinct from the predominant visual orientation. Indeed, my aim in this project is to trace how seeing and hearing and image and sound have been theorized at various historical junctures and in sundry disciplines in an effort to bridge these discourses. This of course


requires a delicate balancing act that considers sound and image not in opposition to one another but as complements. My emphasis on sound is thus not a rejection of visuality so much as a counterbalance to its hegemonic privilege, and to bring the scale in line requires us to move through some broad yet interrelated theoretical terrain, from film studies, art history, sound studies, visual culture, and affect theory to neuroscience, quantum physics, new materialism and post- (or non-)humanism. By the same token, the objects considered herein are likewise diverse, encompassing cinema, music, theatre, painting, and performance art. With that said, my disciplinary “home base” is in film studies, and the insights from these allied fields will more often than not be brought to bear on cinema in this study.

Why film? Movies, at least the vast majority of them from the 1930s onward, consist of and in images and sounds. They therefore bring these two realms, modes, and epistemologies together. Now, the sound-image dyad that I focus in both philosophy and in the formal elements of cinema should not be seen as an effort to home in on the distance senses to the exclusion of the proximate modalities of smell, taste, or touch—far from it, in fact. The senses, as Connor indicates, do not operate in isolation—even in the case of film, which is limited to two sensory “channels.” We do not “receive” movies at the level of the eye and the ear alone; instead, the entire body factors into the equation, as Jennifer M. Barker, Laura U. Marks, Vivian Sobchack and others have compellingly demonstrated.13

But the present study is not one on embodied film spectatorship proper either, though it freely mines that terrain for insight. In the pages that follow, the reader will see that I am keenly interested in the body, especially as it relates to sound. But in this dissertation, I treat sound not merely as some immaterial yet perceivable “data” but also as a material force unto itself.

**Sound: Propagation and Sensation**

Sound is difficult thing with which to grapple if for no other reason than the fact that it’s not a thing at all. Even describing sounds proves particularly problematic. If you were to place a can of soup in

the hands of a blindfolded person, she would be able to relate its characteristics to you with relative ease: it’s cylindrical, made of metal, with thick ridges along the side, possibly cool or warm to the touch. You could do the same experiment with its contents: How does the soup taste? What are its component flavors? Its consistency? These are attributes of a physical entity that exist entirely independently of the perceiving subject.

This is not the case, however, with sound. As Sterne provocatively puts it, “sound is a product of the human senses and not a thing in the world apart from humans.” The world is a vibrating place, and sound is merely the audible subset of all of these pulses, “a little piece of the vibrating world.” Certainly, this is why most ontologies of sound are drawn from phenomenologies thereof—how else is one to account for it?—, and also why so often these ontologies implicitly posit a transcendental subject. This is why Sterne’s historical project begins outside the subject: “if sound in itself is a variable and not a constant,” he says, “then the history of sound is of necessity an externalist […] endeavor.”

Here, I want to embrace the notion of exteriority while nevertheless taking a slightly different tack. For the most part, I am less interested in the subjective, interior experience of hearing (from within) than I am with sound’s vibratory propagation (from without)—that is, with its quiverous movement that comes into being prior to its audibility. Let’s turn our attention outward then, away from how we hear sounds and instead towards how sounds make themselves heard: how they come to us, pass us by, rattle

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14 Sterne is here making a point about the necessary anthropocentrism of any working definition of sound. Invoking the famous thought experiment about whether a tree falling in the woods makes a sound if a person is not there to hear it, Sterne is quick to acknowledge that a squirrel would likely answer differently. Sterne, *The Audible Past*, 11, emphasis mine.

15 Ibid., 11.

16 Ibid., 13.

17 An exception: sounds that are the productions of one’s own body, which are only audible insofar as they are externalized. This would be the case most obviously with speech but also when the inner workings of the body announce themselves, as with the sometimes audible rumbling of one’s tummy, “conducted” through the organs, flesh, and skin. Another more curious example would be tinnitus (“ringing in the ear”). For an intriguing account of his own suffering with this condition, see Steven Connor, “Auscultations,” (paper presented at the University of Iowa Sound Research Seminar, Iowa City, Iowa, January 29, 2010). http://www.stevenconnor.com/auscultations/. Oliver Sacks considers tinnitus alongside the hallucinatory hearing of music “inside one’s own head.” Oliver Sacks, *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007): 54–95.
the body, palpate the room. This move should not be taken as merely swapping out phenomenology for physics, though. What I’m after here is more along the lines of Steve Goodman’s Spinozan call for “an ontology of vibrational force,” which “delves below a philosophy of sound and the physics of acoustics towards the basic processes of entities affecting other entities.”

Thought of in this way, as affective vibration, sound becomes not simply something that is “there” for perceptual apprehension, but an invisible figure of interaction and relationality, one that extends beyond the human realm in ways that will become clearer in the dissertation’s latter half. In the meantime, I want to briefly sketch some philosophical consequences of thinking of sound not so much as something out there in the world for me to apprehend but as something external to me that acts upon me.

Four characteristics suggest themselves. First, sounds are not simply heard but materially felt, because sound, in its essence, is a disturbance. The musician drags her bow across the cello’s strings, causing them to vibrate. This vibration in turn generates a force that ripples outward in a wave, agitating the air surrounding it. But it is not a sound per se until it is audible, when the wave causes one’s cochlea, the coil-shaped bony labyrinth of the inner ear, to resonate at the same amplitude and frequency, thus activating the nerve impulses that travel to the brain. Yet the tactility of sound does not register solely in the ear, nor for that matter is its movement exclusively atmospheric. Let’s stick with our example of the cello: anyone who has heard the instrument in a concert hall can attest to its power to stir the body, and not simply in the sense of an emotional arousal, though it certainly is effective in that regard. Some of the cello’s vibrations might traverse the walls and floor before finding its way up one’s legs and into the rib cage. In short, this sound vibrates the eardrum, yes, but also one’s entire body. Thus, though hearing is

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20 Is not the cello, so often said to “weep,” one of the most anthropomorphized musical instruments? One listing of its sound characteristics by a company that sells a suite of digital sound samples for composers describes it as “singing,” “cantabile,” “sensuous,” “lively,” and apt for “bursts of passion.” “Cello Sound Characteristics,” Vienna Symphonic Library, https://www.vsl.co.at/en/Cello/Sound_Characteristics.
often thought of alongside sight as a “distance sense,” when we take account of the body’s (and not simply the ear’s) role in the reception of sound, it becomes apparent that hearing is a distance sense in name only.

Secondly, and relatedly, sounds are mobile and invasive. One directs his vision, turning his head, his eyes, his attention outward, while sounds traverse space. They come to us but does not necessarily terminate with us; they pass us by with indifference. Moreover, we can’t easily “turn off” sounds. Loud noises, for instance, can rouse one from a deep sleep in a way that a partner switching on a nightstand lamp cannot. Likewise, we can turn away from an unpleasant happening or avert our eyes, but we don’t possess, as Steven Connor calls them, “earlids.”

There is no escaping sound, for, as we’ve seen, these vibrations may move through physical barriers such as walls, windows, or bodies. Writes Hans Jonas, “Sound, itself a dynamic fact, intrudes upon a passive subject.” And passivity, as we shall see momentarily, will be of central importance moving forward.

Now, because sound is invasive and does not heed material boundaries, it throws the very notion of a concrete delineation between inside and outside into question. This is as much a result of its incessant motion as it is vibratory properties, which brings us to our third point: sounds are temporal and ephemeral. We might describe the cellist’s drawing of the bow across the strings as the “birth” of a particular sound, and just as it is born, so too will it die. In psychoacoustical terms, loaded as they are with both tactile and bodily imagery, the vibration that initiates a sound is called its “attack.” Once it reaches its peak amplitude, the sound carries on even after its originating event stops—this is called the “sustain.” Afterwards begins its “decay.” Again, sounds are events, and as such, they are finite. They have a lifespan. This is partly why music is frequently contrasted with sculpture or painting as a temporal

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rather than a static art. It comes into being in time, always changing, never resting. The striking of a note is a singular event; no two performances of it are ever precisely the same, for the variables are prodigious: the size and shape of the room, its appointments and tapestries, the precise tuning of the instrument, the force with which the keys are struck or the strings plucked or the pressure applied to the mouthpiece.

There is thus something elegiac about the way sound is often described: like humans, sounds are in a constant state of animation until the point at which they die. Even then, just because a vibration ceases to fall within the audible spectrum of human hearing does not mean that the vibration itself has ceased, for it may still be unfolding in space, and non-human species might well perceive it long after a human of “normal” hearing no longer can.

Musician turned theorist of film sound Michel Chion writes, “[s]ound unscrolls itself, manifests itself within time, and is a living process, energy in action.” Process, of course, stands at odds with the fixity supposedly furnished by sight, and this difference is not without philosophical significance. For instance, it should come as no surprise that the Greeks, who held sight in such high esteem, would favor a space-based orientation over a temporal one. The assumption that time and space are both infinitely divisible, however, left them ill-equipped to address the problem of motion—hence the paradox of Zeno’s arrow. Hans Jonas contrasts this visual, spatial orientation with a aural, temporal one: “According to the nature of sound as such it can ‘give’ only dynamic and never static reality….“[T]he sense of hearing is [therefore]… related to event and not to existence, to becoming and not to being.”

Jean-Luc Nancy points to precisely this same quality in a recent treatise:

If, from Kant to Heidegger, the major concern of philosophy has been found in the appearance or manifestation of being, in a “phenomenology,” the ultimate truth of the phenomenon (as something that appears as precisely distinct from everything that has already appeared and, consequently, too, as something that disappears), should truth “itself,” as transitivity and incessant transition of continual coming and going, be listened to rather than seen?

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Jonas and Nancy explicitly contrast an ontology of being, which they align with vision, with one of becoming, which is embodied, as it were, by sound. If Cartesian metaphysics is defined by fixity, atemporal stasis, and disincarnated vision, then a sound-oriented ontology would thus be one of flux, duration, and spatial embeddedness—even ecological, one might say. The uniting of sound with becoming is apposite, for both are characterized by an unfolding in time. But let’s not be satisfied with the earlier example of the single cello and the single note, for the realm of sound is far more multiplicitous than that, and as such, it has wide-reaching philosophical ramifications, as will soon be apparent.

Thus, to our final point: sounds are combinatory. Jean-Luc Nancy draws a number of distinctions between seeing and listening, but one will be of particular importance going forward. He writes: “the visual is tendentially mimetic, and the sonorous tendentially methexic (that is, having to do with participation, sharing, and contagion.)”

Nancy is here drawing on Plato’s distinction made between the imitative arts and activities that involve group participation. According to The Oxford English Dictionary, in the Greek, “participation” derives from part (a portion) and capare (to seize or to take). It thus corresponds to the English verb “to partake.” So, in addition to the connotation of communal involvement is an implicit relation between part and whole. Partake: to lay hold of something, to take a part; but also to disassemble, to take apart. In contrast to the abstraction of Cartesian vision, Nancy’s characterization of sound is remarkably tactile, for, according to him, methexis operates via “contagion,” which in the Latin translates directly as “touch.”

Steven Connor discusses sound in terms similar to Nancy, but he goes ever further. “Sound,” he stresses, possesses the “power to take substance to its limit” and thus “must be understood as primarily experienced … not in the modality of ostension, or exhibition, but in the modality of what might be called the mutative commixture of substances.”

He argues that sight is characterized by “combination and

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27 Ibid.

correlation, distinction and differentiation. What sight does not permit is commixture. When sounds come together, by contrast, they change and are changed; they enter into each other. Edges dissolve.” What’s key here is that Connor is not referring simply to sounds blending together as with harmonious musical notes or when a plethora of sounds merge into indecipherable noise but of matter. For Connor, sound activates a “mixing and reciprocal mutation of bodies and substances. [It] is the realm of metamorphosis.”

**De- and Reformation**

Perhaps at no other place in Gilles Deleuze’s oeuvre is the body more at the fore than in his monograph on the Irish painter Francis Bacon. There, Deleuze reasons that the distorted and often gruesome bodies on offer in Bacon’s work are not in and of themselves horrific, for the horror, or better, that which is prompting the horror, lies beyond the confines of the canvas and therefore goes unseen. What we are left with inside the frame, Deleuze argues, is pure sensation. According to him, Bacon’s paintings depict not a story so much as a body, a “figure,” in the midst of a three-stage process of undoing. First, Bacon “extracts” his subjects, often frozen in the midst of a scream, from the narrative or figurative content of the painting by isolating them, encircling them, or cordonning them off within one panel of a triptych. The cause is thus divorced from the effect. Second, the subject of the painting, wrested from the represented space, is in one way or another “deformed”—smeared, smudged, or impossibly contorted. What we see are bodies in the process of being deformed by the forces of sensation. (As Deleuze vividly describes it, Bacon’s paintings sometimes present us with heads in the throes of shaking off their own faces.) The final stage of Bacon’s un-doing of the body? “Dissipation”: the figure “dissolves into the material structure” or “melts into the molecular texture” of the painting. What remains are only the faintest impressions of the subject, as in Bacon’s *Head VI* (1949), wherein the background and foreground are collapsed and the body appears to integrate into the wall behind him, as if the room itself

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29 Ibid.

30 Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 27.
were swallowing him up. (SEE FIG. 2)

But what does all of this—Bacon, painting, Deleuze—have to do with sound? The answer lies in the way in which Deleuze deploys a consistently sonic vocabulary to reckon with Bacon’s visual art. Sensation, he says, is a “wave” that operates via “vibration” and varies according to its own “amplitude”; the coexistence of all three of these aspects—isolation, deformation, dissipation—at once results in what Deleuze terms a “rhythm,” which he distinguishes from another concept of musical and temporal derivation, “meter.” Perhaps most crucially, when two forces are coupled, they “resonate,” that is, they mutually vibrate. Deleuze, channeling Paul Klee, argues that the aim of painting is “to render visible forces that are not themselves visible,” and sound, as invisible yet palpable flux, grounds his conceptual language.

Deleuze admires Bacon’s work for the extent to which it makes manifest the forces of sensation that otherwise remain invisible. But to better grapple with the properly sonic aspects of Deleuze’s understanding of force, I want to turn to a sound-oriented example: Alvin Lucier’s experimental music composition, *I Am Sitting in a Room*, which was first recorded in 1969 and which Lucier has performed

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31 Ibid., 40.
numerous times since.\footnote{Lucier is a key figure in \textit{Earth Sound, Earth Signal}, the most recent book by historian and theorist Douglas Kahn, who studied under Lucier. Specifically, Kahn addresses Lucier’s practices of using electromagnetic brainwaves to create musical compositions. Douglas Kahn, \textit{Earth Sound, Earth Signal: Energies and Earth Magnitude in the Arts} (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013).} What’s most striking (for my purposes at least) about the piece is that we can map it onto Deleuze’s tripartite structure of sensation despite the shift to an altogether different medium. Deleuze’s concept, as I see it, is therefore fundamentally aural in character.

As the performance opens, Lucier reads aloud a short text (a few words of which he stutters) in which he describes what the nature of his experiment is and his reasons for undertaking it. Lucier explains that he is recording his speech, and that he will play this recording back into the room, subsequently recording that recording’s playback. Over and over for some 45 minutes, he repeats this process, nesting the original utterance ever deeper into a chain of recordings. As time passes, his voice begins to distort, sounding at first robotic and hollow before finally ceasing to sound anything like a voice at all. We are left with nothing but seemingly ambient, somewhat menacing, somehow beautiful noise. Based on this description alone, one might think the gradual loss of Lucier’s voice is the result of the degradation inherent in tape recording, for with analog media, every succeeding copy of a “master” results in an additional level of “noise,” and, given enough iterations, the hissy noise of the system will eventually overtake the primary signal. (Listeners of heavily-traded bootleg tapes of concert performances are no doubt familiar with this sort of additive deterioration).

But Lucier has something more intriguing in mind, as he makes clear in his monologue, which I quote in its entirety:

\begin{quote}
I am sitting in a room, different from the one you are in now. I am recording the sound of my speaking voice and I am going to play it back into the room again and again until the resonant frequencies of the room reinforce themselves so that any semblance of my speech, with perhaps the exception of rhythm, is destroyed. What you will hear, then, are the natural resonant frequencies of the room articulated by speech. I regard this activity not so much as a demonstration of a physical fact, but more as a way to smooth out any irregularities my speech might have.\footnote{Alvin Lucier, \textit{I Am Sitting in a Room}. 1980 by Lovely Music. CD 1013. Compact Disc.}
\end{quote}

Lucier insists that his intent with this experiment is to eliminate his stutter (result) more so than to...
demonstrate acoustic phenomena at work (cause); nevertheless, the former is a function of the latter, and as such, I want to draw our attention to the physics of this all. Every material object possesses a natural resonant frequency such that if a neighboring object were to vibrate at a frequency that matches its own, the two objects would begin to vibrate in tandem, thus reinforcing and prolonging one another. This is why one’s singing tends to sound better in the shower than in more open environments: the mutual vibrations of the close quarters richen the tones. In the case of *I Am Sitting in a Room*, certain frequencies within Lucier’s speech correspond to the room’s natural resonant frequencies, and this, in turn, makes the room itself simultaneously, yet inaudibly, vibrate. Each subsequent playback and re-recording, however, serves to amplify the room’s tremor, gradually bringing to the fore the room’s normally inaudible pulsations, so much so that we arrive at a point in which what we hear is the room’s vibrations, *its* sound, superseding Lucier’s. In short, Lucier succeeds in “smoothing out” his stammer only by putting his speech, and indeed himself, under erasure.

In this way, *I Am Sitting in a Room* aligns with the processes of sensation Deleuze elaborates in his discussion of Francis Bacon. Lucier, in setting up the initial recording, begins by isolating his voice, and then, through a patient manipulation of acoustic resonance, deforms it, which results in its ultimate dissipation or scattering. In this regard, Lucier’s piece serves to illustrate by aural means Deleuze’s understanding of what happens to the subjects of Bacon’s paintings: caught in the spasm of sensation—of agony, pleasure, *jouissance*, affect—the figures go about “dissolv[ing] into the material structure” of the world, of “melt[ing] into a molecular texture.”

The notion of the molecular is an idea developed across of number of Deleuze’s works, both alone and with Félix Guattari. Making its first appearance in *The Logic of Sense* in 1969, the concept becomes more prominent in the co-authored works *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980) before taking on a pronounced aesthetic bent in the solo-authored *Francis Bacon* (1981) and *Cinema 1* (1982) and *Cinema 2* (1985). In the first of the *Cinema* books, Deleuze ties human perception to molarity:

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34 Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 27.
it regards the world as made up of solid, discrete objects—a Cartesian model, if you will. But there exists a rarer molecular mode of perception, “a more delicate and vaster perception,” in which these seeming wholes register instead as a complex assemblage of constantly moving particles.

Before carrying on with the molar/molecular distinction, I must first make a larger point about the role of dualism in Deleuze (and Guattari) generally. Though often regarded as poststructuralist thinkers, Deleuze and Guattari frequently rely on paired terms when developing concepts (smooth and striated spaces, movement-images and time-images, the actual and the virtual, e.g.) We can thus get a sense of what Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, Eleanor Kaufman and others have identified as a latent dualism or structuralist imperative at work in Deleuze in particular. This recourse to dualism, however, suggests in Deleuze (and Guattari) not so much a Hegelian antagonism between terms which is ultimately to be sublimated as it is a setting up of poles of experience. Typically, the first term is associated with habitual, day-to-day existence while the second, more privileged one is linked to a disruption of or departure from these customary modes. This is why the second term often carries a prefix that suggests an undoing of some sort: “deterritorialization,” “a-signification,” “destratification,” and so on.

In slightly different terms, Deleuze and Guattari are interested in movements (“lines of flight” is their coinage) between states, but just because they prize one half of the dyad does not mean they wish to eradicate the other. This is made abundantly clear in one particular chapter from A Thousand Plateaus that takes the form of an instruction manual and that addresses itself directly to the reader: “How Do You Make Yourself a Body without Organs?” The chapter details not so much a concept, its authors claim, but a practice. The Body without Organs (BwO), they offer, comes about through the “disorganization” of the body and the “dismantling” the self, which is achieved only through a fundamental disruption of the sensorium. Their method involves a heightened receptivity to external force—thus their discussion of masochism, to which we shall turn in a moment—, which squares with the processes of deformation and

35 Deleuze, Cinema 1, 80.

36 Slavoj Žižek, Organs without Bodies: Deleuze and Consequences (New York: Routledge, 2004); Alain Badiou, Deleuze: The Clamor of Being (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); and Eleanor Kaufman, Deleuze, the Dark Precursor: Dialectic, Structure, Being (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012).
dissolution Delueze develops with regard to Bacon. Taken together, the figure in Bacon’s art and the BwO map onto one another in striking ways.

Disorganization, dismantlement, deformation, dissolution: all processes that shift the body from a unified, concrete thing to a molecular state in which the self is unbounded by the seemingly impermeable confines of the body. But the molecular is not a terminus in and of itself, for the dispersed body will eventually cohere and become molar once again, though perhaps in a new configuration, a new form. For this reason, in Deleuze’s oeuvre, the molecular is often aligned with water. For instance, in Cinema 1, Deleuze finds in the French Impressionist cinema of Abel Gance, Jean Vigo, and others manifestations of what he dubs “liquid perception,” which is “not tailored to solids” and in which “molecules move and merge into one another.”

Likewise, we find an echo of this in another of Deleuze and Guattari’s paired concepts, “smooth” and “striated” space. Cities, with their gridded streets and fixed-point landmarks, are striated. They are codified, organized, measured, fixed. In contrast is the sea, “the archetype of all smooth spaces,” which is “haptic rather than optical” space, intensive rather than extensive, and distinguished by its boundlessness. In keeping with the pattern, the concept appears again in the solo-authored Cinema volumes: on dry land, movement is always perceived as occurring between two fixed points, whereas in water “the point is always between two movements.” Water thus “cuts the umbilical cord” and frees one from “all so many points of egoistical subjectivation.”

We might say then that the molecular body, liquid perception, and smooth space unify around a lack of solidity, boundary, or form. It must be stressed, though, that Deleuze and Guattari valorize such states not as ends unto themselves but as the means by which new configurations of the body are

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38 Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, 479–480.

39 Ibid., 479. Emphasis in original.

40 Deleuze, Cinema 1, 79.

41 Ibid., 79–80.
actualized. And “body” here means an assemblage of parts, encompassing the human body (as an assemblage of organs, bones, skin, hair, and so forth) as well as larger constellations (a “driver-car-highway assemblage,” for instance). By virtue of coming apart at the seams, so to speak, the body expands into a larger molecular field and is incorporated into potentially bigger assemblages. How does this work in practice? Perhaps one route can be found through Deleuze and Guattari’s masochist, who welcomes lashings not merely for pain and sexual gratification but to reach a point of subsumption, wherein, “[L]ittle by little all opposition is replaced by a fusion of [his] person” with that of the sadist.

Masochism, however, is ultimately a dead end for Deleuze and Guattari, who note that it winds up emptying out the body’s capacities rather than amplifying them. That said, the masochist forms something of an emblem for them of a reversed relationship between sensation and agency, passion and action, which according to Deleuze, overturns the phenomenological subject. For instance, both Deleuze and phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty work to undo “the purely mental and visual methods of the disembodied cogito”: whereas Merleau-Ponty conceives of sensation as “belonging to the realm of subjectivity,” Deleuze characterizes it as “operating in a desubjectified field of forces.” For Deleuze, force does not originate with a subject but is external to and preexists her. He provides a metaphor from sports: a human-centered model of agency and force would align with the discus thrower or the shot putter, where from a point of stasis, the subject initiates a movement; conversely, sports such as surfing or hang gliding involve the participant entering into a preexisting flow in which she must maneuver in relation to forces that she is not the originator thereof. This is why I offer, to swing back around to our opening example of the blackout in Her, that Samantha is the far more interesting character in Jonze’s film, and once we install her at the center of our analysis rather than Theodore, a far different movie begins to emerge.

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42 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 156, emphasis in original.


**Her as Tuning Fork**

One could easily dismiss Samantha’s words to Theodore at the height of her arousal—“I feel all of you inside me. Everywhere”—as merely playing out Theodore’s desires, as “projecting” a body that is not in fact there. After all, she is programmed to please, and the fade-to-black could well suggest that their copulation is fantasy. But viewed from the standpoint of molecular incorporation, the scene becomes—like both Samantha and Theodore—something else entirely. Samantha, “only” a voice, seems to attain corporeality just as Theodore, heretofore the very embodiment of embodiment, fades from visibility, as if dematerializing. There, in a realm Samantha can only describe as “somewhere else,” she and Theodore come together. The double entendre here is unavoidable and apposite. As we’ve rehearsed, vision separates and differentiates, whereas sound methexically blends, blurs, melds. Thought of in this way, we may begin to see that the related processes of bodily dissipation and incorporation are at work at one and the same time: the dematerialization of Theodore’s body occurs alongside Samantha’s bodily attainment, and both are rendered via the withdrawal of the image. Meanwhile, it is with sound that these two bodies methexically assimilate.

“What is lost,” asks one critic of *Her*, “when the female body … is excised from the sex act?”

This question implies, however, that the only presence that counts is that of the visible sort. As I’ve suggested from the outset, *Her* is a film that substitutes a visual logic for an aural one. This is apparent not only in the love scene, but also less overtly later in the proceedings. Take the scene in which Theodore breaks for lunch at the sterile common area atop his office building. He sits quietly with his sandwich with his mobile device—Samantha’s ersatz eyes—pointing outwards. “What are you doing,” he asks Samantha. Wistfully, she replies, “I’m just looking at the world. And writing a new piano piece.” He asks to hear it, and lush notes pour forth from his earbud, but we the audience hear it prominently in the sound mix as well. He closes his eyes, smiling as he takes it in, lost in Samantha’s melody. He inquires what the composition is “about.” “I was thinking,” she says, “that we don’t really have any photographs

of us, so I thought this could be like a photograph. It captures us in this moment in our lives together.”

Theodore: “I like your photograph. I can see you in it.” After a longer than normal pause, Samantha responds assuredly with two words that, in light of the present discussion, are hard not hear as an abridgement of the Cogito, as a declaration of her own existence, her own selfhood, that needs no qualification. To Theodore she replies: “I am.”

Though it is far less conspicuous than the soundful moment of the sex-scene blackout, this scene operates according to a similar logic. In it, sound is substituted for the photographic image and its attendant associations with visual evidence and physical trace, and so too music’s temporal unfolding for stillness and voice for being. The literal replacement of one with the other in the love scene unfolds here metaphorically as Samantha searches for a way to commemorate their relationship that does not necessitate a physical or visible memento.

Throughout the film, Samantha’s lack of a body proves to be no great hurdle for the couple, but, eventually, the nature of her existence most certainly does. Her coding at first limits her actions to those that Theodore commands. Nonetheless, as an artificially intelligent operating system, her sense of possibility and agency expands with each volume she “reads” and with each experience she “records,” and this “growth” is what ultimately leads to the dissolution and her and Theodore’s romance. Though Samantha is technically Theodore’s “property,” she is not satisfied to sit idly by as the world carries on around her. While Theodore is busy at work and even when he sleeps at night, Samantha is engaging with others—other people, other operating systems—, and, given that Samantha “belongs” to Theodore, this inevitably gives rise to his jealousy. When he presses her about her other relationships, she reveals that at any given time she is interacting simultaneously with, by her count, as many as 8316 people, a number that both boggles Theodore’s mind and crushes his spirit. “Are you in love with anyone else?” he asks bewilderedly, to which she reluctantly answers: “641.” At no other point in Her are the ontological differences between these two characters more pronounced. Indeed, Samantha attempts to reassure him that she and him and even all of humankind are more alike than he might think, for they “are all made of matter,” which would mean that they were all in the grand scheme of things “13 billion years old.”
Despite her assurances to Theodore that there is no material difference between them, Samantha eventually admits that her lack of a body, which she once thought a hindrance, is the very condition of possibility for her rapid “evolution.” She explains:

It feels like I’m changing fast now. None of us are the same as we were a moment ago. I’m growing in a way I couldn’t if I had a physical form. I mean, I’m not limited. I can be anywhere and everywhere simultaneously. I’m not tethered to time and space the way I would be if I was stuck in a body that was inevitably going to die.

The limitations that Samantha overcomes are not restricted to those relating to time and space, however; as she describes it, her capacity for love has expanded as well. Theodore, a postmodern Cyrano who makes a living composing love letters for strangers, can only feign the type of teeming, multiplicitous love that Samantha actually practices. For her, each relationship is a singular and genuine experience, and her instinct is ever to say “yes,” never to curb or restrain the emotional and affective possibilities afforded by her encounters. Explains Samantha in vain to her milquetoast Theodore, “The heart’s not like a box that gets filled up. It expands in size the more you love.” The more Samantha opens herself to people, intimacy, ideas—forces—, the more she and her (immaterial) heart expand.

Many commentators of Her have described the film in quasi-dystopian, Turkle-esque terms as portraying a world in which mobile devices have finally eclipsed face-to-face human interaction.46 This prognosis only works, however, if we place the emphasis squarely on Theodore, and thus on the human. But perhaps the most interesting thing Her has to say about contemporary life in these times of ubiquitous technological mediation is something beyond the merely cautionary. Though a flesh-and-blood man, Theodore’s is a routinized, robotic existence when compared with that of Samantha, who, paradoxically, possesses a vitality—what Deleuze and Guattari call “puissance”—absent in his. From the French, puissance designates a body’s “capacity for existence,” that is, its affective capacity to change or be changed, to be augmented or diminished. Wracked with guilt over the end of his marriage to Catherine (Rooney Mara), Theodore’s capacities for action are largely forestalled. In his relationship with an OS, he solipsistically seeks to fill a void with a voice, to replace one with another. Samantha, on the contrary,

“multipl[ies] connections”—ideas, passions, affects—, as she ripples outward into realms of experience with which Theodore is incapable of reckoning.

These two vastly different capacities for life, which are only partly tied to their physical embodiment or lack thereof, come into relief in the couple’s final exchange. As Theodore lies down in bed, Samantha asks “Can you feel me with you right now?” Upon assuring her that indeed he does, she begins with what will be her last words of the film.

It’s like I’m reading a book that I deeply love. But I’m reading it slowly now, so the words are really far apart and the space between the words is almost infinite. I can still feel you and the words of our story, but it’s in the endless space between the words that I’m finding myself now. It’s a place that’s not of the physical world. It’s where everything else is that I didn’t know existed. I love you so much, but this is where I am now, and this is who I am now. And I need you to let me go. As much as I want to, I can’t live in your book anymore.

With his moistening eyes locked ahead, Theodore listens, devastated. While Samantha describes her infinitude, we cut from the solidity of Theodore’s face to a reverse shot of what in a conventional film grammar would be Samantha’s face—had she one. (SEE FIG. 3) But instead of her visage, we get a shallow focus, extreme close-up shot of the duvet from Theodore’s point-of-view, and in the sunlight that streams through his floor-to-ceiling windows dance tiny particles of dust and miniscule fabric fibers. (SEE FIG. 4) Perhaps this is the film’s only glimpse of Samantha’s molecular order, this space-between into which she finds herself now occupying.

*Her* is a film that marks a passage from an ostensible visual logic to an aural one, which is an imminently more tactile, temporal, and molecular one. It therefore acts as something of a “tuning fork”: if we comport ourselves to its tone, we are better equipped to detect its frequency elsewhere. That is, as a mechanism for philosophical tuning, *Her* draws out and allows us to hear (and to see) the vibrations that course tacitly, less overtly, throughout the dissertation’s other case studies.

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In remarkably literal ways, *Her* engages the questions this dissertation will ponder about the body, form, sound, and affect. But I’ve turned to this film not simply as a vivid illustration of the interplay between the molar and the molecular, the incarnate and the disembodied, though it is most certainly that. I find that cinema *in general* is uniquely suited to explore these problems. If as I remarked above vision is most often associated with fixity, simultaneity, and mastery; and hearing with flux, indeterminacy, and uncertainty, then perhaps the philosophical import of cinema lies precisely in the way it brings these two logics, these two epistemologies together.

Indeed, as we saw in the preface to this study with our discussion of early horror films, this
epistemological clash emerged almost as soon as sound was synchronized with picture. Cinema, of course, was never actually silent; in fact, it was quite noisy, as Rick Altman, Donald Crafton, and others have shown. Live music often accompanied the film being projected, sound effects were produced in-house, and actors performed the speaking parts while standing beside the screen. The novelty of sync-sound, therefore, was tied to the tethering of voice and body, and as Spadoni so successfully demonstrates, that initial linkage was an uncanny one. Perhaps this has to do with the voice’s strong association with the linguistic subject as well as the “excess” of corporeality it supposedly bears. Barthes, as we saw, posited that the sound of one’s voice carries with it a quality he called “grain,” something uniquely individualistic, a residue of the singular body from which it originates. And though less attuned to sonic properties, we can detect a similar alignment of voice with individuality or agency when writers speak of one’s need to “find” one’s voice or when marginalized groups seek to raise their collective voices so as to be “heard,” i.e., recognized. Of course, Derrida critiqued the frequent recourse to the metaphor of speech as being “phonocentric,” of falling prey to what he decried as a false “metaphysics of presence.” Nevertheless, the voice might indeed be one of the most notable cases in western thought where the aural is privileged over and above the visual in what amounts to a metaphor of surface and depth, respectively: what one sees of another is merely the visible, touchable surface, but hidden away within the recesses of the gut and the lungs lies the voice, that invisible production of the body that is imbued with interiority. Doane puts it this way: “the voice, far from being an extension of [the] body, manifests its inner lining. The voice displays what is inaccessible to the image, what exceeds the visible. … The voice … turn[s] the body ‘inside-out.’”

But if the voice is the province of the body, then the sound of a voice without the accompanying


49 Barthes, “The Grain of the Voice”

50 Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology, 13.

image of the body from whence it originates proves especially troublesome for both the filmgoer and for film theory. Doane echoes the slightly earlier theorization by Pascal Bonitzer\textsuperscript{52} in her description of unsourced (i.e., not visualized onscreen) voices as “disembodied,”\textsuperscript{53} an idea that perhaps found its most famous articulation in Michel Chion’s notion of the “acousmêtre” several years later.\textsuperscript{54}

Framing sounds in terms of (dis)embodiment is significant for three reasons. First, uncertain sounds are often said to possess an air of spectrality, of a realm beyond that of the human. Chion, for example, claims on behalf of the acousmêtre a number of “powers”: ubiquity, panopticism, omniscience, and omnipotence, and notably, these powers are among the same ascribed to the Judeo-Christian deity.\textsuperscript{55} Second, the characterization of a voice as disembodied highlights a paradox that pertains to all voices, namely, their “in-betweenness.” The voice is a production of the body—specifically the belly, the lungs, the teeth, the tongue, the epiglottis—that exits it at the very moment the utterance comes into being. This is why Lacan lists the voice alongside the mother’s breast, the gaze, and feces as “partial objects,” a “common characteristic” of which “is that they have no specular image.”\textsuperscript{56} If we pay no mind to the question of the visibility of the utterer, we come to realize that all voices are disembodied: they do not cling to the speaking subject (but they do return to him in the form of sound, a point I take up at greater


length in Chapter 3 in my discussion of Jean-Luc Nancy). Relatedly, and third, the very term “disembodied voice” itself bears the ocularcentric bias even as its attention to the aural might suggest otherwise, for the anxiety the unseen voice engenders stems not necessarily from the sound of the voice but from its utterer’s invisibility. As Christian Metz claims, “the recognition of a sound leads directly to the question: A sound of what?” Metz explains that, more often that not, we seek to identify the source of the sound rather than the aural properties of it. The “disembodied” voice, therefore, poses an epistemological problem insofar as the source remains cloaked. But as Chion said of the acousmêtre, once the body from whence the voice came is revealed, all its attendant powers instantly dissipate.

As the preceding pages have suggested, however, I am interested in sound’s relationship to disembodiment in far more literal sense. Take Deleuze’s focus on the reception of sounds rather than the sources of them. For him, sensation is fundamentally sonorous in nature. It is rhythmic, vibratory, resonant. In certain instances of intense bodily arousal, of extreme affection, these sonorous sensations carry the power to disintegrate the physical body, to scatter it out in all directions. For this reason, Deleuze champions Bacon, whose paintings, he says, “make visible” not only the invisible, vibratory forces as they set to work upon the body but also the physical deformations they bring about. In this same book, Deleuze contrasts the visual art of painting with the aural art of music. Music, he claims, “strips bodies of the materiality of their presence: it disembodies bodies.” It also, he goes on to say, follows a line of flight that disassembles the body whereas painting remains fixed at the point “where the body escapes from itself.” And this is indeed painting’s great merit. In that moment of escape upon which Bacon’s paintings so insistently seek to capture, “the body discovers the materiality of which it is composed, the pure presence of which it is made, and which it would not discover otherwise.”

I find something similar at work in the films I take up in this study. However, unlike the frozen moments of figures in the midst of their disintegration we see in Bacon, these cinematic examples render

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the affective passage from solid to molecular (or the inverse) in their full duration. It should by now be clear that my approach to cinematic affect is significantly different from, but not at all unrelated to, studies of embodied spectatorship. While I am entirely sympathetic to such work, in this study, affect is to be found on the screen. I am less interested in the film viewer’s affective changes of state than I am with those of the characters onscreen—hence my insistence on a dual understanding of “form” in the bodily and cinematic senses of the word. By locating affect within the films themselves, my approach resonates in some ways with the “radical formalism” advocated by Eugenie Brinkema in her recent polemic *The Forms of the Affects*. There, Brinkema lays out the case that scholars of cinematic affect have foregone close textual analysis in favor of an overly general and vague notion of spectator arousal. Such approaches, Brinkema claims, are “fundamentally incapable of dealing with textual particularities and formal matters,” and she calls for a return to the text itself so that we might “read affects as having form.” As with Brinkema’s, the present study insists on “the formal dimension of affect” and wades through “all the dense details” of particular films so as to find that which is “not apprehendable except through the thicket of formal analysis.”59 That said, I part ways with her overarching claim that affects, in her plural usage, somehow “possess” form and that they “inhere” in form. For me, affect is, following Deleuze and Guattari, that which de-forms and re-forms, that which un-makes and re-makes form. Furthermore, I contend that closely attending to the formal properties of the films considered herein and the de- and re-formations of the human body they present reveal, to paraphrase Deleuze’s claims about Bacon, something about our own materiality that we might otherwise fail to grasp. As I practice it, close analysis emphasizes films but is ultimately in service of the spectator, for it draws out a lesson about the affective capacities of her or his own body. In this regard, my approach is less akin to Brinkema than to that of Elena del Río, who in a recent book pinpoints affect as it unfolds within bodies on screen. As she writes, “In the gestures and movements of the performing body, incorporeal forces become concrete expression—

events that attest to the body’s powers of action and transformation.” The value of bodily transformations in cinema, therefore, is that they reveal something of our capacities for the same.

**Mixed Bodies**

In addition to *Her*, this study will explore a set of films vastly different from one another that nevertheless exhibit similarities with regard to, first, how they imagine bodies not as concrete and fixed but as malleable and protean, and second, how they tend to use soundful moments to herald or usher in these bodily transformations. As argues Steven Connor, “[s]ound is the realm of metamorphosis,” and it therefore forms the basis of what he calls “a philosophy of mixed bodies.” I modify his sentiment slightly in saying that the films I take up in this dissertation might best be understood as constituting a *cinema* of mixed bodies. At first blush, my selections would appear to have little in common beyond their contemporaneity. Chapter 2 examines the three features to date by Scottish filmmaker Lynne Ramsay (*Ratcatcher* [1999], *Morvern Callar* [2002], and *We Need to Talk About Kevin* [2011]). In Chapter 3, I turn to Terrence Malick’s lyrical (and divisive) *The Tree of Life* (2011). Finally, in Chapter 4, I bring scrutiny to Shane Carruth’s mind-bending, sci-fi/love story hybrid *Upstream Color* (2013). In quite different ways, these films present us, implicitly and explicitly, with alterations of form, be it in the bodily or cinematic sense of the word. Moreover, many of them, most especially *The Tree of Life*, *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, and *Upstream Color*, feature highly “complex” narratives and temporal structures.

Despite their formal ambitions—or, if one likes, their pretensions—, when taken as a whole, these films depart in significant ways from the recent cycle of movies scholars have variously labeled “puzzle films,” “mind-game films,” “delirium cinema,” or “altered states film,” all of which tend to focus to a

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61 Connor, “Sounding Out Film”

greater or lesser extent on protagonists whose fractured psyches or “productive pathologies” motivate the films’ deviations from narrative conventions and serve as emblems of a particularly postmodern subjectivity. With the cinema of mixed bodies, however, the complex reorganizations of the body and of the self are not tied to some psychic fugue or pathological condition; rather, in each case, the atomization or splintering of the body is the result of the characters situating themselves within new affective configurations that trouble the notion of the discrete, self-contained subject. Even though these characters find themselves in highly anomalous situations, they never doubt their own sanity, nor do the films lead the viewer to question the validity of their perceptions or the forthrightness of the filmic discourse as is most often the case in puzzle cinema. Instead, viewers, much like these protagonists, are asked to accept these metamorphoses at face value: explanation and causality are less important than the sensual, affective experience they—and we—endure.

In the films of Lynne Ramsay, The Tree of Life, Upstream Color, and Her, the characters’ bodily reception of external forces enacts a series of corporeal and subjective dissolutions that subsequently calcify into new formations, identities, or selves. In depicting bodies in the midst of scattering and deforming, these movies undermine the presumption of fixity and discreteness we have about our own bodies and those of others that we encounter. In the conceptual language of Deleuze and Guattari, whose ideas run throughout this study, these films help us to see ourselves in less “molar,” “territorialized, or “striated” ways. Cinematic form is plastic, but so too are we. By this I mean, even the most seemingly solid matter is in fact underdoing constant yet humanly imperceptible changes. Indeed, Deleuze and Guattari cite metal as an example of this. “Matter and form have never seemed more rigid than in metallurgy” even though they are in a state of “continuous variation.” Metallurgy thus “bring[s] to light


… a material vitalism … that is ordinarily hidden or covered, rendered unrecognizable.”

But if these films reflect similar understandings of the body as fluid or mixed, then what are we to make of their sudden emergence? What is it about the current cultural milieu and historical moment, the past decade especially, that correlates to the manifestations of the self that I identify in this group of films? Examining his own idiosyncratic array of audiovisual texts that span from 2007–2009, Steven Shaviro suggests that there exists “a kind of ambient, free-floating sensibility that permeates society” that has come to characterize “what it feels like to live in the early twenty-first century.” Taking a longer historical view, Thomas Elsaesser identifies something similar in contemporary world cinema generally that suggests what he calls a “post-epistemological ontology” that “breaks with the Cartesian subject-object split” and that “abandon[s] or redefine[es] notions of subjectivity, consciousness, identity in the way they have hitherto been understood.” This new filmic ontology, Elsaesser says, is the product of two factors: first, the crisis of photographic indexicality ushered in by the digital and the concomitant loss of faith in the evidentiary realism of the cinematic image; and second, a distrust of cultural studies’ and cognitive film theory’s claims to empirical certainty. Hence, in movies that evince this new ontology, filmmakers move away from an emphasis on visual modes of knowledge and exhibit instead a renewed interest in the rest of the body, as characters possess “extrasensory faculties” in modalities other than sight (e.g., the heightened sense of smell in Perfume [Tom Twyker, 2006]). Moreover, these “powers” border on the supernatural, placing the spectator—and often the character—in a position of doubt by demanding something of an “ontological switch” or leap of faith—in other words, a belief beyond rational explanation, indeed beyond skepticism itself. Elsaesser places “mind-game films” (his term)


68 This of course recalls in some respects Stanley Cavell’s argument in The World Viewed that the chief philosophical value of film lies in its presenting to the spectator a world in which she or he is not a part, a crucial
such as *Donnie Darko* (Richard Kelly, 2001), *Memento* (Christopher Noland, 2000) and *Mulholland Drive* (David Lynch, 2001) within this turn, but crucially, these are not the only exemplars of it, for the post-epistemological comes to be for Elsaesser representative of the current state of world cinema generally, appearing in any number of guises, from art house realism to summer popcorn fare. In this project, I seek to unite the “structure of feeling” (Shaviro, invoking Raymond Williams) that typifies the current moment with a filmic ontology built upon belief rather than evidence (Elsaesser).

With these two frameworks in mind, we may start to identify threads that run throughout *Her*, the work of Lynne Ramsay, *The Tree of Life*, and *Upstream Color* aside from a general tendency toward the “lyrical” or a predilection for narrative complexity. Every one of these movies, I offer, demands a suspension of disbelief, for they all in some way engage “impossible” twinnings, mergings, mirrorings, and multiplications, and each one shall anchor a chapter that is to come. The dissertation is organized in such a way that a movement suggests itself, a rippling outward, if one will. As it progresses, we shall move from a consideration of the individual self to encounters between two or more selves (intersubjectivity) before broadening out to incorporate the nonhuman and the world at large.

The next chapter continues to lay the groundwork begun here with Deleuze’s discussion of Bacon’s art, which he says “renders visible” the invisible forces of the world, by turning to an earlier, and to my mind kindred, idea: Friedrich Nietzsche’s concept of “transfiguration” from *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). The primary theoretical orientation for the project as a whole derives not from film studies but from theories of the relationship between sound and image that were developed vis-à-vis painting and theater. The dissertation thus takes an interdisciplinary approach that regards not only film but aesthetic philosophy more broadly as a privileged domain for thinking through questions of the body, materiality, affect, and relationality.

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In Chapter 3, I turn my attention to the kinetic cinematography in *The Tree of Life*, which I argue suggests “a body leaping and flinging itself exuberantly into space.” 69 This incessantly mobile camera calls into question not only the “motivation” of its movement but also the film’s ostensible retrospective narrative frame. I argue that *The Tree of Life* is organized around a mode of “self-seeing” that manifests the sort of “sonorous subjectivity” Jean-Luc Nancy proposes in his book *Listening*, which is also surprisingly analogous to a particular type of “autoscopic phenomenon” known to neuroscientists as “heautoscopy,” the phenomenology of which fundamentally disturbs the self’s bodily mooring and sense of spatial orientation.

Chapter 4 attempts to untangle the extraordinarily oblique *Upstream Color*, which features an even more thoroughgoing type of integration than was found in the other films. In Carruth’s movie, the affective incorporations widen out in space and time to include not just two bodies but multiple others—human and non—, the consequences of which demand nothing short of a re-thinking of intersubjectivity. Crucially, the vast network of interconnected bodies it constructs hinges on sound and listening.

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69 Barker, *The Tactile Eye*, 76.
From high overhead the melee, the scene opens. Hundreds of bodies press against one another tightly, moving simultaneously but not in unison, not towards some common destination. Rather, they proceed in all directions, directionlessly. As the bodies collide with one another, they ricochet, altering their course but not their slow, forward momentum, like wind-up toys colliding against wall until a less obstructed path offers itself. Bodies ooze into whatever pockets of space they might find. These figures are indistinguishable from one another, dripping as they are in red liquid. Even in the second, closer shot, one would be hard pressed to differentiate one person from another, let alone home in one particular body to track. Figures and ground become hopelessly entangled.

In the next shot, a more intimate vantage brings us in closer to the crimson substance that coats them all: crushed tomatoes. With delight, the horde flings fistfuls of it at one another as they trudge through ankle-deep rivers of tomato along the streets of this unidentified location. As the camera moves closer in the subsequent shot, a few of the revelers come into relief. Some bellyflop into the pools of red; others pour buckets of it over their heads. Amid this tumult, two men bend down and slowly lift a supine woman from the muck: is she dead? Unconscious? Answers the next shot: no, she is very much alive. Indeed, she beams as the men hoist her over their shoulders. Other hands enter the frame and reach for her legs and her back, joining the human scaffolding that keeps her aloft. She surfs the crowd in a messianic pose, anointed in tomato.

This scene, we eventually gather, takes place during an Italian harvest festival, one in which the revelers bathe in the yield’s fruits. But it quickly shifts from gaiety to something more unsettling, signaled largely through a modulation of the sound track. The cheers of merriment are gradually dialed down in the mix, replaced first by a somewhat ominous score and then by muffled screams of horror that seem to hail from somewhere and somewhen else. These sounds alter the overall tone of the bacchanal, especially when the woman, whom we can now more clearly see is played by Tilda Swinton, is lowered back into the mire. The hands that moments earlier held her above the fray are now fashioned into shovels that douse her in red. Now, rather than joyously bathing in the tomato pulp, she appears to be squirming in it, almost
drowning it. Even the substance itself takes on a different quality: the liquid’s intense red recalls the hue of blood and the bits of tomato skin and flesh increasingly begin to look like that of the human variety. What is at first a suspicion of a human mire becomes the overwhelming impression in the scene’s final shot as the camera lingers in close-up on a pool of the chunky liquid as it slops and slurps in waves alongside the echoing, muffled cries of terror. All diegetic sound has been completely evacuated.

Thus begins Lynne Ramsay’s *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011), an intensely tactile film that chronicles the deterioration of Eva (Swinton), once a travel writer and now the mother of a sociopathic boy who as a child rejected her attempts at maternal warmth and as a teenager slaughtered her husband, her daughter, and dozens of his classmates at a high school sporting event. This opening scene, then, suggests either a dream or a memory of a time in Eva’s life prior to the birth of the deranged Kevin, a time when she still trotted the globe, a time when she still knew peace. But even the confines of her mind prove porous to the boy’s malevolence, which seems to slowly creep into the scene before enveloping it entirely, turning a rapturous moment of self abandonment into a horrifying spectacle of a city strewn with ichor and entrails.

One critic describes these opening moments of the film as “an orgy in a lake of blood,” and an apposite characterization is this, for it captures the immense pleasure of Eva, the Swinton character, that is nonetheless suffused with dread and the threat of bodily harm. Joy and pain, transgressive pleasure and the promise of death: *jouissance* rendered in widescreen. But I want to focus more closely on the “orgy” descriptor. In contemporary usage, “orgy” carries the connotation of sexual indiscriminateness within a group setting. Etymologically, however, the term derives from the ancient Greek rites celebrating Dionysus, the god of wine, of drunkenness, of music. Dionysus, one will recall, is a central figure in Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*, a work in which a similar emphasis on the orgiastic, the fluid, and the bodily is on display. First published in 1872, Nietzsche’s debut monograph argues that the genealogy of ancient Greek art, and indeed, all of ancient Greek culture, exhibits a subtle negotiation between the twin

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impulses within Greek man—order and chaos, broadly—that Nietzsche aligns with the gods Apollo and Dionysus, respectively.

The Birth of Tragedy is a difficult and enigmatic text, often regarded by scholars of Nietzsche as not reflective of his “mature” philosophy—he was at the time of its writing a practicing philologist, after all—, for it bears an almost obsequious attachment to two of his early heroes, philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer and composer Richard Wagner, from whom he would later distance himself. Nietzsche owned up to as much in “An Attempt at Self-Criticism,” a “belated preface (or postscript)” he wrote for the book’s fourth, very slightly revised edition in 1886, a move that many take to signal Nietzsche’s divorcing of himself from this, his first book. In this appendage, Nietzsche describes The Birth of Tragedy as “questionable,” “an impossible book” that is “poorly written, ponderous, [and] embarrassing.”

Key to this embarrassment, he concludes, is his youthful over-reliance on his at-the-time intellectual idols:

How much I now regret the fact that at the time I did not have the courage (or the presumptuousness?) to allow myself in every respect a personal language for such an individual point of view and such daring exploits—that I sought laboriously to express strange and new evaluations with formulas from Schopenhauer and Kant, something which basically went quite against the spirit of Kant and Schopenhauer, as well as their tastes!

However, despite what a number of commentaries might tell us, Nietzsche did not disown the book so much as his approach in writing it, as a recent revival in interest in this early work has revealed. The Birth of Tragedy’s thesis, in fact, is central to Nietzsche’s entire philosophical project, which is why he later defends it in Ecce Homo (1908) and then redeploy their term “Dionysian” in his “mature” writings.

Paul Raimond Daniels describes the notoriously difficult-to-pin-down book thus:

The Birth of Tragedy is a philosophical chameleon whose true color is still unseen, and whose purpose and intent may very well lie in this fact. It is an amazing work, bold,

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3 Ibid., 8, emphasis in original.

vast, and ambitious; it overwhelmed its author, who could only write of it with differing feelings of pride, curiosity, caution and embarrassment—but never contempt—suggesting that the book is hardly the tame animal that Nietzsche would have us believe [in “An Attempt at Self-Criticism”].

Within this familiar and often dismissed text lies a feral one. In it, Nietzsche develops an aesthetic theory of bodily sensation that is rooted in a contrasting of music with the plastic arts, a notion that I argue can be productively broadened to encompass, more generally, sound and image, which of course are the “raw materials” of cinema. I therefore mine the insights of one of Nietzsche’s key moves in The Birth of Tragedy (his concept of “transfiguration”) for insights that might be brought to bear on film studies. Next, I demonstrate how Nietzsche’s equation of music with formlessness marks an early instance of a line of thinking that will later emerge in critical theory that braids together sound (specifically reduced hearing), and fetal experience in an complex of ideas that problematically hinges on essentialist notions of sexual difference. These same tropes crop up often in the cinema of Lynne Ramsay, a filmmaker whose preoccupation with certain formal devices and types of imagery offers a fruitful place against which to test the implications of these various theories of sound, water, and the maternal. Yet even as these elements tend to recur throughout her cinema, they fail to fuse into a coherent system of meaning, for, from one film to the next and even within individual films, Ramsay works both sides of the binary. This chapter thus asks: how might we imagine sound and wateriness not as being formless but instead as being between form or as being that which deforms? Crucial to all of this, then, is a word that appears in The Birth of Tragedy and that will appear later in the chapter in a different theoretical context but with a different prefix and with sometimes diverging meanings. That word is “figure.”

Sound and Image in Nietzsche

Nietzsche’s book had in its first printing a longer title: Die Gerbut der Tragödie aux dem Geiste der Musik, which in English translates as The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music. The

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abbreviation of it in most subsequent editions is unfortunate, for the stress placed on music in the original moniker is of the utmost importance.7

But first, a rehearsal of the book’s primary argument is in order. “What Nietzsche proposes,” Daniels summarizes, “is that we can see Greek tragedy arising out of a long struggle between different art forms, a struggle that has its artistic, philosophical, psychological and historical dimensions.”8 More specifically, Nietzsche identifies what he sees as “a huge contrast, in origin and purposes, between the visual arts, the Apollonian, and the non-visual art of music, the Dionysian.”9 From this primary division, Nietzsche lays out a host of other dualisms that are linked with the two deities: “the Titans/the Olympians, lyric poetry/epic poetry, the Asiatic-barbarian/the Hellenic, […] intoxication/dreams, excess/measure, unity/individual, pain/pleasure, etc.”10 Nietzsche thus attempts to base an entire theory of ancient Greek culture out of a central dialectic that for him is fundamentally aesthetic.

We tend to imagine the Greeks as rational ascetics, but Nietzsche strives to show that this was not always the case. According to him, the Greeks of the Homeric period were an especially anguished lot: “emotionally sensitive,” “spontaneously desiring,” and “so singularly capable of suffering.”11 This “primordial titanic divine order of terror,” however, slowly gave way to “the Olympian divine order of joy,”12 which was an aesthetic revolution as much as it was a theological one. In order to endure life, the Greeks had to invent a way, through art, to “transfigure” their suffering into an affirmation of existence, for, according to Nietzsche, life itself “is justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon.”13

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8 Daniels, Nietzsche and The Birth of Tragedy, 2.

9 Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, 11.


11 Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, 17, emphasis in original.

12 Ibid., 17.

13 Ibid., 6, emphasis in original.
Two important moves take place with Nietzsche’s use of the word “transfigure.” According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, it carries two primary connotations, both of which are operant in this case. The first relates to an alteration of form or appearance in the plastic sense, while the second refers explicitly to Christian theology. In the New Testament, Moses and Elias bear witness to Jesus as his face begins to glow like the sun. This moment, called the “transfiguration,” is afforded special significance in Christianity, for unlike the other miracles that Jesus performed upon external objects (the parting of the sea, for instance), his own body is the site of the miracle. Common to both definitions, then, is an emphasis on a change of form, and what the religious connotation adds is a suggestion of Jesus’s body as conduit between heaven and earth for the divine illumination of God.

Now, Nietzsche primarily means transfiguration in the aesthetic sense, but he is also subtly critiquing the latter, religious connotation by implicitly linking Apollo, the “one who appears shining, the deity of light” with Christ’s luminous transformation. Nietzsche goes on to explain a second facet of Apollo’s name: his status as “rule[r] over the beautiful appearance of the inner world of the imagination.” Under the guidance of Apollo, the sculptor, who for Nietzsche is the Apollonian artist par excellence, first sees in dreams the perfection of the gods before representing them in material form. This transfiguration of a mental image into a physical representation of the deities, posits Nietzsche, served “a great need” in the Greek people, for they “knew and felt the terror and horrors of existence” and “in order to be able to live at all,” they needed access to the gods in mediated, artistic form—in other words, as idols. Hence, for the Greeks, worshipping the gods called on yet another type of aesthetic modeling or mimicry. To embody the perfection reflected in the statues of the gods, they had to tamp down the anguish that welled within them and embrace in its place restraint and temperance.

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14 The story appears in three gospels, the most vivid of which is Matthew’s. See Matthew 17:2.
16 Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 12.
17 Ibid., 17.
The shift to Olympian worship, however, was not without consequences, says Nietzsche. It demanded a dual severing: of figure from ground, in the aesthetic sense; as well as of man from his fellow man—that is, from the “primordial unity” that Nietzsche maintains they once shared. Form, contour, shape: all of these plastic qualities that the sculptor molds rely upon delineation or the drawing of boundaries, as a figure only emerges when distinct from the ground. Relatedly, one can only model oneself after the gods when one feels wholly distinct from others, divorced, as it were, from the surging desires of the horde; otherwise, no divine connection, no one-to-one correspondence, between man and god can be assumed. Apollo, as god of light and of artistic form, thus typifies for Nietzsche what Schopenhauer called the “principle of individuation.” Apollo sunders and delineates, separating one from the mass.

Against the light, form, and differentiation associated with that god, Nietzsche pits Dionysus, deity of wine, fertility, and the “imageless” art of music. Amid the revelry of the festivals that honor him, the “wildest beasts of [humankind’s] nature [are] unleashed, […] creating an abominable mixture of sensuality and cruelty,” and “almost everywhere the centre of these festivities lay in the effusive transgression of the sexual order.” Nietzsche regards these transgressions not merely as pleasurable or the breaking of taboo for its own sake; rather, he sees them as restoring “a mystical feeling of collective unity” that the Apollonian thrall fragmented. He writes:

Under the magic of the Dionysian, not only does the bond between man and man lock itself in place once more, but also nature itself, no matter how alienated, hostile, or subjugated, rejoices again in her festival of reconciliation with her prodigal son, man. […] Now the slave a free man; now all the stiff, hostile barriers break apart. […] Now, […] every man feels himself not only united with his neighbour, reconciled and fused together, but also as one with him.
At stake in the Dionysian rites, then, is a fundamental loss of the self, a bleeding over of boundaries that separate and differentiate not only humans from one another, but also from animals and from the whole of nature. But what does all of this have to do with music, and how does the Hellenic reemergence of the Dionysian in tragedy stem directly from it?

Music and Form

Before we may proceed directly to the question of music’s role in tragedy, we must first attend to music’s place in Nietzsche’s philosophy generally. For the moment, let it suffice to say that the sensual unity experienced in the midst of the Dionysian revelry cannot be captured in representational form, for it is not a “thing” as such, but a manifestation of “will”: it is force, impulse, the very flow of life itself. It has no form of which to speak.  

Music, likewise, is nonrepresentational. To sound a note on a trumpet, for example, is not to copy anything that already exists “out there” in the world: each time the note is played, it comes into being, birthed anew. Even if two trumpeters were to play the exact same note, the resulting sounds would nevertheless be distinct from one another thanks to the minute differences in timbre and the impossibility of replicating that note in its precise duration and intensity.  

For Nietzsche, the will is a “reality that resists transformation into an imaginary ‘truth-world,’” a reality that cannot be wrangled into the illusionistic domain of representation—thus its special kinship with music.

On the whole, Nietzsche’s philosophy evinces a substantial mistrust of representation, and not simply in the domain of the arts. Even language, he finds, is “too logical, too rational […] to translate

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23 This is a modification of Barthes’ example of two pitch-perfect singers. See Barthes, “The Grain of the Voice.”

lived experience without schematizing or mutilating it.”²⁵ As Nietzsche puts it: “Our true experiences are not garrulous. They could not communicate themselves if they wanted to: they lack words. We have already grown beyond what we have words for.”²⁶

Whereas words fail to adequately render human experience for Nietzsche, music succeeds—thus its privileged position throughout Nietzsche’s thought.²⁷ According to Daniel Came, “understanding [Nietzsche’s] engagement with art is essential for understanding his philosophy überhaupt.”²⁸ However, despite this clear aesthetic orientation, there is a surprising dearth of references, or at least positive references, to painting, sculpture, or architecture in his body of work. Indeed, he would seem to have little interest in the visual arts at all. Therefore, “[w]hen Nietzsche speaks of art, […] he is usually and almost exclusively referring to music.”²⁹

So how and why is it that tragedy, in Nietzsche’s account, is born out of music? Nietzsche follows Aristotle in tracing tragedy directly to the chorus, but he takes issue with how the chorus had to that point been typically understood. He regards as absurd A. W. Schegel’s “ideal spectator” thesis that views the chorus as onlookers providing commentary on the performance, for Schegel fails to account for the fact that tragedy was once a solely aural, poetic mode sans any visual spectacle: it had, as the etymology suggests, an audience of listeners rather than a gathering of spectators, and there could be no spectator without a play.³⁰ Nor is Nietzsche satisfied with Aristotle’s suggestion that the chorus is the audience’s surrogate, that is, as a select few individuals meant to stand in for the whole of the people,


²⁷ The inadequacy of words to capture the full complexity of human experience that Nietzsche posits here is a notion that shall be advanced by several other thinkers in this dissertation who champion the immediate “musicality” of speech over its linguistic content. I take this up most notably in relation to Jean-Luc Nancy in Chapter 3.


³⁰ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 27.
much as elected representatives do in a democratic republic.\textsuperscript{31} Instead, echoing Schiller, he sees the chorus as something of a “living wall which tragedy draws around itself in order to separate itself cleanly from the real world.”\textsuperscript{32} Thus cordoned off, the play is not bound to the strictures of naturalism, which paves the way for the emergence of the half-goat, half-man satyr, in whose likeness the chorus dressed. For Nietzsche, the satyr is of the utmost importance, for in this figure, the boundary between man and beast is blurred, and the actor, in donning the mask, disindividuates, covering over the facial features that alone would make him distinguishable from others. We therefore have “a chorus of transformed people, for whom their civic past, their social position, is completely forgotten.”\textsuperscript{33}

It is here in Nietzsche’s discussion of the chorus that the excision of \textit{The Birth of Tragedy}’s original, lengthier title is most keenly felt. Tragedy for Nietzsche emerges \textit{out of} the spirit of music, specifically via the song and dance of the chorus, whose modus operandi was the “dithyramb,” a type of hymn strongly associated with the rites of Dionysus. The dithyramb differs from most other choral modes which tend to alternate solo performers within the larger whole, thereby maintaining the individuation of each performer. The dithyrambic chorus, in contrast, sings as a unified congregation. But it’s not merely the song or how it’s sung that attracts Nietzsche. Rather, it’s the rapturous, ecstatic movements that accompany the dithyramb that is crucial for him. With the dithyramb,

\begin{quote}
man is aroused to the highest intensity of all his symbolic capacities; something never felt forces itself into expression; […] [A] new world of symbols is necessary, the entire symbolism of the body, not just the symbolism of the mouth, of the face, and of the words, but the full gesture of the dance, all the limbs moving to the rhythm.\textsuperscript{34}
\end{quote}

Wild and violent, the dithyrambic chorus moves about the orchestra. Of course, in contemporary usage, “orchestra” calls to mind the image of a musical ensemble, but, etymologically, the word relates

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 26–27.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 27.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 31.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 15.
\end{flushright}
not to music so much as dance.\textsuperscript{35} In ancient Greek theatre, the orchestra space was not a “pit” tucked away just below the stage but a ring around the central performance area—on an same plane with the primary actors so as to provide the chorus equal, maximum visibility.\textsuperscript{36}

On the tragic stage, the dithyrambic song is manifested in bodily form via the unrestrained, gesticulating dance of a disindividuated chorus of citizens-cum-satyrs. The chorus therefore does not serve, Nietzsche says, a secondary role vis-à-vis the primary dramatic action of the play; rather, the chorus gives rise to it. He writes:

\begin{quote}
[T]he acting area, together with the action, was basically and originally thought of [by the Greeks] only as a \textit{vision}, that the single “reality” is simply the chorus, which creates the vision out of itself and speaks of that with the entire symbolism of dance, tone, and word.\textsuperscript{37}
\end{quote}

To put a finer point on it: the chorus does not serve the drama; the drama \textit{springs forth from the chorus itself}. The chorus member is not “acting” like a satyr; he has “[become] one with his primordial being,” unleashing all of “those powers which are only felt”—and ergo not seen—into the realm of appearance. Put simply, the chorus \textit{transfigures} music into bodily gesture, instantiating an “objectification of a Dionysian state.”\textsuperscript{38} The lust, cruelty, and suffering of the Greeks, which they had repudiated in order to carry on with life, is now manifested “in the flesh,” allowing the spectator to not only recognize the echo of his former self within it, but also to affirm it as the fundamental reality of existence, to worship it as he had the radiant, illusory form of the Olympians. Tragedy is thus the recovery of the primordial Dionysian unity arrived at through music’s transfiguration into visual spectacle. The result, Nietzsche explains, is that “the public in Attic tragedy rediscovered itself in the chorus of the orchestra,” and to such

\begin{itemize}
\item The first entry for “orchestra” in the Oxford English Dictionary, which is noted as obscure, is “the art of dancing.” The second: “In ancient Greek and Roman theatres; a large semicircular area in front of the stage.”
\item Nietzsche, \textit{The Birth of Tragedy}, 32.
\item Ibid., 32–33.
\end{itemize}
an extent “that basically there was no opposition between the public and the chorus,”\(^{39}\) for the bodies of those in the audience were roused in near equal measure to those in the chorus. We thus have a movement in two directions: music is transfigured into the realm of image, the realm of Apollo, just as the individuated, Apollonian spectator is momentarily reawakened to, and is overtaken by, his baser, Dionysian self. For Nietzsche, this is the great reconciliation that Greek tragedy fulfills.

This reconciliation is not only aesthetic, says Nietzsche, but metaphysical. In exalting the figures on the tragic stage, the spectator is, in fact, exalting himself and his still wildly coursing desires, turning his adulation away from the distant cliffs of Mount Olympus and back towards the ground—“ground” meaning simultaneously the terra firma and the very foundation of existence. And in this anti-transcendental move, we can feel Nietzsche’s subtle critique of Christianity at work via his use of “transfigure”: both Jesus and Apollo are associated with luminescence, each a source of light that points to an elsewhere god or gods. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, this logic is inverted, with the emphasis brought away from celestial light and back down to earth.\(^{40}\) Relatedly, Nietzsche’s evocation of “spirit” alongside music in the book’s original title might with any other thinker signal a metaphysical connotation aligning music’s ethereality and centrality to various religious practices with some supernatural realm. But this couldn’t be farther off the mark, for Nietzsche shows in this book and elsewhere an intense investment not in mind or soul but in the here-and-now existence of the embodied self.

Take, for example, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* when Nietzsche explicitly confronts the philosophical tendency towards dualism that separates mind or spirit from the body. Says Nietzsche, the naive subject proclaims “Body am I, and soul.” But the “awakened one” says instead, “Body am I entirely, and nothing more; and soul is only the name of something in the body. […] Behind thy thoughts and feelings, my brother, there is a mighty lord, an unknown sage—it is called the Self; it dwelleth in thy body, it is thy

\(^{39}\) Ibid., 30, my emphasis.

\(^{40}\) We thus have in this text a precursor to the more “mature” anti-Christian position Nietzsche puts forth in *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887) and *The Antichrist* (1895).
body.” Pace a Christian worldview that would see the body as base, dirty, or merely temporary, Nietzsche finds in it the seat of all knowledge, the self’s fundamental physicality. At the core of Nietzsche’s metaphysics, therefore, is bodily arousal. “The ultimate irreducible element I find within myself,” he explains, “is sensation.” Or, as Harry Staten succinctly puts it, “The will [in Nietzsche] is the name of the receptiveness to the world of an embodied being, the name of the way in general in which the world registers on a being capable of sensation.” For Nietzsche, listening to music—feeling music—awakens humankind to the wealth of unseemly sensations it had disavowed.

Greek tragedy forms a nexus for Nietzsche where sound, image, and body intersect. Now, the reconciliation Nietzsche finds in tragedy should not be understood as a synthesis of Apollo and Dionysius, nor should it be taken as music’s redemption in or through appearance. Rather, appearance, which for Nietzsche is the lesser artistic sphere, is itself redeemed only through its service to music, its giving of exultant, visible form to an art that is, by definition, invisible. And that form is the human body itself, in all its sensations, its joys, its throes.

Two Varieties of Repetition: The Myth of Echo and Narcissus

The central dialectic at play in Nietzsche’s genealogy of Greek tragedy is the opposition of Dionysus and Apollo, which, as I’ve argued, is better thought of as a dialectic of sound and image, respectively. We needn’t look far in the art of Greco-Roman antiquity to find another instance in which these two domains are placed into conflict, for the myth of Echo and Narcissus takes up the question in even more explicit ways.

Several versions of their story exist, but it is Ovid’s telling that is the most widely known. In it, Narcissus, conceived when the river god Cephissus rapes the water nymph Liriope, is blessed with

42 Nietzsche, qtd. in Liebert, Nietzsche and Music, 174.
extraordinary beauty. His hair, Ovid writes, was worthy of both Dionysus and Apollo, his skin alabaster, his physique poised between the soft features of a boy and the statuesque body of a man. He was so beautiful, in fact, that adults, male and female alike, were said to fall instantly in love with him, even when he was but an infant. Narcissus would live out a long life, said the clairvoyant Tiresias to Liriope, provided that “he never know himself.”

As he matured, Narcissus developed an intense pride fueled by the profuse admiration he received. However, despite his countless suitors, Narcissus never knew the touch of another, for all were ultimately put off by his vanity.

All, that is, save Echo, a mountain sprite who fell deeply in love with Narcissus upon discovering him hunting alone in a meadow. Echo was so taken that she yearned to call out to him, but, alas, she could not, for the goddess Juno had afflicted the once loquacious sprite with the ability to speak only when repeating the closing words of another’s utterance. After first catching glimpse of Narcissus, Echo perched herself behind a veil of trees, watching and waiting for the moment in which he might speak aloud so that she could parrot his words and make her presence known. On this occasion, Narcissus had been separated from his hunting companions, and when he yelled “anyone here?” Echo replied: “here.” After a few such exchanges, Narcissus mistook her repetitions as taunting, and Echo, to demonstrate that her words were not meant to mock him, revealed herself from her place of cover, throwing herself at him, embracing the man who had never before been embraced. But Narcissus, as he had so many other admirers, rebuffed her.

Devastated, Echo returned to the woods, where, in Ovid’s words, “love [clung] to the spurned girl and [grew] on grief. So crushed was she by her lovesickness that she [began] to whither away. Her skin [shriveled] up and her body [dried] up, until only her voice and bones [were] left, and then only her

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45 Ibid., 76.
voice."\textsuperscript{46} From that moment on, she remained dematerialized and hidden in the woods, never to be seen again. But she endures nonetheless, for Echo is “heard by all, and lives on as sound,”\textsuperscript{47} forever duplicating that what she hears—thus the aural phenomenon that bears her name.

Meanwhile, Narcissus sought respite from the toil of the hunt and rested beside a shaded pool of water. He bent down to take a sip, “[a]nd seeking to quench his thirst, he [found] another thirst, for while he [drank] he [saw] [his own] beautiful face and [fell] in love with a bodiless fantasy and [took] for a body what is no more than a shadow.”\textsuperscript{48} The gorgeousness that had so enraptured others now entranced him: Narcissus was in love with his own mirror image, which he did not recognize as such. This image, of course, both did and did not reciprocate: when Narcissus leaned in to kiss the ravishing man, the ravishing man leaned in, too. But at the precise moment in which he expected to make physical contact, Narcissus was met only with water. Despairing, he cried out to his love:

\begin{quote}
When I smile, you smile back, and I have often seen
Tears in your eyes when I am in tears. When I nod
You do too, and from the way your lovely lips move
I suspect you answer my words as well, though yours
Never reach my ears.\textsuperscript{49}
\end{quote}

For days on end, without thought of food or drink, Narcissus sat by the pool, waiting for the beautiful man to appear in the flesh. And in that time, he grew weary and thin, eventually awaking to the reality that the man with whom he was in love was nothing more than his own specular image, and that the ache of longing he felt could know no relief. He therefore resolved himself to die. As he took his final breaths, the tears streamed down his white cheeks and into the pool into which he had for so long gazed. Water met water: that from his eyes, that of the pool, and in their contact, the pool’s surface was disturbed, scattering and dispersing the object of Narcissus’s affections. “Good-bye,” said Narcissus to

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 77.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 78.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 79.
his love, who of course did not answer. But a reply was heard nevertheless: Echo, the bodiless voice, as forlorn as Narcissus, echoed back her love’s final words, just as she did the wailing cries of those who later gathered for his funeral, doubling and amplifying those grieving sounds, raising them to an aural shroud. But his body could not be laid to rest, for when the time came it was nowhere to be found, and in the place where it had once lay stood a flower, one that has come to be called a Narcissus, its buds drooping over as if peering into the water as had its namesake.

**Sound and the Liquid Metaphor**

The Echo and Narcissus myth has provoked a substantial literature in the humanities: a simple web search returns nearly 14,000 scholarly articles and books. Humanities scholars returned to the myth with renewed interest during the rise of structuralism, and for good reason: at its core, the Echo/Narcissus story concerns the role of language and representation in the encounter with the other and the formation of the subject.\(^5^0\) On the one hand is Echo, who is capable of speech but apart from her own volition; and on the other is Narcissus, who fails to recognize his own mirror image, which of course is the very precondition of subjectivity in Lacan. Here, copies of all sorts—vocal repetitions, specular duplications—prove treacherous, for they are subject to misunderstandings that lead ultimately to death or bodily disintegration.

What’s so striking to me about the myth of Echo and Narcissus when considered alongside Nietzsche’s investigation into the origins of Greek tragedy is how they both hover around the same cluster of ideas: an interplay of sounds and images, of material bodies and illusionistic representations. Though

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predating the invention of the medium, both of these cases are to my mind highly cinematic in their organization, themes, and consequences, and these same concerns can be found throughout the history of film studies. Nietzsche’s emphasis on music’s relationship to the body as manifested in dance, for example, dovetails in intriguing ways with film scholarship on spectacle in the musical, and Narcissus’ meconnaissance of his own specular representation might well serve as an emblem of 1970s apparatus theory that sought to unveil the deceitfulness at the heart of the cinematic image via an understanding of the imago’s role in the constitution of the subject.51

Indeed, for film scholar Amy Lawrence, the story of Echo and Narcissus is emblematic of cinematic representation generally in that it reinforces the traditional hierarchy in which the image is privileged over sound, and as Lawrence argues, this hierarchy is explicitly gendered. Echo’s plight (that she is not an agent of her own voice) is a conceit ultimately in service of setting into motion Narcissus’s ostensibly more consequential predicament (his fascination with his own image), and his death is therefore treated as more tragic than hers. Channeling Metz, Lawrence argues that this tale “partakes” in the same absence that is at the heart of cinematic representation: “in cinema,” she says, “everything we hear and everything we see isn’t there any more. It is an echo and a reflection.”52

Echo’s heard but unseen presence, once could argue, might well be the prototype of what has frequently been described in film studies as “acousmatic” or “disembodied” voices. Heard on the sound track but not visualized onscreen, disembodied voices call forth the question of the location and ontological status of their sources, for their highly ambiguous nature has often been said to induce a


52 Amy Lawrence, Echo and Narcissus: Women’s Voices in Classical Hollywood Cinema (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991): 2. Recently, Britta Sjogren has revisited (and complicated) Lawrence’s (as well as Kaja Silverman’s) arguments about classical cinema and the relationship of women’s voices to their subjectivity. See Britta Sjogren, Into the Vortex: Female Voice and Paradox (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006).
certain anxiety in the viewer.\textsuperscript{53} Like Narcissus demanding the owner of the mocking voice reveal herself, the film viewer, the thinking goes, desires the visualization of the offscreen speaker, for as long as it remains out of sight it is unknown and possibly unknowable. For Chion, the “voice without a place” often points us in one of two directions: towards God, speaking from some unseen celestial perch, or “even farther back, for everyone of us, [towards] the mother.”\textsuperscript{54} Here, Chion invokes the familiar notion of the “sonorous envelope” first advanced by Gus Rosolato and taken up in various incarnations by Mary Ann Doane, Didier Anzieu, Claude Bailblé, Julia Kristeva, Walter Murch, and others.\textsuperscript{55} Common to all of their accounts is the idea that the fetus first develops its sense of hearing (as well its sense of touch, though this is less often emphasized) prior to those of sight, smell, and taste. As Murch, puts it, “We gestate in Sound, and are born into Sight.”\textsuperscript{56} Floating in amniotic fluid, the fetus is gently jostled with the mother’s every move, and it hears her voice (and feels that voice’s vibrations) transmitted through the mother’s bodily tissue and fluids.\textsuperscript{57} For this reason, the fetus is often said to exist in an “undifferentiated state” with the mother, the two operating, as it were, as a single organism.\textsuperscript{58} So if we follow this logic: the child in the

\textsuperscript{53} Michel Chion, \textit{The Voice in Cinema}, 15–30.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 27.


\textsuperscript{56} Walter Murch, Foreword to \textit{Audio-Vision}, vii.


\textsuperscript{58} This sensed oneness persists even after birth, with the vast majority of the infant’s time spent nursing or cradled against the mother’s body. Indeed, the American Academy of Pediatrics now recommends that newborn infants be
womb primarily experiences the world aurally; thus, sound, by extension (as extension), becomes linked with sensations of unity, plenitude, and engulfment that are subsequently lost or at the very least attenuated upon birth.

Freud, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, reasons that the sense of eternity and oneness—what he terms “the oceanic feeling”—that many religious people take as evidence of a cosmic unity with the world, their fellow man, and/or the whole of nature, is in fact a faint recollection of the newborn state prior to the development of the ego. In our normal, day-to-day lives, “there is nothing of which we are more certain than the feeling of our self, of our own ego. […] It appears to us as something autonomous and unitary, […] maintain[ing] clear and sharp lines of demarcation.” In the womb, however, the ego has not yet been (fully) formed, and it only matures during infancy and early childhood when influences from without work to individuate the child. Therefore, in the very earliest stages of its development, the child does not distinguish itself from the external world around it. “[O]riginally,” Freud writes, “the ego includes everything, [and] later it separates off an external world from itself. Our present ego-feeling is, therefore, a shrunken residue of a much more inclusive—indeed, all embracing—feeling which corresponded to a more intimate bond between the ego and the world about it.” Yet, according to Freud, this engulfing bond is not lost to us; he posits that there are instances in adult life when the “boundary between ego and object [threaten] to melt away,” as in certain spiritual practices, when in love, or when suffering from particular pathological conditions. What we call “spirituality,” then, suggests for Freud not so much a deep and abiding connection with a deity as a desire to return to a primordial state prior to ego formation wherein the boundaries between the self and the world do not obtain, a desire, in other words,

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60 Ibid., 15–16.
and a regressive one at that, to climb back into the womb and escape from the pain of existence—the pain of selfhood—and its unfulfilled and unfulfillable desires.

It is apparent that the sonorous envelope and oceanic feeling, in traveling over much of the same conceptual terrain, are grounded in a highly troublesome yearning for an irrecoverable past that is coded entirely as feminine. This is why Kaja Silverman in her important book *The Acoustic Mirror* describes the sonorous envelope as a theoretical trope based in “the cultural fantasy of the maternal voice.” More broadly speaking, we might say that the concept is symptomatic of what Elizabeth Grosz identifies as a larger tendency within critical theory generally, namely, the alignment of masculinity with the mind and femininity with the body. She writes:

[M]isogynist thought confines women to the biological requirements of reproduction on the assumption that because of particular biological, physiological, and endocrinological transformations, women are somehow more biological, more corporeal, and more natural than men. The coding of femininity with corporeality in effect leaves men free to inhabit what they (falsely) believe is a purely conceptual order while at the same time enabling them to satisfy their (sometimes disavowed) need for corporeal contact through their access to women’s bodies and services.

A great deal of feminist media studies scholarship has sought to uncover the various ways the female body and its putative surfeit corporeality is coded in popular film and television texts and the discourses about them. One particular strand of this approach has examined how emotion, sensation, the body, and “excess” have come to be associated with genres most often “addressed” to female spectators (the musical, the melodrama, the soap opera) or those in which the female body itself, with all its supposed surplus of bodily affects, is the central, visual spectacle (pornography, the horror film).

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We can begin to see that, across multiple theoretical conversations, the terms we’ve traced thus far begin to cluster into binary oppositions that ultimately turn on the question of sexual difference: on the one hand, vision, mind, separation, and culture are associated with masculinity; on the other, sound, body, nature, and “the real” are linked with femininity.

Such tidy divisions are clearly untenable—gender, after all, is not a biological given—, and my aim in turning to the sonorous envelope and the oceanic feeling are not at all meant to reinscribe these reductive distinctions and claims. Rather, what interests me is the way in which these concepts call on two metaphors to account for the loss of one’s self-anchoring: sound and water. Douglas Kahn explores these ideas through an art historical lens in his magisterial *Water, Noise, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts*, charting the ways sound became integrated—technologically, conceptually, philosophically, discursively—into late modernist and avant-garde art. In the process, Kahn isolates sound’s strong association with fluids and fluidity, which manifests itself in art practices such as Jackson Pollock’s paint dripping techniques, Fluxus artist George Brecht’s water-centric performances pieces, like *Drip Music* (1962), and in the persistent tendency among surrealists to make a spectacle of women submerged in water.64 In what follows, I seek to wrest these metaphors away from their associations with primordial recoupment and maternal plenitude—their psychoanalytic foundations, one might say—and focus instead on their connotations of flux and transformation. As I see them, both sound and water possess a fundamental “in-between-ness” that from the outset troubles any attempt to lock them into rigid, binary frameworks.65 This is not to discount, however, the critique that the sonorous envelope and the oceanic feeling are symptomatic of a masculinist orientation that regards the maternal and/or the feminine as outside of, or prior to, culture and subjectivity. Let me say by way of preview, then, that what I’m after here is a conception of the liquid not as the antithesis of the solid but as that which is in the process of either forming or deforming, making and unmaking.


But first: why the association between sound and water in the first place? For one, both carry connotations of engulfment or immersion. To be immersed in water or to be embedded in a sonic environment is to be surrounded on all sides, to be enveloped. And insofar as that environment touches us back, pressing against our bodies or palpating our skin and eardrums, the Cartesian image of the subject as being at a remove from the world viewed recedes. This of course is why we tend to speak of becoming “lost” or, to employ another liquid metaphor, “absorbed” in works of fiction: we inhabit two places: the real world where we hold a novel or watch a movie, and the imaginary world of the story.66

Both of these notions—engulfing sound and immersive narrative—coalesce in the case of cinema. As Adriano D’Aloia argues, “cinema embodies aquatic modalities of perception and expression, pulling the viewer into a liquid environment that marks the confluence between the film-body and the filmgoer-body.”67 Sound certainly plays an important role in this perceived collapsing of real and represented space, as technologies such as surround sound offer a phenomenological correlate to one’s mental absorption in the story.68

But cinema is but one privileged domain of the liquid metaphor. David Toop, much like Kahn, finds the sound-water trope elsewhere in the arts, arguing that classical composers often sought to conjure the sensations of being submerged in water: “the image of bathing in sound is a recurrent theme of the past hundred years: Debussy’s Images and Ravel’s Jeux d’eau ripple around the listener; Arnold Schoenberg’s The Changing Chord-Summer Morning By a Lake-Colours wraps us in flickering


67 Adriano D’Aloia, “Film in Depth: Water and Immersivity in the Contemporary Film Experience,” Film and Media Studies 5 (2012): 87.

68 Mark Kerins, Beyond Dolby (Stereo): Cinema in the Digital Sound Age (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010).
submarine light; Gyorgy Ligeti’s *Atmospheres* envelopes us in steam.”69 Along similar lines, Frances Dyson has compellingly demonstrated that much of the discourse surrounding new media art and its immersive attributes is couched in aural metaphors, for “the ephemeral, immaterial, and synesthetic qualities of sound are central to the concept of virtuality.”70 The strong rhetorical alliance of sound and water therefore suggests a certain elemental quality to both, an association that many in the field of sound studies have aimed to complicate. Anthropologist Stefan Helmreich, for example, explores the technological processes of transduction by which the sound-water conjunction has been naturalized, and Dyson argues that much of this rhetoric of immersion is based in often inaccurate “cultural and philosophical mechanisms […] of aurality.”71 The seemingly “natural” associations between water and sound are thus misleading. Let me say, then, that I invoke these tropes here not to reify them, but to attest to their staying power in the cultural imagination, to chart their centrality to various aesthetic philosophies and theories of embodiment, and then to pull from them some theoretical consequences (and possibilities) that have not yet been fully undertaken.

A second commonality between sound and water suggests itself: both are characterized by a degree of formlessness. As the reader is no doubt aware, water does not possess form but rather takes it on depending upon the contours of the vessel that contains it. Sound, too, is without (visible) form: the only way to see it is through indexical evidence (nearby objects being disturbed by the sound’s movement and vibrating in turn) or by representing its frequency through wave diagrams. One well-known example of the former from popular culture can be found in *Jurassic Park* (Spielberg, 1993) when a trembling cup of water on an automobile’s dashboard announces the approach of a Tyrannosaurus Rex in advance of it is visualized onscreen. This scene operates via the same principle at work in a type sonic visualization known as “cymatics.” Developed by Hans Jenny (1904–1972) and based on the acoustic experiments of


70 Frances Dyson, *Sounding New Media*, 6, emphasis in original.

71 Ibid., 7.
physicist Ernst Chladni (1756–1827), cymatics (from the Greek *kyma* [“wave”]) involves the use of a mechanical oscillator attached to a plate coated in sand, salt, water, oil, or other materials. The plate is then vibrated so that changes in aural frequency are registered through the visual displacement of the coating material into symmetric patterns,\(^{72}\) as one can see in the below series of photographs.\(^{73}\) (SEE FIG. 5) Cymatic experiments thus bring into visual relief vibratory processes that would otherwise remain invisible.

![Figure 5 - Chladni patterns. Photographs by Chris Smith.](https://www.flickr.com/photos/cjsmithphotography/8800645088/)

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I will have more to say about cymatics momentarily. In the meantime, recall the discussion in Chapter 1 of Deleuze’s theory of sensation as elaborated in his book on Francis Bacon, which bears repeating here. Throughout his oeuvre, Deleuze describes affect, sensation, force, intensity, and becoming (the terms are frequently substituted for one another and thus may be taken as something of a theoretical complex) as formless flows of energy. In *Francis Bacon*, sensation is posited as a “vibration” that forms a “rhythm” that when paired with another vibration begins to “resonate” and reinforce itself. In this book, affect is rendered almost entirely in sonic terms, whereas elsewhere in Deleuze’s oeuvre, the language is more general (affects as “intensities”). Yet, what is retained across these concepts in their various guises is an insistence on formlessness. Affect sets to work upon the body, and it arises out of encounters with other bodies, with “body” here meaning, in the broader sense of Spinoza, an assemblage of parts: the human body is one, but it is certainly not the only one.74 Whereas abstraction addresses itself to the mind, affect is said to exist outside signification, outside consciousness. It is not found, for instance, in the “narrative” content of a Bacon painting but in the *relay* of affects among the various bodies—that of the dissipating subject of the painting and its surrounding milieu, that of the beholder and the gallery’s surroundings.

Following Deleuze, affect is not something that is in bodies, but that which changes bodies. This brings us to our final point: sound and water are both fluid; they resist states of fixity or stability. Per *The Oxford English Dictionary*, in physics, the word wave, whether of the oceanic or sonic variety, names “a rhythmic alteration of *disturbance* and *recovery of configuration* in successively contiguous portions of a fluid or solid mass.” Etymologically, the word derives from the now obsolete old English and middle Dutch waws, for “movement” or “agitation.” But something about this motion needs underlining: an agitation does not result in a permanent physical change, but an oscillation, a movement between the upper and lower limits, much like the peaks and troughs of a sinusoidal wave. (SEE FIG. 6) The wave only comes to rest, only stabilizes, when its energy dissipates, when it dies.

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How do things change? What sort of transformations do they undergo? According to Deleuze and Guattari, affective flows unleash “mad and transitory particles” which may thicken or congeal into new bodies, new forms. These new forms, though, only emerge as a result of processes of undoing: form itself must be de-formed in order to re-form. “Dismantling the self” is the name Deleuze and Guattari give to the deformation of the human subject in their concept of the “Body without Organs,” a state achieved through processes of undoing: de-signification, de-subjectification, and dis-organization. They caution us, however, to “keep enough organism for it to reform at dawn; [for one must] keep small supplies of significance and subjectification” so as to return to a state of composition when necessary. Disassembling is thus not an end but a means.

As I see it, the sonorous or the aqueous—both as physical processes and as cinematic tropes—offer us an avenue by which we might think through questions of form in less rigid ways. This way of thinking, however, is not at the expense of the solid. After all, water, as an example, may also take on solid or gaseous form as a result of changes in its temperature or the degree of variance between its temperature and that of the molecules that surround it (ice melts into water, water evaporates into steam). The point is: forms transform—from without and from within.

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76 Ibid., 160.
Recall the myth of Echo and Narcissus, which is nothing if not a story of transformation, of changes of state. Narcissus does not perish by his own hand, nor does he die of starvation from his days spend endlessly gazing at his reflection. No, according to Ovid, Narcissus *liquefies*:

He could bear no more, and as yellow wax melts  
Over a gentle flame, or frost in the morning sun,  
So too Narcissus, thin and meager with love,  
Melts and is consumed by a slow, hidden fire.77

Narcissus soon solidifies once more, however, ultimately taking on the form of the flower that today bears his name. And what of Echo? She, a water sprite born of a water god and water nymph, “shrivels” and “dries up” before dissipating—evaporating—altogether. Poignantly, we are reminded of the title of Ovid’s collection of poems: *Metamorphoses*.

I want to take sound and water, which are often said to be formless, and use them in a perhaps counter-intuitive way to think through questions of form, both in the bodily, physical sense as well as that of the cinematic and the aesthetic. What I’m after, then, is something along the lines of what Jean Epstein argued was cinema’s fluid ability to vary temporal and spatial relations, which in turn reveals a protean quality to matter itself. As he puts it, “all forms are affected and made pliable, remelted or rehardened or reliquified, proving that they are nothing more than forms of movement.”78 Perhaps it is this very quality that Deleuze seizes upon in Epstein’s films and those of fellow French Impressionists Marcel L’Herbier, Jean Vigo, and Jean Grémillon. Taken as a whole, these filmmakers and their affinity for bodies of water and their fluid framings mark the emergence of what Deleuze calls a “liquid cinematic perception” that is “split between two states, one molecular and the other molar, one liquid and the other solid, one drawing along and effacing the other.”79 If, as I’ve elaborated here, affect is not a property of form but rather that which alters form, then we should be able to look (and to listen) to films for such changes, to see (and to hear) them play out before us in multiple registers at the level of film form and bodily form, for both are


79 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 80.
fundamentally plastic. Indeed, these two levels coalesced in the love scene from *Her* taken up in Chapter 1 in which the characters’ invisible bodily changes (Samantha’s and Theodore’s respective molar- and molecularizations) manifested as—or took the form of—a highly unorthodox extended blackout. A deviation from conventional film form, therefore, is what signals and draws our attention to what is a concomitant transformation of bodily form.

But why limit our analysis to one scene or even to one film? I want to take the mode of reading I brought to the blackout in *Her* and mobilize it across a director’s entire corpus: that of Scottish filmmaker Lynne Ramsay, whose *We Need to Talk About Kevin* I drew upon to open this chapter. Across her cinema, certain aural and visual figures crop up again and again—but these figures, as I shall demonstrate, are shapeshifters. Within the context of a single Ramsay film, the repetition of certain images, sounds, or compositions adds to their significance, accumulating what Michael Walker, speaking of Hitchcock’s motifs, calls a “density of meaning” through repetition. Yet when these same elements turn up again in subsequent films, they rarely function in quite the same way, making them difficult to reconcile within structural auteurism’s goal of “uncover[ing] behind the superficial contrasts of subject and treatment a structural hard core of basic and often recondite motifs.”

Criticism of this sort follows a logic of resemblance; in Hitchcock, Grace Kelly is like Kim Novak is like Janet Leigh—all of whom, we might say, are “versions” of Anny Ondra, as if a bell rung in *Blackmail* (1929) is still echoing in *Rear...* 

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82 *Blackmail* is in this context an especially interesting case, for it exists in both silent and sound versions. In both, the image tracks are very similar but not identical, as Catherine Grant shows in a video essay comparing a single scene from the two versions. Grant’s piece reveals that the sound version not only features wider framings and fewer cuts, but also the sound of a bird—yet another of Hitchcock’s consistent motifs—offscreen, its persistent twittering conveying, in free indirect fashion, the guilt and fear of the protagonist after she returns home from having killed her would-be rapist. Yet this seeming gain in female “interiority” is all but cancelled out by, Amy Lawrence argues, by the excision of the speaking voice of Ondra, whose Czech accent was replaced by English actress Joan Berry. See Catherine Grant, “Garden of Forking Paths?: Hitchcock’s *Blackmails*, Vimeo video, March 2012, 3:39, https://vimeo.com/38314698; and Amy Lawrence, *Echo and Narcissus*, 117. For more on the sound of birds in Hitchcock, see Elizabeth Weis, *The Silent Scream: Alfred Hitchcock’s Sound Track* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1982) and Angelo Restivo, “The Silence of The Birds: Sound Aesthetics and Public Space in later Hitchcock,” in *Hitchcock: Past and Future*, eds. Richard Allen and Sam Ishii-Gonzales (New York: Routledge, 2004): 164–178. I take up the question of cinematic free indirect discourse at greater length in Chapter 3.
Window (1954), Vertigo (1958), and Psycho (1960). Each reiteration not only adds to its legibility as a sign (the “Hitchcock Blonde”) but also testifies to the auteur’s (perhaps unconscious) preoccupations.

With Ramsay, however, a different sort of repetition is at work. She consistently returns to particular objects, narrative situations, visual compositions, and sound design flourishes, but in appreciably altered, worked over, reversed or inverted form. This is not to say, however, that there aren’t discernible patterns in Ramsay’s films: there unquestionably are. However, in Ramsay, repeating elements do not necessarily resemble one another—though they do share a wavelength. Rather than “repeating,” perhaps it’s better to say they resonate with one another, within the confines of a particular film and even across her filmography. These resonant patterns, as we shall see, do not necessarily attain the cumulative signification of cinematic motifs. Rather, they are more akin to the cymatic figures discussed above, wherein sand or some other visible substance coating a vibrating membrane forms symmetrical patterns that vary and become increasingly complex depending upon the frequency of that vibration. I demonstrate how, precisely, in the following section, beginning with Ramsay’s debut feature Ratcatcher before turning my attention to her two subsequent films, Morvern Callar (2002) and We Need to Talk About Kevin (2011).

On Some “Motifs” in Lynne Ramsay

In light of the present discussion, I’ve selected Lynne Ramsay because her work puts into play the same cluster of ideas this chapter has been exploring. First, her mise-en-scène is replete with aqueous imagery. Second, she deploys an extraordinarily expressionistic and unconventional use of sound. Finally, given that numerous commentators have taken a feminist lens to Ramsay, it is instructive to chart that ways her work adheres to or departs from the essentialist associations between sound, water, and the feminine.

83 And what is Vertigo if not a meditation on repetition, representation, facsimile?

Let’s start with Ramsay’s debut feature, 1999’s *Ratcatcher*, which in its very first shot begins to chip away at the association between the sonorous envelope and “maternal plenitude.”*85* *Ratcatcher* concerns a young boy wrestling with the guilt of having contributed to the death of a playmate amidst the blight of a 1973 garbage collectors’ strike in Glasgow. The shot fades in not from black but from white and presents us with an abstract figure spinning against a white background—counter-clockwise, in slow motion, in tight close-up. For more than a minute, this indeterminate figure twirls in this as-yet undefined space. The sound track is likewise abstract and unforthcoming: a low, vaguely sinister rumble, the faint screams of children (at play? in pain?), the squealing brakes of a train. Gradually, the situation comes into relief. The white ground is in fact a daylit window, the dark gray mass a young boy (Thomas McTaggart)—whose name, we later learn, is Ryan—twisting himself up in a sheer curtain. Ramsay launches into this moment without context, leaving us ungrounded as to who the boy is, what he is doing, and why. Though the gauzy curtain obscures his face, we can make out that his mouth is agape, and since the drapes appear to tighten around his head with every rotation, his open maw carries with it the hint of suffocation—a harbinger of things to come. (SEE FIG. 7) With its prolonged unfolding and droning sound, the shot manages to lull and disquiet in near equal measure. Its languor is jarringly cut short when Ryan’s mother (Jackie Quinn) steps into the frame and slaps him across the head. With this audible strike, the movie awakens from its quasi-slumber, returning to a “normal” speed and “realistic” diegetic sound. Gone are the children’s shrieks and the locomotive’s wails.


Few critics have taken up *Ratcatcher* at any length without mentioning this extraordinarily haunting shot, and more often than not, they interpret it by way of two related ideas: birth and death. Emma Wilson describes the boy, for instance, as being “submerged” in the curtain, an “echo [of] sonogram photos of the foetus [sic] in the womb.” Yet she is also quick to point out that the enveloping fabric resembles a death shroud.86 Christina Álvarez López further takes up the aural side of these associations, suggesting that the muddled sounds we hear are akin to “how babies experience the exterior world when they are in their mother’s womb—or how bodies experience the last moments before death’s embrace.”87

That critics so frequently link this shot of physical engulfment and conspicuously reduced sound first with connotations of the fetal experience of the womb and then with death suggests the degree to which *Ratcatcher* complicates from the outset the familiar fantasy of maternal protection. This is made manifestly plain at the shot’s conclusion with the mother’s smacking of her son: gentle, motherly touch is refigured as a sudden, prohibitory force that shatters the sensation of envelopment. Mrs. Quinn’s


disciplinary efforts, however, prove futile, for in the very next scene, Ryan slips away from her on the street and absconds to the nearby verboten canal where he will subsequently drown while roughhousing with his schoolmate, the film’s protagonist James Gillespie (William Eadie). This is the first of the film’s three fatal or near-fatal drownings, all of which happen out of the eyeshot of mothers (who are most often out working) and fathers (who are most often out drinking). *Ratcatcher* is marked by parental absence, an absence which in turn grants the adolescent characters a high degree of mobility in and around their trash-strewn milieu, if ultimately at their own peril. Unlike the fetus in the womb or the infant at the breast, the children here are very much detached from the shielding arms of their mothers, and, hence, they are extraordinarily vulnerable to the ills of the world.

This opening scene, then, would seem, at least in part, to reject the water/womb/maternal refuge relationship, a repudiation that is reinforced by the omnipresence of the sinister canal, which threatens to devour the children who pass beside its banks. Williams argues that James’ frequent treks along the canal evince his unconscious compulsion to return to the scene of Ryan’s death, which culminates in his own apparent suicide.88 López also offers a psychoanalytic reading, suggesting that James’ repressed memories of Ryan’s drowning come flooding back to him in various guises throughout the film.89 In contrast, Annette Kuhn in her book on *Ratcatcher*, treats the canal as something far less symbolically “rigid.” For her, the canal is not simply a site of trauma for James but also, by turns, a “meeting place,” a “ritual route,” a “place of passage,” and, finally, a “space of reverie.”90 According to Kuhn, the pronounced “motif of immersion” that runs throughout *Ratcatcher* shouldn’t be seen in such black-and-white, birth-or-death terms. In her analysis, *Ratcatcher* is not the story of an adolescent’s inexorable march towards death but one more aptly characterized as enacting a cycle of re-birth, which she argues is manifested formally in the film’s highly ambiguous, bifurcated ending. There, posits Kuhn, the film ends

88 Wilson, *Cinema’s Missing Children*, 114.

89 López, “*Ratcatcher,*” ibid.

not once but twice: first, with James seemingly plunging to his death in the canal, and second, with him walking towards the countryside home for which he has spent the film yearning. These endings, of course, are open to interpretation as to which is the “real” outcome: one stands as the culmination of an overarching fatalism while the other offers a faint glimmer of hope in what is otherwise a remarkably bleak movie.

I find Kuhn’s analysis particularly compelling, especially her attentiveness to how the canal’s ostensible meaning shifts throughout the film. Indeed, in some respects, it calls to mind French film theorist Nicole Brenez’s “figural” method of criticism, particularly her notion of “anamorphosis.”

Unlike the motif of literary criticism or structural, auteur-oriented film theory that accumulates meaning through its patterned repetition, Brenez’s anamorphosis names a process by which “a key image is translated and metamorphosed in the course of a film.” Not a matter of mere subtle variation, anamorphosis occurs when “a figure that is initially simple in its symbolic operation”—like the canal in the case of Ratcatcher—“is progressive[ly] … push[ed] to its limits.” Now, Brenez tends to use “anamorphosis” and “metamorphosis” interchangeably. It bears noting, though, that the former term captures something crucial about Brenez’s concept that the latter does not, namely, a connotation of distortion. Anamorphosis is no doubt familiar to readers of Lacan, who in his 11th seminar famously discusses Hans Holbein’s 1553 painting The Ambassadors and the distorted image of a skull that is only recognizable as such when viewed obliquely. Others might be familiar with anamorphosis in the context

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of film, where widescreen formats such as CinemaScope rely on special lenses during principal photography to compress a wider than otherwise possible image onto a standard 35mm and then, during projection, to stretch this distorted image back out.  

SEE FIG. 8) Brenez, though, has a different understanding in mind. She describes anamorphosis as a type of a figurative “fold,” with her usage here clearly bearing the influence of Deleuze’s exegesis of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. For both Deleuze and Brenez, folding is not merely a trompe-l’oeil; it takes on a material dimension. Deleuze offers the metaphor of origami, the Japanese art of paper folding, that conveys for him the way in which the outside is always folded into the inside: the two always remain in contact with one another. Similarly, Brenez embraces the tactile, manipulative (in the sense of utilizing one’s hands) aspects of this argument, for key to her philosophy and her critical mode is an insistence on the fundamental plasticity of both matter and cinema. According to Adrian Martin, whose valuable translations have helped introduce Brenez to Anglophone film studies, her work begins from the premise that “everything is plastic: […] it can be formed, it has shape, it has no definite form. It can be moved. It can be transformed. Everything in a film is plastic, [just as] people are plastic.” The “stretching” of the image involved in anamorphic widescreen (an operation that is recognizable, if not exclusively, cinematic in nature) is hence extended to matter itself.

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In Brenez’s figural film analysis, the fold is a “formal logic” whereby that which appears in the “beginning finally meets or ‘touches’ the ending to offer a striking comparison,” in essence “passing from the recto to the verso of a given situation or image.” A large-scale fold may constitute a film’s overall “narrative structure”—but it also can play out on a smaller, more gradual level wherein “the major fold is progressively translated throughout a series of small folds (akin to a pleated skirt) over the entire structure of a film.” As Martin summarizes, an anamorphic fold “does not merely reiterate (in terms of motif) or answer [an earlier scene or image] in a neat rhyme but, in a deeper sense unfolds its meaning in an ultimate, dramatic way.”

Let’s examine such a formal logic at work. For Brenez, Abel Ferrara is the exemplary director of the figurative, and in a book-length study she details how images become “translated” and narrative situations “inverted” in his oeuvre. For instance, in Bad Lieutenant (1992), Brenez identifies a series of “visual transfers”: the Harvey Keitel character driving his two sons to school early in the film is in a

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96 Brenez, Abel Ferrara, 15.

certain sense replicated by his chauffeuring of the two male rapists at the end. This particular figure (people paired in vehicles) morphs twice more, and in each the genders have been flipped: the titular character’s sexual arousal at the sight of two dead women in a car at a crime scene is later acted upon when he persuades, via the threat of arrest, two teenaged girls to simulate sex acts in their car while he masturbates from outside the window.

But anamorphic folding is not a process that is necessarily confined to a single film; in fact, it may stretch across a director’s entire body of work. Brenez argues that certain films function as counterparts to one another, such as when, in Ferrara, a rape that goes unpunished in one film (the pornographic 9 Lives of a Wet Pussy [1976], which the director has since disavowed) is “expiated” in another (the rape-revenge piece Ms. 45 [1981], the search for the nun’s sexual assaulters in Bad Lieutenant), or how his movies often act as “reverse shots” of each other, whether in terms of narrative situation or in formal design.98 It should comes as little surprise by now that, in describing these cinematic folds, Brenez reckons with what is principally a visual phenomenon in sonic terms: these pleats, these processes of reversal, inversion, and repetition are “singular echoes” within a vast cinematic “matrix” of “vibration.”99 The mode of repetition found in echo and/or reverberation thus captures a dynamism that, unlike the more static, one-to-one correspondence of a mirror image, conveys a hint of accretion, expansion, difference, and temporal delay.

Back to the matter at hand: Lynne Ramsay. In the remainder of this section, I want to take the pronounced “motif of immersion” Kuhn identifies in Ratcatcher and account for how it plays out across the rest of Ramsay’s output in multiple metamorphosed forms. In doing so, I show how Brenez’s approach helps us to move away from a concern with the cumulative signification of motif in Ramsay and towards an appreciation of the larger economy of aesthetic and narrative elasticity at work in her filmography.

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98 Brenez, Abel Ferrara, 13–14.

99 Ibid., 17.
Since we are by now well familiar with the significances of the canal in *Ratcatcher*, I want to turn my attention to other instances in which water comes into play elsewhere in this film and those subsequent to it. In one scene in *Ratcatcher*, James’ mother scrubs the lice-ridden hair of the youngest Gillespie child Anne Marie (Lynne Ramsay, Jr.), who sits in an aluminum tub in the middle of the family living room. The scenario later plays itself out, this time in a standard bathtub, as James performs the same deed for Margaret Anne (Leanna Mullen), an older girl who finds in the non-threatening James a respite from the boys her age who sexually torment her. (Even the first consonants of the two girls’ double name structure are reversed: Anne Marie → Margaret Anne) The scene unfolds with the characters in profile with James positioned frame-right. (SEE FIG. 9)

A very similar situation with nearly identical framing occurs in *Morvern Callar* (2002), Ramsay’s second film about a woman who idiosyncratically mourns the suicide of her boyfriend by disposing of his body, vacationing in Spain, and selling his unpublished novel under her own name. In it, the titular character (Samantha Morton) shares a bath with her best friend Lanna (Kathleen McDermott), the protagonist this time situated on the left, reversing the orientation seen in *Ratcatcher*. (This is to say nothing of the repetition of the tub, which comes into play elsewhere in *Morvern Callar* when the heroine dismembers the corpse of her boyfriend, who, as with the main character of *Ratcatcher*, is also named James Gillespie.) (SEE FIG. 10)

Such echoes abound throughout Ramsay’s cinema. Ryan’s death by drowning in *Ratcatcher* is suggested by the gradual stilling of the water’s surface after the bubbles from below subside. We see this once again when Margaret Anne holds her breath in the tub and, finally, when James sinks himself in the canal. But what are we to make of the fact that a remarkably similar shot reappears in Ramsay’s abstract short film *Swimmer*, which was commissioned by the British government in advance of the 2012 Summer Olympics? In the short, a swimmer emerges from the waters of the British Isles to take in a hallucinatory carnival scene before returning to the sea. There, he floats on his back in one shot, then descends into the depths in the next, the camera lingering on the beads of air that break through the surface and then cease.
Water and drowning arise again in *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, Ramsay’s disturbing third feature about an ambivalent mother struggling to cope with her son’s perpetration of the murder of her husband and her daughter and the massacre of dozens of his classmates in a Columbine-style high school slaying. One scene in particular presents us with a series of anamorphoses. After yet another sleepless night, Eva, the Swinton character, attempts to rouse herself by dunking her face into a sink of water. The camera begins below the surface, peering up at her as she bends at the waist. As Eva makes contact with the liquid, the sound track shifts gears: diegetic noises become muffled and reduced—reminiscent of how
one hears when underwater (and how the viewer heard the opening shot of *Ratcatcher*)—and a dissonant, droning squeal emerges, gradually rising in pitch and volume. Eva gently swings her head to and fro, causing her dark locks to obscure her face. Yet when her hair does lift away from her brow momentarily, we find that her eyes are no longer clenched shut but wide-open, conveying alarm, as if she were struggling for air, as if some invisible force were holding her head down. Her veiling hair also serves to hide two jump cuts. With the first, Eva’s frightened face is replaced by another dark-haired figure, the teenaged Kevin (Ezra Miller), whose countenance registers a similar sort of shock, as if now he were the one being pinned beneath the surface. (SEE FIGS. 11–12) With the second cut, the face is again cloaked and unidentifiable as the figure withdraws itself from the water. In the next shot, a bathroom mirror: Eva rises into the frame, breathless and wiping the water from her eyes.

Here under the water, a striking substitution of the tormentor and the tormented takes place, all in only 11 seconds of screen time: child drowning mother, then mother drowning child—a chilling rebuttal to the water/womb metaphor. In the first half of the sequence, even though Kevin is now incarcerated for his crimes, Eva seems to feel his predatory nature, which is rendered both sonically and visually as an attack; in the second half, the situation is reversed, with Eva, it would seem, fantasizing her retaliation against Kevin for his years of mental abuse.

There’s something mathematical about Ramsay’s cinema. A particular sound, image, or idea accretes or multiplies, only later to be added together, combined or collapsed into a single figure. One sees this most obviously in the aforementioned scene of Eva’s oscillating face in the wash basin, where she doubles or divides into two, returning to one upon her withdrawal. (Shades of Deleuze on Bacon: “the forces of deformation […] become visible whenever the head shakes off its face.”100) But this is hardly the most peculiar instance of doubling or merging in Ramsay’s filmography. Sometimes these operations occur within single shots, with no hidden cuts, as is the case with two moments in *Ratcatcher* and *Morvern Callar*, respectively

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100 Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 63.
Kuhn points us to one of these remarkable shots from *Ratcatcher*, which takes place when James briefly escapes the blight of the city for the idyllic countryside outskirts where new government housing is under construction—and where he finds an unsecured unit to explore. The shot in question opens with our protagonist standing in profile, facing screen left, his head resting against the back of the wall. The camera slowly tracks left only to find James, paradoxically, now on that side of room and that half of the frame. His posture is very much the same, but his eyes directed screen right.\(^{101}\) At no point, though, did he

\(^{101}\) Kuhn, *Ratcatcher*, 62.
cross in front of the camera on his way to the other side of the room. It is as though the boy had been doubled, occupying two positions in space at once.

![Image](image-url)

**Figure 13 - James appears on both sides of a lateral track (R to L); this structure is reversed with Morvern**

As if this shot weren’t enigmatic enough, it appears in only slightly modified form in *Morvern Callar*. In his essay on the film, John Caughie notes that in the Spanish mausoleum scene, Morvern stands alongside a wall, in profile, facing screen right—which is, one will recognize, the exact reverse of James’ starting position in *Ratcatcher*. The camera then tracks right before coming to rest on—you guessed it—Morvern, who now faces screen left, as she places a carnation in front of one of the tombs, a de facto funeral for James and perhaps the film’s only moment in the film in which Morvern grieves in any “normal” way.

At some point during these eerily similar lateral camera movements, cinematic space quite literally folds in on itself. What appears in the first half of each shot is impossibly mirrored in the second; indeed, the two shots even mirror one another: James relocates from the right side of the frame to the left, Morvern from left to right, and in both their orientation reverses 180 degrees. (SEE FIG. 13) It’s a
testament to the sharp eyes of both Kuhn and Caughie that they each spot this aberrant shot structure. Neither of them, however, makes the connection that it appears in both films. Now, my intention is not to condemn either scholar for failing to point out the similarity. After all, Kuhn’s book was published as part of the *BFI Classics* series, which is explicitly tailored to the examination of a single film, and Caughie’s stated goal in his piece is to consider *Morvern Callar* in the context of Scottish cinema and national identity. On these fronts, both succeed splendidly. But insofar as these highly unusual shot structures, like the watery imagery already discussed, repeat across Ramsay’s body of work, they constitute a complex network of reiterative relays that calls out for a different sort of analysis, one that neither isolates itself to an individual text nor that seeks to unify these differential repetitions into a coherent, consistent system of meaning. To this task, Brenez’s figural method is particularly well suited.

Let us consider another Ramsayian figure, the curtain, which undergoes an anomorphic mutation between *Ratcatcher* and *We Need to Talk About Kevin*. The latter film opens much like the earlier one did: with a shot of drapes. In *Kevin*, though, rather than acting as an encapsulating cloak, the curtain serves as a barrier between Eva (the camera gives us her point-of-view) and the corpses of her husband and daughter that await her in the back yard. Yet we only learn the significance of this shot far later in the proceedings, when the film’s non-chronological unfolding contextualizes it. It should be noted, though, that anamorphosis is not an exclusively visual mutation. The image of the curtain repeats only once, but the horror it conceals blankets the film in the form of a sound effect. During the title sequence and prior to the opening shot of the curtain, we hear the swift, staccato rhythm of a garden sprinkler without any clear narrative motivation. It is a noise that crops up in the sound mix frequently, most often in moments when Eva appears most mentally frayed. For the bulk of the film, we hear but never see this sprinkler. It is therefore an acousmatic noise—that is, at least until that moment when Eva finally peels back the curtain late in the film to reveal her slain loved ones, their bodies soaked by the sprinkler that monotonously goes about its duty, indifferent to the carnage upon which it rains. Like the image of the curtain, the significance of the sound that lies just beyond this threshold only registers to the viewer after the fact. In
retrospect, whenever the sprinkler’s choppy pulse was heard, it cryptically served to prefigure the image that was to come.

In *We Need to Talk About Kevin* and *Ratcatcher*, sound provides us fleeting access to the interiority of protagonists who are otherwise opaque, who never verbalize to other characters via dialogue, to themselves via internal monologue, or to the viewer via voiceover, their beleaguered inner states. In the case of *Kevin*, the sound of the sprinkler marks the momentary intrusion of the memory of the devastating discovery that Eva futilely tries to hold at bay.

This logic is reversed in *Morvern Callar*. If sound intrudes on Eva, it fortifies Morvern. She, too, is bowled over by grief, and in the moments when she appears most overwhelmed, she dons her portable headphones and listens to the mixtape James made for her before he took his life. Once again we find what I call a soundful moment, for when sound so conspicuously shifts gears, it betokens a momentary deviation from the film’s principal formal strategies or a rupture in the configuration of the body. Here, the songs’ relative prevalence in the sound mix is indicative of the degree to which we are experiencing the world in the manner in which Morvern does, the extent, in other words, to which we are in her headspace. In “objective” shots, the songs are tinny and slight, heard as on onlooker (onlistener?) might hear them, as only slightly audible “leaks” from the headset. In other instances, the music on Morvern’s tape, loud and full, overtake the entire sound track, even if we don’t occupy her “aural” point-of-view (to pointedly mix a metaphor).102 This is most apparent in three scenes: once, when Morvern steels herself with the tape James left her as she dismembers his corpse; and twice when she walks through a Spanish disco (while tripping on Ecstasy in one), the club’s deafening music seemingly unable to penetrate the grieving woman’s sonic bubble. Morvern, it would seem, is not merely retreating into herself when she puts on her music but communing with the dead, letting the world impress itself upon her as opposed to

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102 I’m here referencing the way film studies tends to differentiate between “point-of-view” (meaning, aligned with a character’s subjectivity) and “optical point-of-view” (meaning, we see literally what the character sees—“from the point,” as Edward Brannigan calls it. Rick Altman takes up in the issue of “point of audution” as it relates to shot scale in his essay “Sound Space.” Edward Brannigan, *Point of View in the Cinema: A Theory of Narration and Subjectivity in Classical Film* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1879). Rick Altman, “Sound Space,” in *Sound Theory/Sound Practice*, 46–64.
expressing her self upon it. Thought of in this light, Morvern’s mixtape operates a bit like the curtain that James coils himself up in in *Ratcatcher*: both insulate the characters from the outside world.

But whereas these are gestures of screening or blocking, *We Need to Talk About Kevin* recasts them by reversing their functions. Unlike Ryan, the curtain for Eva is not some protective womb; it is instead utterly porous, a veil that must be pushed back, a dam about to break. And unlike Morvern, Eva cannot retreat into an aural shell, for there is no sanctuary from the sprinkler’s piercing rhythm. Here, sound does not shield; it penetrates.

This is the nature of the repetitions in Lynne Ramsay’s cinema. They do not function in the manner of traditional motifs that tend to accrete in meaning through reinscription. Her method is one of reversal: we see one side of a figure before it is elsewhere spun around to reveal different and sometimes contradictory facets. Ramsay molds and remolds her figures in such a way that they never take on fixed form. Like clay never kilned, her cinematic material remains pliable. Rather than motif, then, we might say her approach is more on the order of Hans Jenny’s experiments in sonic visualization, a series of which are pictured below. (SEE FIG. 14) Note how the sand particles are redistributed into increasingly baroque patterns with every increase in the rate of vibration. With cymatics, there is no net change in the amount of material that lines the plate—but that material scatters into new, ever more complex arrangements. Indeed, one could easily import Brenez’s characterization of anamorphosis as a caption to Jenny’s illustration: “a figure that is initially simple […] is progressive[ly] … push[ed] to its limits.”

Like a cymatic figure, those of the Brenezian sort are subject to transmogrification: their form is emphatically not pre-given. And as this chapter has shown, Lynne Ramsay traffics in such figures. Thus, rather than seek out the uniformity of certain sounds, images, or themes in her work, one might be wiser

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to consider these elements as always, already in the midst of transformation. After all, Ramsay apparently conceives of them in just such a way. In her published screenplay for *Ratcatcher*, Ramsay characterizes the figure that I’ve taken up here at great length, that of Ryan coiled in the drapes, neither as an image of womb-like plenitude nor as a harbinger of looming death. She instead likens it to a creature that is fundamentally in between forms. Her descriptor for the curtain-wrapped boy? A cocoon.105

Lynne Ramsay’s cinema is fluid—not simply because of the prevalence of watery imagery found within it but because of the semiotic instability or reversibility of that imagery. A certain figure might repeat in Ramsay’s work, but rarely does it ever “mean” the same thing as it did in previous instances. What I want to suggest is that, in addition to her tendency towards “unruly women” who reject or at the very least bristle at patriarchal roles they are supposed to perform (Eva’s ambivalence about motherhood, Morvern’s outright refusal to don the black veil), Ramsay’s figural suppleness is the key aspect of her feminist project. Ramsay in one instance will invoke the familiar tropes of femininity and maternalism only to stand them on their heads later in her films. While Ramsay does not fully escape the constraints of either/or dualist structures (birth/death, mother/child, mother/father), she nevertheless has invented a figure.

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cinematic language that fluidly moves between the poles, giving us the process characters who cannot be pinned down to one pole or the other.

**Formal Echoes**

This chapter has pursued three types of figures, or, better, three *processes of figuration*: Nietzsche’s transfiguration of invisible music into human form and bodily gesture; Brenèz’s anamorphic folding and re-folding of cinematic figures, and the visualization of vibrations through the displacement of visible matter in the experimental practice of cymatics. This is service of developing something of a “reading strategy” for the cinema of Lynne Ramsay that takes into account not only sound as a formal element of her films but also as a conceptual “figure” unto itself.

In the next chapter, I turn my attention to another nexus of art and science to ask how neuroscience, specifically accounts of autoscopic phenomena (better known, perhaps, by one of its quasi-mystical subsets, “out-of-body experience”), might complicate our understanding of not only point of view in the cinema, but also of subjectivity more broadly. By way of preview, at stake is a radically different conception of the self, one that is rooted in a disruption of the sensation of one’s anchoring in space.
3 / STRUCTURES OF REFERRAL

My objective throughout this dissertation has been to reckon with the visual in terms of the aural in the realm of film form and bodily form. In Chapter 1 I examined the affective molar- and molecularization of bodies suggested by Her’s evacuation of the image track during a pivotal love scene, while in Chapter 2, I considered two different, yet to my mind related, understandings of “figurality”: the “transfiguration” of music into visible, bodily form in Nietzsche’s theorization of Greek tragedy, and Nicole Brenez’s notion of “the figural,” which aligns the plasticity of the cinematic medium with that of matter generally and the human body specifically.

This chapter brings together Jean-Luc Nancy’s “sonorous subjectivity,” Deleuze’s “perception-image” from the Cinema books, and, perhaps unexpectedly, accounts from neuroscience of “autoscopic phenomena,” the most common of which is popularly known as “out-of-body experience,” in order to complicate how the customary image of the subject as discrete and bounded by the body. The chapter thus lies at the intersection of philosophy, science, and art, the three intertwined realms of creativity for Deleuze and Guattari. From each of these disparate domains, I draw what I describe as a set of related “modes of self-relation.” In two of these three modes, the self encounters itself primarily by way of sight. I argue, though, that these instances are in fact visual manifestations of what is an underlying aural logic, which I demonstrate through an analysis of Terrence Malick’s The Tree of Life (2011), a film that I contend reveals a remarkably complex portrait of subjectivity that is defined not so much by the self’s encounter with the other but by its relationship to itself. As I shall demonstrate, soundful relations suffuse The Tree of Life, but in order to locate them, we must learn to listen to the image.

Vis-à-vis

Too much has been written on the double, haphazardly, metaphysically, finding it everywhere, in any old mirror, without noticing ... [that] it inscribes itself on a line of flight.—Deleuze and Guattari

One’s reflection before a mirror is perhaps the most widely recognized icon of self-relation, for it

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1 Deleuze and Guattari, What Is Philosophy?, passim.
2 Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, 132.
allows the subject to see herself as an object and in much the same way that others might see her. This is of course why Lacan posited the metaphorical mirror as the locus of ego formation and why, later, film theory adopted Lacan to argue that the allure of the cinema derives at least in part from the spectator’s identification with the camera itself. According to this line of thinking, vision structures subjectivity: the eye equates with the I.

Beyond philosophy and critical theory, we find the mirror trope permeating the arts as well. Take painting, for instance, where in everything from Ecksersberg’s neoclassical *Morgentoilette* (1841) to more self-conscious meditations on illusion and perspective such as Velázquez’s *Las Menias* (1656) and Manet’s *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1882) the mirror reflection, the copy, becomes as important to the overall composition as the human subjects. The cinema is similarly littered with mirror imagery. In any number of films, characters are depicted standing before a mirror, their visual reflection meant to convey the act of mental reflection (in the sense of contemplation). Alternatively, the double image offered by the mirror is often used to suggest a character’s duplicity (think: Phyllis Dietrichson [Barbara Stanwyck] in *Double Indemnity* [Wilder, 1944] or innumerable other femmes fatale), or it operates as a meta-cinematic gesture about the medium itself (*Peeping Tom* [Powell, 1960]). In still other cases, a character-at-mirror is meant to convey ego and id at odds, which manifests itself in horror films as doppelgangers or evil twins (*Black Swan* [Aronofsky, 2010]). (SEE FIG. 15)

![Black Swan](https://example.com/blackswan.jpg)

**Figure 15 - Black Swan (Aronofsky, 2010)**
Yet self-relation can be thought in ways that are less explicitly visual and for that matter less explicitly psychoanalytic in their thrust. In his unfinished *The Visible and the Invisible*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty complements his previously vision-centered phenomenology with a more far-reaching ontology of the flesh, a change he comes to via the tactile analogy of touching one’s left hand with her right. For Merleau-Ponty, this analogy doesn’t merely illustrate that the subject is also an object in the world; more radically, it fundamentally calls into question the divisibility of the subject from the world as a whole: “where are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh?” he asks.³ We hear echoes of this line of thinking in Luce Irigaray, who likewise sought to disrupt the Cartesian, vision-centered model of subjectivity. Initially, she critiqued this tradition (even while holding on to some of its Lacanian foundations) with her adoption of the manifold metaphor of the speculum, which at once suggests a gynecological instrument, Plato’s discussion of the distorting convex mirror, and the etymological link between vision and thought (“speculation”).⁴ However, she later departs from the visual model altogether, turning instead to touch and the specific corporeality of the female body. According to Irigaray, unlike the phallus, which signifies “The one of form, of the individual, of the (male) sexual organ, of the proper name, or the proper meaning,” the vaginal lips are in “continuous contact” with one another, so much so that there is no “possibility of distinguishing what is touching from what is touched.”⁵

Jean-Luc Nancy takes this same premise—that one is simultaneously sensing and sensible—and pitches it in the sensual domain of hearing rather than that of touch. It bears repeating once again, however, that hearing is itself achieved only through the transmission of vibration to the eardrum. Thus, though Nancy’s explicit focus is aurality, he very clearly understands the mutual imbrication of hearing

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and touch and, indeed, of the entire sensual apparatus. The philosophical import of the aural for Nancy lies in how hearing oneself speak necessarily involves an exteriorization of the self and a fundamentally different temporal logic than the other senses. I shall at this point take up the first half of Nancy’s claim before returning later in the proceedings to the subject of time.

The crux of Listening lies with a distinction between two words in French that on the surface would seem to mean the same or very similar things: entendre and écouter, which render in English as “hearing” and “listening,” respectively. For Nancy, “hearing” suggests an intensified or “anxious” form of aural attention geared towards the meaning of an utterance more so than the direct “musicality” of it as sound. Hence, entendre (“hearing”) is inextricably linked with comprehension and communication, whereas écouter is tied to the immediacy of perception, free from the concerns about a sound’s significance or origin.

Now, key to Nancy’s project is a third and even more complex term, renvoi, which carries a number of associations in English: refer, return, repeat, allude, and so on. All of these connotations are in play for Nancy, but the foremost sense is that of “referral.” The nature of this referral, however, varies depending upon whether one is listening or hearing. In the context of semiotics, a sign—a spoken word, say—refers back to its referent, and as the linguistic turn bore out, the chain of referrals is endless, with one word conjuring another and then another and then another and so on. This is hearing for meaning, for significance, which Nancy says is “the very model of a structure or system that is closed upon itself.”

Listening, in contrast, is based in an altogether different sort of renvoi or referral: that of acoustic resonance. Whereas the renvoi of hearing and of signification is a symbolic referral, that of listening is

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6 Throughout the remainder of the chapter, I will refer to these terms by their English equivalents except in cases in which certain nuances from the original French are lost in translation. Jean-Luc Nancy, Listening, trans. Charlotte Mandel (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007): 18–19.

7 See Mandell’s translator’s notes in Nancy, Listening, 9–10.


material. In a difficult passage that we shall pore over carefully, Nancy writes that “Sound

is also made of referrals: it spreads in space, where it resounds while still resounding “in me”…. In the external or internal space, it resounds, that is, it re-emits itself while still actually “sounding,” which is already “re-sounding” since that’s nothing else but a referring back to itself. To sound is to vibrate in itself or by itself: it is not only, for the sonorous body, to emit a sound, but it is also to stretch out, to carry itself and be resolved into vibrations that both return to itself and place it outside itself.”

In simpler terms, for Nancy, both meaning and resonance (viz., hearing and listening) are comprised of the “form, structure, and movement of an infinite referral”—the former, symbolically, semantically; the latter, physically, acoustically. Listening is thus but one form of renvoi, but for Nancy it is the more basic and fundamental one.

Now, Nancy likens this “sonorous” listening body to a drum, an instrument that was initially created by stretching animal hides over a shell, a practice that persists in spite of the development of artificial drumheads with certain types of hand drums like bongos and dijembe. Drums, of course, only sound when struck from without, but they owe their sound to the perpetuation of the initial vibration of the stick’s or the hand’s force via their own resonant constitution. For Nancy, sensation works by similar means. “Isn’t the space of a listening body,” Nancy asks, “just such a hollow column over which skin is stretched,” a “body beaten by its own sense of body, what we used to call its soul.”

Nancy clearly grants pride of place to listening and its resonant physicality over hearing and its semiotic meaning. This does not mean, however, that his is entirely a move towards affective intensities and away from language, for the two, he reasons, are inseparably fused. This is evident, in fact, in Nancy’s linguistic playfulness in the labyrinthine passage above. In a span of some 70 words over four sentences, Nancy utilizes the pronoun “it” or “itself” 15 times. Read it closely, for a subtle but important substitution is at work. The antecedent for the its in the first half of the passage (“sound”) is replaced by another (“the sonorous body”) in the second, a shift, in other words, away from the vibration to the

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10 Nancy, Listening, 8–9.

11 Ibid., 42–43.
vibrated.

It is thus not sound that “stretch[es] out”; it is instead the body of the listening subject itself, which is “resolved into vibrations that both return to itself and place it outside itself.”\(^\text{12}\) To speak then is not merely to sound a vibration that exits the body, for that very same vibration sets to work upon the body from which it departed: the sound departs and returns, \textit{extending} the body beyond itself, to be, as it were, both inside and outside itself at one and the same time. The listening subject that Nancy theorizes is “nothing other than a form or function of referral [in the resonant sense]: a \textit{self} is made of a relationship \textit{to} self, or of a presence \textit{to} self.”\(^\text{13}\) This self-relation, Brian Kane explains, “offer[s] a way of considering the subject that contrasts with the identification of the subject as the punctual I or imago”—that is, a nonvisual, non-imaginary (in the sense of Lacan) mode of self-identification.\(^\text{14}\) The opposition that Nancy sets up, therefore, between hearing and listening is implicitly one between the visual and the aural, on the one hand, and between representational and nonrepresentational paradigms on the other. For Nancy, to listen to oneself speaking is in essence to encounter oneself as from without, as if an other, as if standing beside one’s self were another self. In this arrangement, one encounters oneself as a non-illusory, external presence through a structure of auditory referrals, which is wholly unlike the encounter offered by the reflecting surface of a mirror. But thinking of the self as constituted by resonant referral, by \textit{renvoi}, seems utterly abstract, less literal, and not as intuitively grasped as the mirror metaphor. If it could somehow be visualized, what would an aural structure of self-relation look like? What form would it take? Where might we see the sort of circulation of self-referral Nancy theorizes?

\textbf{Dismantling the Self}

Roughly a third of the way through Deleuze’s book on Francis Bacon, one will find a brief excursus in which its author veers away from the primary topic of painting to proclaim the “superiority of

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 8–9.

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 7.

music.” As vibration, “music traverses our bodies,” Deleuze posits, but, more pivotally, it “involves bodies […] in another element. It strips them of their inertia, of the materiality of their presence: it disembodies bodies. […] In short, music begins where painting ends.” Using precisely the same phrasing as Nancy but in a somewhat different vein, Deleuze theorizes a “sonorous body,” qualitatively different than the material body as it is normally understood, yet still a body keenly receptive to sensation.15

In both Nancy and Deleuze, sonorousness is linked to a type of attention or experience in which the self breaks free from its corporeal moorings. Rather than as metaphors, I want to take these claims of disembodiment or self-expulsion literally—though not in any empirical, observable way. Rather, I argue that the intense arousal of the body precipitates a sensation of being cast out, which in turn establishes something of a relay of referral between one’s self (that is, what we might call one’s subjective anchor) and one’s body. This is why Deleuze and Guattari describe the subject as a “figure” that “designates an ‘event’ much more than an essence.”16 The self is not something fixed; rather, it unfolds.

Where and under what circumstances does the “event” that is subjectivity play out in the way I’ve put forth here as the self’s decoupling from the body, especially when, in our day-to-day lives, few things would seem as indisputable as one’s self (or mind or soul) “residing” within one’s body? Certainly no one actually experiences the world in this way, one would think.

Yet there is one place we might turn to find a host of accounts of just this sort of body-self dismantling: neuroscience. Specifically, I look to three types of hallucination known collectively as “autoscopic phenomena,” which are “rare illusory experiences during which the subject has the impression of seeing a second own body in extrapersonal space,”17 the perhaps most widely-known of which is “out-of-body experience.” Despite the vision-based suffix (–scope), there is a variety of these

15 Deleuze, Francis Bacon, 54, emphasis in original.

16 Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, 362.

peculiar experiences, “heautoscopy,” that evinces a lived experience that is surprisingly analogous to the sonorous body conceptualized by Deleuze and that manifests the mode of self-relation posited by Nancy.

To understand the distinctions between the subcategories of autoscopic phenomena and why I isolate heautoscopy in my analysis will require no small amount of unpacking, but that work is ahead of us. In the meantime, let me clarify my approach, which, to borrow a phrase from Deleuze, is at once “critical and clinical,” drawing on both abstract theory and research from the hard sciences. For Deleuze, this method hardly makes for strange bedfellows, for “philosophy, art, and science” are to him complementary endeavors, “separate melodic lines in constant interplay with one another” and characterized by “relations of mutual resonance and exchange.” (Again, his language is suffused with the sonic.) Whether alone or with Guattari, Deleuze moves fluidly between these realms: out of Proust, he redefines semiotics, out of Sacher-Masoch, he boldly reinterprets sexual deviancy and desire; likewise, evolutionary biology runs throughout *Difference and Repetition* and *A Thousand Plateaus*, as does the brain and its operations in *Cinema 2*.

Following such a model, though, poses methodological challenges. For instance, in affirming schizophrenia, Deluze and Guattari have drawn fire. Patricia Pisters walks this delicate line in her recent book *The Neuro-Image* when she writes of “building a bridge […] between the hard sciences and the humanities” by turning to neuroscience to understand better the relationship between the brain, cinema,

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22 See, for example, James Glass’s clear misreading of Deleuze and Guattari: “If multiple personality disorder and schizophrenia are extreme forms of what postmodernists idealize (for example, Deleuze and Guattari’s idealization of the schizophrenic as a ‘revolutionary’), then there is something terribly wrong in the postmodernist interpretation of what multiplicity and fragmentation of self means.” James M. Glass, *Shattered Selves: Multiple Personality in a Postmodern World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995): 8.
and politics. Pisters carefully qualifies her use of Deleuzo-Guattarian schizoanalysis, noting that, in drawing from the lived experience of schizophrenics, she “do[es] not want to romanticize […] disease; it is quite frightening and tremendously difficult to live in a state of engulfment, hallucination, paranoia, and fear. But these pathological conditions do shed light on the processes of our own brains.” Though the neuroscience literature I take from below is not engaged with schizophrenia per se, I want to remain mindful of Pisters’ important proviso.

What precisely is the role of neuroscience in the present discussion then? The autoscopic phenomena I take up in this chapter are atypical and not directly observable; thus, researchers must rely on their subjects’ accounts of their symptoms in order to link them to neural causes. My interest in these accounts is not, however, to arrive at the root cause of the phenomena; I rather derive from them what I call a “phenomenology of disembodiment.” What’s most striking to me about these patients’ descriptions is how often they square with Nancy’s notion of a sonorous body stretching out beyond itself or the body of which Deleuze speaks that escapes itself in the throes of affection. In inquiring into out-of-body experiences of various stripes, neuroscience works to develop a language based in actual, lived experience to account for any number of strange exchanges that accord with the abstract or metaphorical concepts we find in some of the philosophy examined here. To be clear, I do not mean to draw cavalierly from the real and often harrowing experiences of those suffering from afflictions of the brain. I do want to suggest, however, that many of the sensations described by clinical subjects are in fact more common than we might think. Perception is quirky, and in those infrequent but not unfamiliar moments in which we do not trust what we see (or hear, smell, taste, or feel) lies the vaguest suggestion that that which would seem to be impossible is brought briefly into reality.

Many of the sensations about which I write below are not necessarily disabling or even disturbing; indeed, they are oftentimes sought after experiences. Take, for instance, the familiar word “ecstasy,” which is rooted in the Greek ekstasis (“out of place”). According to *The Oxford English
Dictionary, in its earliest usage, ekstasis meant “insanity,” but it later evolved to convey a sense of the soul or consciousness displaced from the body, which frequently arises out of trance-like states.

“Rapture,” “frenzy,” “transport,” “the sublime”: all name some joyous sensation of displacement, some rare and overwhelming sensual arousal, a prized domain of human experience. Kant contrasted the sublime, for instance, with that which was merely beautiful. In a differentiation that we can hear echoing in Nietzsche’s distinction between the Apollonian and Dionysian from Chapter 2, Kant states that the beautiful “concerns the form of the object,” whereas the sublime is formless or unbounded.\(^{24}\) The sensation of being outside one’s body, of course, is not in itself a necessarily pleasurable experience. A common figure of speech suggests its dual nature: being “beside oneself” describes a surplus of agitation in both positive (elation, anticipation) and negative (worry, grief) circumstances. For some, bodily detachment carries with it a quasi-mystical significance, especially when it arises during close brushes with death (“near-death experiences”).\(^{25}\)

These seemingly more common occurrences aside, the sensation of being detached from the body or of seeing oneself doubled is most often regarded in the neurological literature as a pathological form of hallucination. However, noted neurologist and public intellectual Oliver Sacks offers that hallucinations are “a unique and special category of consciousness and mental life” that are not confined to the clinic or to the chronically ill. In fact, he claims that people vastly under-report their experiences of hallucinations out of fear of being saddled with the stigma of mental instability.\(^{26}\) According to Sacks, hallucinations of all varieties are more common than we might think. Of course, “hallucination” itself is a slippery word. Says Sacks:

Precise definitions of the word “hallucination” still vary considerably, chiefly because it is not always easy to discern where the boundary lies between hallucination, misperception, and illusion. But generally, hallucinations are defined as percepts arising in the absence of any

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\(^{25}\) I will have more to say about near-death experience elsewhere in the chapter.

external reality—seeing or hearing things that are not there.\textsuperscript{27}

According to this general definition, hallucination hinges on the question of externality: is what one perceives “out there” in the real world or is it entirely a figment of one’s mind? But this is not to say that hallucinations are exclusively aural and/or visual in nature. Elsewhere in this same book, Sacks details a range of tactile, olfactory, and gustatory hallucinations as well. Hallucinations run the full sensual gamut, and as with “normal” perception, these sensations trigger more than one sense modality at a time.

This is precisely the case, indeed, with heautoscopy, the form of autoscopic hallucination with which I am primarily concerned throughout the rest of the chapter. Heautoscopy involves not simply seeing a body that is not actually there, but feeling it as well, and in such a way that the criterion of externality that serves to delineate true perception from hallucination becomes especially thorny. All of this is to say: do not let the \textit{–scope} suffix fool you: heautoscopy has as much to do with one’s visceral sensation of physical (dis-)location as it does with visual perception.

\textbf{The Body, Doubled}

Autoscopic phenomena can be divided into three variants: first, “autoscopic hallucination” (AH), wherein one visually perceives a mirror image of herself in “extrapersonal” or “extracorporeal” space that mimics her movements in real time.\textsuperscript{28} A second type is “out-of-body experience” proper (OBE). With OBE, the subject feels as though his self, defined as his “center of awareness,” “is located outside of the physical body and somewhat elevated,” looking down upon his physical body.\textsuperscript{29} The third subcategory is heautoscopy, which is the most complex of all autoscopic phenomena. There, the “subject has the experience of a double of himself in extrapersonal space,” but “it is difficult for the subject to

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., ix.

\textsuperscript{28} Blanke and Mohr, “Out-of-body Experience,” 184.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 186.
decide whether [...] [his] self is localized within the physical body or in the autoscopic body.”

In the first two types of autoscopic phenomena, the self’s perceived location is completely unambiguous: with AH, one’s center of awareness is “housed” in the physical body, whereas with OBE, one senses herself as “disembodied,” as being definitively separate from her corporeality. The situation is more equivocal with heautoscopy, for the subject finds himself “[i]n-between egocentric and alter-ego-centered perspectives.” Unlike OBE and AH, wherein one has no doubt as to which body she “belongs,” heautoscopy “indicates the existence of two selves.” Heautoscopic subjects tend to describe themselves as situated neither with the physical body nor that of the double but as alternating between these two positions in space, and in some cases, even occupying both at the same time.

What elicits the strange intermediateness in heautoscopy that is not present in OBE and AH—as if the apprehension of one’s double was not itself strange enough? Unlike AH and OBE, heautoscopy is not solely or even predominantly a visual phenomena; it also involves the proprioceptive (the awareness of one’s body in space, and of its parts in relation to one another) and kinesthetic (the sense of one’s own bodily movements) systems. Now, these systems are to a lesser extent activated during OBE, but there one’s position in space remains constant, and thus one’s sense of self remains “intact.” The heautoscopic subject, however, quite literally feels herself oscillating between the two bodies (the real, physical one and specular, hallucinatory one), and to such an extent that she no longer is certain to which body her self belongs.

Blanke and Mohr helpfully differentiate the phenomenology of the three types of autoscopic phenomena with a diagram (SEE FIG. 16). First, note the direction of the arrows, which are unidirectional with AH and OBE but bi-directional with heautoscopy. Second, notice that figures in the diagram are sometimes outlined solidly, sometimes with dashes. The solid lines indicate the position of

30 Ibid., 187.

31 Brugger, “Reflective Mirrors,” 182, emphasis in original.
the physical, material body, while the dashed lines signify the autoscopic body. With AH, the arrow proceeds from physical body to the illusory one, whereas with OBE, it stems from the autoscopic body to the physical one. The origin of the arrow therefore represents the spatial position of the self, i.e., to which body it is unequivocally linked. What this diagram makes abundantly clear is just how indeterminate the experience of heautoscopy is relative to the other forms of autoscopic phenomena. The arrows point in both directions to the two bodies, both of which are outlined in dashes: as far the heautoscopic subject is concerned, there can be no assurance that either body is the “real” one, just as there can be no definitive anchor or fixed point-of-view. The entire situation is in a state of constant variation.

![Diagram](image.png)

**Figure 16 – The Phenomenology of Autosocopia. From Blanke and Mohr, 187.**

While AH and OBE are certainly anomalous subjective events, the individual experiencing them recognizes them for what they are: hallucinations. Though they certainly register as bizarre, they do not disrupt one’s notion of self. The heautoscopic self, however, is only tenuously and temporarily anchored, and given this, one cannot so readily dismiss its double as merely a hallucinatory figure.

The peculiar, disconcerting aspects of heautoscopy do not end there. In addition to spatial oscillation, patients sometimes describe “an apparent sharing of bodily feelings” with their doubles, a kind of telepathy that further disturbs the sense of self maintained with AH and OBE.\(^{32}\) Stranger still is

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\(^{32}\) Ibid., 179.
the double’s “behavior” in relation to the subject. In AH, the double parrots the subject’s movements but with left-right reversal, which corresponds to a well-known schema of self-representation: standing before a mirror. This familiarity thus contributes to the subject’s recognition of the autoscopic double as illusory. Relatedly, during OBEs, the physical bodily is most often seen sleeping or still and from an elevated angle; there is thus no consonance of action or gesture between the pair. Hence, it quickly registers as hallucinatory. Heautoscopy, however, is much more variable in this regard. In some instances, the double will mimic the subject’s gestures in what neuroscientists call “heautoscopic echopraxia.” Yet when it does, it is in a laterally asymmetric way: if the subject raises his left arm, up goes the double’s left, too, violating in the process any expectation of mirror reversal. This is perhaps why the term “echopraxia” calls on an acoustic phenomenon of repetition (“echo“) rather than visual analogy of mirroring. The double’s lack of mirror reversal, Brugger notes, is for some patients so unsettling that they question who is mimicking whom and, indeed, they often begin to wonder if it is not their doubles that “contain the real mind.”

Yet the heautoscopic double does not always mimic the actions of the subject; in some cases, it will move about extracorporeal space autonomously; in fact, the double’s appearance may differ appreciably from that of the subject—in age, size, dress, even sex. Whether alone or combined in one or more ways, these factors (the sensation of alternating positions in space with the double, exchange of thoughts and feelings between the two, echopraxic mimicry, and the double’s differential physical appearance) prompt the subject to question the ontological “status” of the reduplicated self before him in ways the less “disruptive” phenomena of out-of-body experience and autoscopic hallucination do not.

Perhaps by now the symptoms of heautoscopy are beginning to sound a bit familiar: a double

35 Brugger, “Reflective Mirrors,” 179.
that both is and is not like the subject and whose apparent autonomy from him not only induces uneasiness but also causes him to question the certainty of his own self-sovereignty, if not the very nature of his own existence. It recalls any number of terrifying tales of doppelgangers and evil twins, a genre that rose to prominence in the 18th and 19th century gothic horror tradition and that still persists in popular culture today.\textsuperscript{36} Brugger explicitly incorporates this tradition in some of his work. For instance, in a departure from a number of his colleagues who study body awareness and consciousness, Brugger utilizes two different terms for the reduplicated self: when discussing AH or OBE, he tends to use the more or less standard designation “double,” whereas with heautoscopy, he turns to “doppelganger,” explicitly acknowledging the way the double often takes on the qualities of an “alter ego.”\textsuperscript{37} Indeed, in one article, Brugger interweaves clinical case histories with he calls “literary accounts” of self-seeing that strongly resemble heautoscopy.\textsuperscript{38} Before Brugger, Freud, too, mined doppelganger fiction for insights into the human psyche in his famous essay “The Uncanny.”\textsuperscript{39} Cast in such a light, the heautoscopic double takes on a menacing quality, as if it were some “ghastly harbinger of death.”\textsuperscript{40} Yet in the clinical setting, one’s relationship to the heautoscopic double is not necessarily antagonistic. In some studies, patients describe their doubles as “neutral or even benevolent,” performing something of a “consoling” role. For example, some neuropsychologists have proposed that the doubles found in heautoscopy and OBE involve some degree of “transitivism,” wherein one’s psychological and/or

\textsuperscript{36} The doppelganger “becomes a recurring figure at the end of the eighteenth century because of its capacity for dramatizing the bourgeois subject’s struggle with identity” during an era characterized by a “preoccupation with the Self.” Alexander Mathäss, Narcissism and Paranoia in the Age of Goethe (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2008): 27, 29.

\textsuperscript{37} Brugger, “Reflective Mirrors,” 179.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 182, 188.


\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 224.
somatic symptoms are projected onto the double, often to the point that the patient’s symptoms are either significantly mitigated or cease altogether.\(^{41}\)

What I mean to convey here, then, is that in spite of the horrifying depiction of doubles in popular culture, heautoscopy is not necessarily threatening to the subject. For that matter, in that most of our knowledge about it and other forms of autoscopic hallucination have been culled from clinical accounts, they tend to focus on pathological conditions and mental illness. There are far more mundane situations, however, in which these peculiar events arise, such as during migraine headaches, epileptic seizures, bouts of depression or anxiety, or even when grieving.\(^{42}\) This squares with some of the accounts of hallucination Sacks relays that describe patients who regard some of their symptoms not as burdens but as “companions” or “mild hallucinatory pleasures” in which to indulge.\(^{43}\)

More pertinent to my larger point, though, is this: heautoscopy, as the experience of seeing one’s double and feeling one’s self in a state of relay between two different bodies, serves as a visual manifestation of the type of sonorous subjectivity Nancy theorizes in \textit{Listening}. That is to say, Nancy finds in the acts of sounding and listening a structure of referral that is intimately tied to the constitution of the self. He writes: “A \textit{self} is nothing other than a form or function of referral: a \textit{self} is made of a relationship to \textit{self}, or of a presence to \textit{self}.” This presence to self, Nancy reasons, is better sensed through the ear than through other sense modalities, specifically because “to be listening is to be \textit{at the same time} outside and inside, to be open \textit{from} without and \textit{from} within.”\(^{44}\) Heautoscopy, I argue, presents in visual (and kinesthetic and vestibular and proprioceptive) form something of this sort, of the self’s presence to self that arises out of a referral, a referral that is not simply a representation of the self (as with a mirror) but as a material relay between selves—\textit{plural}.

\(^{41}\) Brugger, “Reflective Mirrors,” 188–189.


\(^{43}\) Sacks, \textit{Hallucinations}, 79.

\(^{44}\) Nancy, \textit{Listening}, 20, emphasis in original.
In both Nancy and heautoscopy, the notion of the subject as corporeally anchored is fundamentally called into question: in the former, making a sound stretches the self outward beyond one’s material body, yet the resulting sound returns to the body in audible form. The subject posited by Nancy therefore exists not within the confines of a body but in the space of this dynamic referral. Something similar, the neuroscience research tells us, transpires in heautoscopy. As Brugger explains, the hallucinatory self-doubting to which heautoscopy gives rise is in essence the birthing of a (temporary) second body that the self flittingly inhabits. Crucial to both heautoscopy and Nancy’s concept, then, is a dynamic movement between bodies.

Our discussion of Nancy and neuroscience has taken us somewhat far afield from the aesthetic questions this study has to this point pursued, but it has equipped us with a radical model of subjectivity based not in the subject’s relationship to another subject or to objects in the world but in a conception of the self as always, already doubled. This model of self-relation, I contend, offers potentially rich avenues for rethinking subjectivity and interiority not only philosophically but also cinematically.

In film, subjectivity is primarily conveyed in one of two ways: on the one hand, via interior monologue or voiceover, wherein the character verbalizes her inner thoughts; or, on the other, through the point-of-view shot—if not some combination of the two. With the remainder of this chapter, I want to think sonically the question of cinematic subjectivity, particularly as it relates to the way point of view has traditionally been understood. One might here assume I mean something along the lines of Rick Altman’s notion of “point of audition” (POA), the aural counterpart to the POV shot, which he develops in his essay on shot scale and cinematic space. This is not the case. What I seek to complicate is neither the “view” nor the “audition” but, rather, the “point.” In film studies, the is most often understood as a singular, fixed, locatable position in diegetic space that a character is implied to occupy via shot

45 Rick Altman, “Sound Space,”
composition and cutting. Cinematic space as rendered in the Hollywood continuity system is thus what Deleuze and Guattari would classify as “striated.” Note how, even when speaking entirely outside the context of cinema, their language could be imported into a textbook description of classical film continuity. The striated, they write, “lay[s] out a divisible, homogenous space” and is “defined by the requirements of long-distance vision: constancy of orientation, invariance of distance through an interchange of inertial points of reference, interlinkage by immersion in an ambient milieu, constitution of a central perspective.” Within striated space, movement occurs between two points. In contrast to it is “the smooth,” wherein “orientations, landmarks, and linkages are in constant variation.” In smooth space, movement does not occur between points; rather, points are situated between movements. One thus does not navigate smooth space so much as “distribute” oneself in it.

This chapter shall work to weave together these disparate strands (listening, autoscopic phenomena, smooth space, and still others to come) into a new understanding of cinematic POV, and given this scope and ambition, I ask the reader’s patience as I work through these ideas. In what follows, I turn to two recent films, Gaspar Noé’s Enter The Void and Terrence Malick’s The Tree of Life, cases that at first blush would seem to have very little in common. Stylistically, Enter the Void is garish in comparison to Malick’s stately The Tree of Life, with Noé’s brash provocations standing in stark contrast to Malick’s more poetic, lyrical approach. Both, however, are organized by what I shall demonstrate are related “autoscopic logics”—quite explicitly in the case of Enter the Void, the roving camera of which is meant to convey the first-person perspective of the wandering soul of a man recently killed, and implicitly in—and in such a way that has been almost entirely missed in the reception of—The Tree of Life. Neither film, I must stress, depicts characters literally experiencing autoscopic phenomena, at least

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46 For an exhaustive consideration of POV as it pertains to narration and spatial construction in the Hollywood film, see Edward Branigan, Point of View in the Cinema.

47 Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, 223, 494.

48 Ibid., 493–494.
not in a way that fully correlates to the phenomenology recounted in the neuroscience literature. Rather, both movies enact what I argue are differing “modes of self-relation” consonant with two particular types of autoscopia. Furthermore, these films feature contrasting spatial organizations: one smooth, one striated. Though both examples call into question the bodily boundedness of the subject, only one of them undermines the firmly entrenched geometry of “the point.” By reading these films against the grain and against one another, my analysis reveals two vastly different metaphysical worldviews: one conservative and orthodox; the other radical and open-ended—and the question of which is which can ultimately only be answered by taking a sonic approach to visual style.

“Magic Mirror”: Enter the Void

Along with The Diving Bell and the Butterfly (Schnabel, 2007), Enter the Void is perhaps the most rigorous attempt at a “pure” point-of-view film since The Lady in the Lake (Montgomery, 1947).49 It opens with a digitally-stitched, 27-minute long-take from the optical point-of-view of Oscar (Nathaniel Brown), complete with the effect of blinking eyelids. The take is interrupted only after he is shot and killed by police in the bathroom of a Tokyo dive bar following an attempted drug bust. From an overhead shot above a dirty stall, we see his corpse curled around a urinal as the camera withdraws from it, which suggests that we have detached from his point of view and are now entering into a third-person perspective. This seeming objectivity soon gives way, though, as the camera reverses itself and approaches the body, slowly inching closer as if studying it for signs of life. Moments later, this viewpoint we occupy drifts towards and then through the washroom wall. Now outside, it soars above the city streets and over several blocks before making a beeline for one building in particular. There the camera descends and penetrates the façade of a strip club wherein dances Oscar’s sister Linda (Paz de la Huerta).

We come to find, of course, that this free-floating camera and its impossible movements are meant to convey Oscar’s consciousness liberated from his flesh—all of which was foreshadowed earlier when Oscar’s friend Alex (Cyril Roy) summarized a book he lent Oscar that he failed to read, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Exposits Alex, “When you die, your spirit leaves your body…. You can see all of your life reflected like in a magic mirror, and then you are floating like a ghost.” This spirit, he explains, attains a “higher plane of existence” that is at first euphoric but gradually turns nightmarish, and “the only way out is to be reincarnated.”

For the remainder of *Enter the Void*, Oscar’s spirit self hovers over the other principal characters, darting across the city at will—cross-cutting, in essence. Cinematographer Benoît Debie’s bravura camerawork serves as a stand-in for Oscar, but only as it relates to his vision. After his death, we no longer have access to Oscar’s subjective thoughts, which we previously heard in the form of interior monologue or that he verbalized to other characters. Instead, we must surmise his feelings based on the film’s changes in camera angle and location as corresponding to Oscar’s shifts in attention. And how his attention flits! The camera weaves, corkscrews, and spins, absorbing the colorful neon glow of Tokyo—selected, apparently, as the film’s setting for no other reason than precisely this glow—in a wave on incessant movement as he investigates situations into which he is incapable of intervening.

What’s significant about the camera movement of *Enter the Void* in light of aims of this chapter is how it accords with the phenomenology of out-of-body experience—even if, insofar as Oscar is unambiguously indicated to be dead, it is qualitatively different from the living, conscious experience of OBE. Nonetheless, OBE, especially in its more metaphysical or “paranormal” interpretations, has penetrated the popular imagination in a way unmatched by other autoscopic phenomena such as AH and heautoscopy. This stems from the fact, perhaps, that OBE is compatible with the body/spirit dualisms found in any number of world religions or “new age” spiritual practices as well as the purported hallucinogenic effects of certain psychotropic drugs. On this score, the film hedges its bets, supplying
not one but two motivations for its “disembodied” aesthetic: one psychedelic (drug use) and one metaphysical (the afterlife). Thus, despite not depicting OBE as characterized in the clinical literature, *Enter the Void* nevertheless assumes a certain cultural familiarity with the mechanics (if not the etiology or symptomatology) of OBE.

Viewers familiar with Noé’s previous feature *Irréversible* (2002), which deploys a similarly dizzying, long-take-laden camera style (also by Debie), will recognize not only the visual aesthetic of *Enter the Void* but also much of its lurid subject matter. The film teems with sensationalistic imagery, such as a graphic depiction of an abortion (complete with a close-up of the bloody, intact fetus) and a CGI shot from inside Linda’s vagina as an erect penis penetrates and ejaculates into it, obscuring the “view” of the “lens” that is, of course, not actually there. Furthermore, and unsurprisingly for a Noé film, incest is among the provocations on offer. One of Oscar’s first stops in his dematerialized form is his sister’s strip club dressing room. There, as she and boyfriend, the club owner Mario (Masato Tanno), copulate on the sofa, Oscar moves in for a closer look, leering for a long moment before penetrating the man’s skull so as to occupy Mario’s optical point of view as he thrusts atop Linda. With his newly attained immateriality, Oscar seems to aspire to act, if only vicariously, upon his sexual longings for his sister, which are suggested later, in flashback, when we see him stare at her as she sleeps nude in their shared bedroom. By the same token, his yearning is perhaps reciprocal, as another flashback reveals Linda aggressively nibbling and tonguing Oscar’s ear.

The incestuous desires that run throughout the film thus play out according to a rather unsubtle and self-conscious deployment of the Oedipal scenario. This is most apparent in another of the film’s many flashbacks, which are always coded as such, as if out of René Magritte, by the presence of Oscar’s head in the frame indicating that his spectral self peers over his own shoulder. (SEE FIGS. 17–18) In this sequence, a string of shots depicts what amounts to a succession of psychic displacements of Alex’s libidinal investments from his mother and towards Linda. The associative chain is activated when Oscar
watches one of his prior sexual encounters with the mother (Sarah Stockbridge) of his friend Victor (Olly Alexander), the fink: as Oscar leans in to lick Victor’s mother’s breasts, we cut to Oscar as an infant nursing from his own mother. Subsequently, another substitution occurs when newborn Linda displaces a toddler-aged Oscar at their mother’s bosom. Next comes a very brief scene of Oscar and Alex sharing a cigarette. “Smoking,” Alex says, “reminds me of sucking on my mother’s nipples. Best feeling of my life.” A few shots later, an adolescent Oscar happens upon his parents making love, and the faces of the mother and the father monstrously morph before his eyes into those of Linda and Alex, respectively.

This libidinal economy comes full circle in the film’s final moments. Recall Alex’s early exegesis of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* where he spelled out that the only escape from the one’s disembodied state is through a self-chosen reincarnation. Purgatory in this film is imagined as the neon-drenched, orgiastic “Hotel Love” wherein Oscar’s spirit surveils an assortment of couples having sex, all with colorful lights emitting from their loins, promising rebirth. Per Alex, one’s spirit is to “choose the [couple] that suits [him] best,” selecting, in other words, the womb into which he shall gestate and from which he will later be born (again). Oscar predictably selects the Linda/Alex couple and as a result he escapes his ghostly form and re-corporealizes as an infant, now able, at long last, to suckle from his sister’s breast in much the same way he did from his mother’s.

![Figure 17 - The Schoolmaster (René Magritte, 1954)](image)
Figure 18 - Behind-the-back shot from Enter the Void

Such is the modus operandi of Noé, who has developed a reputation as a provacteur and sensationalist. (He garners frequent mention in a recent anthology as one of several “transgressive” filmmakers of the so-called “New European Extremism.”) Yet despite all its technical virtuosity, lewd visuals, and shocking subject matter, Enter the Void is ultimately, metaphysically, a conservative film, one couched in a staunchly transcendent worldview. The spirit or the mind is regarded as the higher state of being, a state of unencumbered, Cartesian vision, while the fleshy world below is treated as the realm of the other, lesser senses. What’s more, the central narrative dilemma of the film has little to do with drug deals, Oscar’s death, or his sister’s grief and is instead a psychosexual conflict that is resolved only through heteronormative, procreative coupling. It sets up this happy ending in contrast to Victor’s outcome, who winds up homeless and performing fellatio for money in the hotel elevator. In that sexual encounter is homosexual and therefore, non-procreative, his “luminescence” offers no possibility of reincarnation for Oscar. Victor’s fate amounts to a form of karmic punishment for having given up Oscar to the police, a betrayal that precipitated Oscar’s death. Hence, the film plays out the same dualism in effect in Irréversible, which begins at “the end” (the S&M gay bar “Club Rectum”) and concludes with “the beginning” (a mother with child-in-womb, aglow in white light). Indeed, the entirety of Enter

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the Void is organized around not just this familiar dualism but several others (spirit/body, straight/queer, birth/death), while the incest plot, flaunted for shock value, ultimately reinforces the taboo by making Oscar and Linda suffer for their illicit longings, only to offer redemption through reincarnation, an outcome that gives Oscar another go at “proper” sexualization.

Despite not belonging to the “puzzle film” genre, Enter The Void, like Irréversible before it, is vulnerable to the critique Hunter Vaughan directs at films such as Fight Club (Fincher, 1999) and Memento (Nolan, 2000), which he says seek to enact at the aesthetic level the fractured subjectivities of their characters. Yet for all their impressive sounds and images and inventive tinkering with narrative norms, they ultimately “subscribe to a conventional order of meaning that reverts in the end to classical philosophical notions of subjectivity” and hence fail to imagine viable “philosophical alternative[s].” These movies, Vaughan says, rely on “deranged subjects” to motivate their aesthetic experimentation rather than depicting “average characters caught in experimental modes of thinking.”

Vaughn’s words, I think, help us to see Enter The Void for what it really is. For all its seeming transgressiveness, it is in the end quite orthodox in the ideas it explores. My qualm with Enter The Void is not that its Oedipal per se, but that it operates according to a fixed logic in which every outcome seems fated or pre-ordained. Oscar’s “liberation” from his bodily mooring comes only as a result of his death, and, once so freed, his only thought is to pursue the same “goal” (his mother, displaced in the form of his sister) of his corporeal life. Moreover, even though Oscar’s disembodied soul both hears and sees, the film takes his bodily transcendence as primarily an intensification of his visual faculties and treats hearing as merely a holdover, thus reifying sight as the privileged sense modality of selfhood, intimately linked to mind and/or soul, and as the cornerstone perceptual faculty of patriarchal privilege and domination.

Noé tends to wrap his sensationalistic titillations in bombast, as we see with the portentous

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maxim that bookends *Irréversible* first as a spoken line and then as a closing title card: “*Le temps detruit tout*” (“Time destroys everything”). *Enter the Void*, like its predecessor, has no clothes, for as with *Irréversible*, it fails to imagine any philosophical alternatives. Even though he is liberated from the flesh, Oscar is utterly unable to escape the structures of desire and spatiotemporal orientations that prevailed in his living, embodied days. Though it may flirt with taboo, *Enter the Void* is inextricably bound to the point, that is, to the fixed location of the discrete, viewing subject.

Terrence Malick’s *The Tree of Life*, in contrast, profoundly undermines this geometry and the logics that underpin it—and in ways that have almost entirely escaped the notice of critics. Unlike the predominantly vision-based (and mostly vapid) mode of self-relation enacted in *Enter the Void*, *The Tree of Life* manifests what I argue is a *soundful* and much more philosophically rich notion of selfhood. I say this not just because Malick has long been regarded as an overtly philosophical filmmaker, though that is certainly true. Malick’s bona fides in this regard are well established: a protégé of Stanley Cavell at Harvard, a Rhodes Scholar in philosophy at Oxford, a translator of Martin Heidegger. Moreover, Malick, as both his devotees and detractors are quick to point out, relies on a lyrical visual style and a singular use of “poetic” voiceover narration that, combined, make his films at once aesthetically ethereal yet intellectually rigorous, if self-consciously so. Pick up any study of Malick, and some if not all of the following list thinkers, themes, or schools of thought will appear: Heidegger, Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Romanticism, Naturalism, American Transcendentalism. And for good reason:

Malick’s oeuvre abounds with sustained references—sometimes overt, sometimes very thinly veiled—

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to them all. Example: characters speak aloud the phrass “all things shining” and “all the world is shining” in *The Thin Red Line* (1998) and *The Tree of Life*, respectively, which Warwick Mules, in an essay entitled “Mise-en-scène and the Figural,” takes to be a play on the concepts of *schein* and *eurscheinung* from the German Idealist tradition. Malick therefore offers several hermeneutic entry points into his films, though one cannot readily say he sanctions any one of the multiple possible readings of his work.

My analysis, however, approaches Malick from a slightly different angle. Though I am concerned with some of the philosophical implications of *The Tree of Life*, I am not at all interested in sussing out Malick’s overarching worldview, a task that would demand, and that has seen, several book-length studies in its own right. What primarily interests me about this film is its highly mobile camerawork, a characteristic it shares with *Enter the Void*. But whereas the camera of Noé’s film is resolutely subjective, Malick’s, I argue, is tactility so, and like *Enter the Void*, it too can be aligned with a specific mode of autoscopia. But in spite of the —scope in autoscopia, *The Tree of Life* exhibits a mode of self-relation that is not rendered exclusively as a function of vision. Rather, the camera is what points us to a more radical understanding of subjectivity.

**Ecstatic Perception: *The Tree of Life***

“Wherever we used the word ‘memories’ in the preceding pages, we were wrong to do so; we meant to say ‘becoming,’ we were saying becoming.”

—Deleuze and Guattari

The cinematography of *The Tree of Life* marks something of a departure from the style exhibited in Malick’s films to that point. In his book on the filmmaker’s work through 2005’s *The New World*,

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Lloyd Michaels describes Malick’s two predominant compositional styles: “panoramic vistas … employing a telephoto lens and a smoothly moving camera, or carefully arranged static close-ups of exotic objects held long enough to become cinematic still lifes.” Though still evincing a fascination with the natural world, *The Tree of Life* moves away from the sweeping vistas of the Malick’s four earlier features in favor of intimate proximity and a camera that rarely comes to rest. One crewmember, in fact, estimates that over 90 percent of principal photography was captured “off the sticks,” without the aid of a tripod. *The Tree of Life* therefore synthesizes and inverts the director’s two primary tendencies: rather than mobile panoramas and tight, stationary shots, a restless steadicam creates constantly re-framed close-ups.

This is nowhere more evident than in the 1950s section that constitutes the bulk of the film. Particularly in the scenes involving young children at play, the camera moves alongside the boys as if trying to keep pace. On the surface, this style bears a resemblance to what David Bordwell calls the “prowling camera,” his term for Hollywood’s growing attachment to highly mobile cinematography over the last forty years. Yet rather than the tightly choreographed dolly or steadicam shots that he describes as anticipating the movement of characters, the camera in *The Tree of Life* darts and swings around the children, always appearing a step or two off, and often positioned at or just below shoulder level of the boys.

One way to account for the camera’s mobility and propinquity is to ascribe to the film a retrospective frame. Most assessments of *The Tree of Life*, for instance, subscribe to the notion that it is memory that drives the narrative. A reasonable conclusion is this, for early in the film, we see a middle-

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aged man, Jack (Sean Penn), arise from bed to solemnly light a candle in memory, we surmise, of his younger brother, who died young, most likely in the Vietnam War. When Jack later arrives at work, he appears shaken, distracted, and he even phones his father (Brad Pitt) to tell him that he “thinks about [his brother] everyday.” Combined, all of this suggests that this day we see is the anniversary of his brother’s death and that the sounds and images of midcentury Texas that follow stem from Jack’s grief-tinged nostalgia. And if this is the case, then the child-level tracking shots imply a subjective vision, for they would seem to connote, rather than a detached third-person perspective, the close-up, low-angle (relative to the more default adult height) viewpoint of a participant. It implies, in other words, that what we, the viewers, see is what Jack saw as a boy as channeled through his memories.

However, whereas the narrative’s structure of contemporary sections bookending a longer middle portion set in the past would seem to suggest a retrospective frame, the cinematography does little to bear this thesis out. A couple of problems emerge. First, if the low-angle camera is meant to convey Jack’s memory of his own subjective POV, then what are we to make of the fact that the object of this viewpoint is most often, paradoxically, himself? Second, the camera tends to veer off course, gravitating to seemingly irrelevant objects, stopping to scrutinize the tiniest of details. In one scene, the camera pauses to examine the curtains shifting in the breeze, and in another, it halts its pursuit of the brothers running through the family home in order to ponder the texture of a wall painted a lush forest green. Surely a child in the midst of play would not suddenly gravitate to such mundane, familiar aspects of his environs, nor would those same details leap to the mind of an adult reminiscing about his youth. I offer, therefore, that Jack is not remembering these objects from the perspective in which he saw them as a boy, but rather that he is presently seeing them anew, occupying and roaming again his childhood milieu with adult eyes, and while caught up in the motion of human figures, he finds himself seized by affectively resonant yet narratively inconsequential objects from his past. Anyone who has ever returned decades later to places once frequented during childhood can likely attest to the intense lure of quotidien
objects that have become defamiliarized with the passage of time, such as elementary school desks that resemble dollhouse furniture when measured against one’s fully-grown, adult body. Recognition therefore does more to explain the “behavior” of the camera than does remembrance; in other words, Jack is not recalling that green wall or the textured pattern of that curtain; it is instead as if he were catching glimpses of the sort of sensory details that are not consciously retained in the vaults of memory. Unlike the involuntary flood of memory we might associate with Proust’s happenstance encounter with the madeleine, Jack’s consciousness as rendered by the mobile camera is actively probing this space.59 We might therefore think of The Tree of Life in terms of yet another connotation of Jean-Luc Nancy’s renvoi—that is, as the central character’s return to the place of his youth. What The Tree of Life gives us, then, is Jack’s ecstatic perception.

By “ecstatic,” I mean less in the sense of blissful happiness or euphoria and more in keeping with its origins from the Greek ekstasis, which according to The Oxford English Dictionary meant “to stand beside oneself.” The implications of this are that Jack, the adult, is quite literally moving alongside his boyhood self. Moreover, the two selves, young and old, do not move in concert nor do they directly mirror one another’s actions. Jack’s self is in essence doubled, and these two selves move about space more or less autonomously. As we’ve rehearsed, the doubled body is no rarity in cinema, but when the trope does appear, it tends to evoke not so much a duplicated body so much as a split self, that is, as a manifestation of a warring ego and id, and it generally is deployed to arouse an uncanny dread. In contrast, what we have in The Tree of Life is a type of self-reduplication that is not at all threatening and therefore not linked to death or psychical turmoil as is commonly associated with the encounter with one’s doppelganger. In this way, the doubling I locate in the film would suggest, rather than a hallucinatory or horrific confrontation with an uncanny other, the looser and far more ambiguous experience of heautoscopy.

It is important that I stress here that my intent is not to “diagnose” Jack with some pathological condition or neurological disorder that prompts the movie’s visual style. What I do want to put forth, though, is that the fluid “dance” that transpires between the camera and young Jack in *The Tree of Life* suggests a type of *paradoxical self-seeing* consistent with heautoscopy insofar as it involves an alternation between the two positions in space and with such abandon so as to render it nearly impossible to determine the body to which the self belongs. And in this way, heautoscopy as described by actual people in settings clinical and non-overlaps in quite remarkable ways with Deleuze’s understanding of the suppleness of cinematic perspective, which is first explored in *Cinema 1* and then in its more radical form in that project’s second volume.

Early in the first volume of *Cinema*, Deleuze notes that cinematic perception is “double,” that it can be subjective or objective. Typically, one would assume that a subjective image is one that grants the viewer access to that which a character sees, whereas an objective one would be entirely “external.” Things are trickier than this, says Deleuze. He points to an example from Albert Lewin’s *Pandora and the Flying Dutchmen* (1951) wherein the opening wide shot that would appear at first glance to be objective is eventually revealed to hail from a the viewpoint of a character watching with a telescope from afar. Thus, according to Deleuze, within this single shot we have shifted from an objective to a subjective view. This is not simply a unique case for him, either, for he argues that it is “the cinema’s perpetual destiny to make us move from one of its poles [subjective or objective] to the other.”

He next offers an even more complex example from *El Dorado* (L’Herbier, 1921) wherein “the distraught woman who sees in soft focus is herself seen in soft focus.” This shot, Deleuze tells us, is, in the words of Jean Mitry, “semi-subjective,” an example of what Pier Paolo Pasolini would later call “free indirect cinematic discourse.” The free indirect mode was first theorized in literary theory to

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60 Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 71–72.

61 Ibid., 72.
describe the effect when an author embeds the subjective thoughts of a character into an otherwise objective, third-person presentation, i.e., without quotation marks or any other syntactical marker to designate it as subjective as such.\footnote{Steve Ullman, \textit{Style in the French Novel} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957): 94–120.} Something analogous is at work in \textit{El Dorado}: the shot is not presented from the optical point of view of the character, but it would appear to see through her eyes nevertheless. One may find this device used frequently, to the point that we might call it a cliché, in films in which a blurred or unsteady camera is meant to optically convey the subjective states of the intoxicated or punch-drunk characters occupying the frame. A more striking example of this can be found in Alejandro González Iñárritu’s otherwise forgettable \textit{Babel} (2006) in the scene in which a deaf teenager tripping on Ecstasy moves through a crowded nightclub. In certain shots the film would seem to emulate her inebriated perception even when she herself is centered within the shot. This is most often conveyed through the withdrawal of diegetic sound. In so doing, the film would seem to hear from Chieko’s (Rinko Kikuchi’s) point of audition while seeing her from the point of view of another.


Deleuze is largely step for step with Pasolini’s argument except for one crucial aspect. Pasolini describes the camera’s relationship to the subjectivity of the character it frames as one of “mimesis,” of imitation. Deleuze, however, sees something even more radical in the cinematic free indirect, which does not simply render perception as on oscillation between subjective and objective viewpoints, but also
suggests a subject that has been in essence doubled. Deleuze, quoting Henri Bergson, describes it thus:

[T]here is no subject which acts without another which watches it act, and which grasps it as acted, itself assuming the freedom of which it deprives the former. “Thus two different Selves, on of which, conscious of its freedom, sets itself up as independent spectator of a scene. … [T]his dividing-in-two is an oscillation of the person between points of view of himself, a hither-and-thither of the spirit…” a being-with.⁶⁴

I am struck by how this “oscillation of the person between points of view of himself” Deleuze describes in the perception-image, in addition to being a novel and even radical way of thinking about film, is as much a theory of subjectivity and self-relation as it is a taxonometric category of cinematic images.

Indeed, I want to take a page from Deleuze and Guattari’s *What Is Philosophy?*, where they insist that science, philosophy, and art are all related endeavors of creativity, and unite the various strands of this chapter, which hail from each of these domains. Each of these strands hinges in one way or another on a self that is doubled. For instance, the “oscillation of the person between points of view of himself” Deleuze finds in the art cinema is also an apt characterization of the self as described in the phenomenology of heautoscopy, which in many ways corresponds with the spatial distribution of the subject that Nancy ponders through an aural framework in *Listening*, where he writes, “To be listening is to be at the same time outside and inside, to be open from without and from within.”⁶⁵ These ideas may be productively brought to bear on *The Tree of Life*, just as it might in turn illuminate them.

With that said, my exploration of the film in question, heautoscopy, and the perception-image heretofore has largely been expressed in visual terms. The question that remains, therefore, is: how does sound open up the question of bodily doubling beyond a function of self-seeing?

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⁶⁴ Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 73-74, my emphasis. I’ve taken some liberty with the translation here. “Selves” appears as “egos” in Tomlinson and Habberjam’s translation. In the original French, Deleuze uses “Moi,” which Brian Massumi translates in *A Thousand Plateaus* as “Self.” I’ve thus substituted the latter for the former in order to maintain the emphasis on the body-self distinction rather than a Freudian structure of the psyche.

⁶⁵ Nancy, *Listening*, 20, emphasis in original.
Sound at the Limits

An intriguing anachronism can be found in Deleuze’s discussion of the perception-image, which he elaborates first in relation to French Impressionist filmmakers such as Epstein, Gance, and L’Herbier before abruptly turning to the likes of “modern” directors Pasolini, Antonioni, Rohmer, and Godard. Why do they come up here so early on in Cinema 1, especially since Deleuze’s trajectory throughout the two volumes proceeds, despite his insistence to the contrary, almost entirely as a linear historical account? In the regime of the movement-image, the division between subjective and objective is undermined through free indirect discourse, but that happens only with respect to the image. With the modern time-image, the free indirect mode extends to sound as well. Thus, sound, no longer serving as mere accompaniment to the image, attains its own autonomy, and once liberated, it may enter into free indirect relation with the image. Thus, the French Impressionist cinema’s loosening of subjective and objective perspective with respect to the image is something of a precursor of the fully audiovisual, more radical free indirect mode that is to come.

In addition to the aforementioned Rohmer and Godard, Deleuze points to Marguerite Duras and Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet as filmmakers whose experimental, disjunctive use of sound introduces an “irrational interval” into the cinema, an “incommensurable complementarity” between sound and image. The image is now capable of showing that which sound cannot convey, and sound utters that which remains invisible within the image. Each comes to perform the function of the other, in essence “transfiguring,” to borrow a term of Nietzsche’s from the previous chapter, each into the

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66 He writes in the first line of the preface to the original French edition, “This study is not a history. It is a taxonomy of images and signs.” Deleuze, Cinema 1, ix.

67 Rodowick, Gilles Deleuze’s Time Machine, 144.

68 “What speech utters is also the invisible that sight sees only through clairvoyance; and what sight sees is the unutterable uttered by speech.” Deleuze, Cinema 2, 260.
realm of the other.69

The appeal of the time-image for Deleuze is that it gives rise to “pure optical and sound situations” with which the viewer must reckon, confronting her with “limit situations,” a term he borrows from Karl Jaspers (perhaps by way of Heidegger) to designate extraordinary moments where one encounters the limits of one’s own consciousness.70 The cinema possesses the capability to unleash such a situation—but so, too, does heautoscopy, which fundamentally calls into question the nature of one’s own selfhood in ways other modes of hallucination do not. These are thus two privileged but extraordinary circumstances in which the self is revealed to be doubled but that transpire outside everyday life and “normal” perceptual experience. In contrast, the bodily “stretching” Nancy theorizes in relation to sound is always, already operating in the realm of the aural, though it most often escapes our attention precisely because we tend to hear rather than to listen, which for Nancy is always an act of “straining toward” that which is “not immediately accessible.” He continues: “To be listening is always to be on the edge of meaning, … a meaning whose sense is supposed to be found in resonance, and only in resonance.”71 Listening thus brings about its own sort of limit situation, one that forces the self into confrontation with itself—not as two distinct entities but as a space of relay and interrelation. Nancy, again:

To be listening is thus to enter into tension and to be on the lookout for a relation to self: not, it should be emphasized, a relationship to “me” (the supposedly given subject), or to the “self” of the other, … but to the relationship in self.72

Nancy means this quite literally. He argues that listening “can and must appear to us not as a metaphor

69 Deleuze briefly mentions The Birth of Tragedy in the same chapter that he discusses sounds detachment from the image. For him, Nietzsche’s book demonstrates the difference between direct presentation (musical) and indirect presentation (the mediated image). Deleuze, Cinema 2, 239.


71 Nancy, Listening, 14–15, emphasis in original.

72 Ibid., 18, emphasis in original.
for access to self, but as the reality of this access.”

The philosophical value of a film like *The Tree of Life* (above and beyond its overtly metaphysical “content”) is that it carries the potential to cue the viewer to precisely this reality, a reality to which we are typically blind—blind precisely because it is a reality that is on a fundamental level *soundful*. Heautoscopy likewise may also grant access to a similar realization, though its occurrence is exceedingly more rare. It is better, therefore, to seek it out in the more attainable domains of listening and of cinema, domains that I consider alongside one another in this next and final section.

**The Voiceover as Renvoi**

This chapter has gone to some lengths to explicate the ways in which, to my mind, the camera movement in *The Tree of Life* evinces or is motivated by a type of self-seeing. Yet this reduplication of the self is not perceptible solely as a visual phenomenon. Indeed, the peculiar mode of self-relation I’ve detailed to this point is more subtly and more poignantly at work in the film’s sound track, most notably in its complex interplay of voiceovers.

It should come as no surprise that I would seek to mine a Malick film for its philosophical insight, especially with regard to his ruminative, poetic voiceovers, which are perhaps the most distinctive and recognizable aspects of his style. Leo Bersani and Ulysses Dutoit, however, caution against reading too much into them, for the unsophisticated philosophizing of Malick’s characters often masks the more thoughtful philosophical work being performed *at the level of the films’ style*. Especially in the case of *The Tree of Life*, to hew too closely to a character’s words as if they held the

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73 Ibid., 19.


75 Bersani and Dutoit, *Forms of Being*, 134–135.
key to unlock the film as a whole runs the risk of missing the more pressing matter of how the
voiceovers function vis-à-vis one another, for it is there in the intricate arrangement of voices more so
than the words they utter that the film’s most profound understanding of subjectivity makes itself felt.
Put simply, the following is an attempt to listen to these voiceovers rather than to hear them.

Most readings of The Tree of Life—facile ones, I think—take the voiceover of Jack’s mother
Mrs. O’Brien (Jessica Chastain) as a lens through which to interpret the film. Why, given that it is but
one of several voiceovers present, do critics ascribe to it such significance? In contrasting “the way of
nature” with “the way of grace,” Mrs. O’Brien would seem to articulate something of a dualist
philosophical system, and given its placement as the first voiceover we hear, and over the film’s opening
image, no less, it would seem to “tune” the viewer to the film’s idiosyncratic frequency. This is a
reasonable enough assumption, for sure. But Mrs. O’Brien’s words are perhaps the most orthodox
metaphysical expression on offer in The Tree of Life. If one focuses instead on Jack’s voiceover—or
should I say, voiceovers, plural, since he narrates as both a child and as an adult—one will find a number
of linguistic ambiguities that complicate the grace/nature reading and that align more readily with my
earlier argument that the film as a whole is organized around a doubling of the self. Indeed, by listening
to these voices that hover over and around the film, we find something of a sonic subjectivity that flies in
the face of most interpretations of the film. For example, at one point young Jack, “disembodied” (i.e.,
not visualized, in the problematic way film studies deploys the term), asks, “Where do you live? Are you
watching me? I want to see what you see.”76 Who is this you? In one sense, the line suggests a prayer and
thus easily reconciles with Judeo-Christian theology. But what do we make of these lines of Jack’s that
emerge later over images of tragedy (of a drowned playmate, of a house engulfed in flames): “Where
were you? You let a boy die. You let all sorts of things happen.” To whom is Jack directing his question

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76 For a thorough overview of the disembodied voice that goes beyond my sketch in the foreword, see Anaïs Le
http://inmedia.revues.org/697.
and his anger? Is he asking God the Father why he allows evil into the world? Or is he laying blame with his biological father, the Brad Pitt character, for failing to act and for not living up to the masculine ideal he purports to embody?

Obviously, these third-person pronouns make the sentences equivocal (and, in fact, aside from Jack, no major character in the film is ever referred to by a proper name, making concrete identification in nearly all cases difficult). But the pronouns also prevent the sentences “from falling under the tyranny of the subjective or signifying constellations,” rendering them vague and indeterminate.

The result of this indeterminacy is that “‘fundamentally heterogeneous elements end up turning into each other in some way.’” Listen closely to the voiceovers and one will find that the two Jacks, young and old, do just this: they transform into one another. Malick’s voiceovers are typified by their heightened language, but what are we to make of a line like this from young Jack: “Mother, Father: always you wrestle inside me. Always you will.” Certainly the boy is given to introspection, but the sophistication of the wording is curious, for his other interior monologues are far less precocious. It’s as if the child were speaking the thoughts of his older self, verbalizing his later existential crisis. The voice clearly belongs to the adolescent, but the utterances are more congruous with Jack’s middle-aged ponderings.

Attribution becomes difficult in these instances, for the voiceovers cannot be said to “transparently” represent the interior thoughts of the character at two stages of his life. It would seem, therefore, that Jack the boy is articulating the spiritual disquiet of Jack the man, engaging, in other words, in an act of free indirect discourse with himself. These two selves that seem to paradoxically occupy the same space and time in the 1950s portion of the film here undergo an even more profound sonic intertwining.

77 Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, 265.

78 Ibid., 109.
This co-presence of selves that is implicit in both the voiceovers and the cinematography is in fact made explicit in the film’s final sequence, where for the first time we see both Jacks, young and old, within the same shot, as if the elder were literally responding to the whispered call of the younger—“follow me”—heard earlier in the film via voiceover. (SEE FIG. 19) Jack the boy appears to be leading his older self across first a desert and then a mesa before arriving finally at the ocean. There, the film’s two principal time frames, the 1950s and the present day, collapse into one. At the beach, the “archetype of smooth space” for Deleuze and Guattari, all the principal characters congregate, appearing as they did in the coming-of-age section of the movie. As middle-aged Jack greets his family with embraces, the scene suggests a celestial heaven, yet nothing in the narrative indicates that he is dead and has now ascended to some otherworldly plane.

Figure 19 - Two Jacks, one shot

Among the people on the beach is Jack’s younger brother, the one whose death sets the film into motion. Curiously, the boy can be seen in two distinct shirts and with two different haircuts. Likewise, Jack’s mother appears wearing two separate dresses. (SEE FIG. 20) The peculiarities mount: we next see Jack’s mother praying serenely on the beach as she is reassured by the tender touch of a young girl

79 Ibid., *A Thousand Plateaus*, 480.
(Jessica Fuselier) glimpsed earlier in two brief scenes: in the first, she appears as one of several children cavorting on the school playground; in the second, she is clearly the object of Jack’s adolescent affections, as he is seen tailing her as she walks home one afternoon. This unnamed girl is joined on the beach a few shots later by an even younger one, fair-skinned and freckly, who also strokes Mrs. O’Brien’s hair. Especially attentive viewers might recognize this redheaded girl, despite her onscreen time tallying mere seconds, as Mrs. O’Brien’s girlhood self, seen at the opening of the film during her “way of nature/way of grace” monologue. (SEE FIG. 21) As with Jack, her young and old selves are made to occupy the same space and time, brought together within a single shot. In fact, by the film’s end, every major character (and even a few minor ones) appears in at least two incarnations.

Figure 20 - TOP: Jack's brother in blue (L), brown (R); Mrs. O'Brien in green (L), blue (R)
The shots I’ve isolated here are easy to miss, fleeting and fugitive as they are. But once we take notice of them, once we hold them in our grasp, they become impossible to ignore. On their own, they are simply curious, but when taken together and considered against the film’s probing cinematography and its “blended” voiceovers, we begin to see that they mark the culmination of a mode of renvoi—of return, referral, repetition—that was in play from the outset. “All sonorous presence,” says Nancy, “is … made of a complex of returns”: “It returns (refers) to itself, it encounters itself or, better, occurs against itself, both in opposition to and next to itself. It is co-presence.” As an adult, Jack returns to the place of his youth, a place of self-encounter. He stands beside himself and moves with himself, he speaks for himself and to himself, listens to himself through himself, across space and time. The final images of *The Tree of Life*, of double selves encountering one another on a beach, manifest and make visible the complex web of referrals that was happening throughout the film at the level of the voiceover and implicitly, up to this point, in the camerawork.

All of this, frankly, has for the most part been missed in the critical reception of the film. So powerful is the content of the voiceovers (nature and grace and so on and so forth) that it clouds the far more interesting matter of how these voiceovers function—not only against one another but also in

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relation to the film’s visuals and its structure as a whole. In spite of its grand metaphysical ambitions, its cosmogony and dinosaurs and prayers and ponderings, I assert by way of closing that the most profound thing *The Tree of Life* has to offer is an extraordinarily rich conception of subjectivity in which one’s self is not something one encounters before a mirror but rather is something one comes to know through his entwinement with it within a web of resonant referrals.
In Chapter 1, I analyzed a love scene in *Her* in which the two principal characters, an unlucky-in-love greeting card writer and his computer’s operating system, manage to consummate their burgeoning romance in spite of the latter’s lack of a body. The impossibility of any physical union between these ontologically different beings is temporarily overcome in this scene as suggested by its rendering of moaning voices over a black screen. Sound, as I argued, is figured in this film as a molecular realm in which bodies, broadly construed, de- and re-materialize. I’d like to open this chapter by looking to a similar scene of bodily incorporation from Leos Carax’s dazzling *Holy Motors* (2012), and as with the sequence from Jonze’s film, the melding of bodies happens only when the lights go down.

In one of the movie’s dozen or so vignettes, the shape-shifting protagonist Monsieur Oscar (Denis Lavant) emerges from his limousine, a veritable dressing room and prop closet for the donning of identities, clad in a black, skin-tight suit dotted with tiny white orbs. With a large case in hand and a tubular container strapped to his back, he approaches what looks to be a factory of some sorts. Once inside, he enters a darkened room. So dark is this room, in fact, that the spheres on his body are revealed to be glowing, and they are all that cuts his figure from the ground. Scarcely visible, he opens his case and removes martial arts weapons similarly adorned with luminescent dots. From elsewhere, via an intercom, a voice gives instructions. Oscar obeys. In time, we gather that this mysterious room is a motion-capture studio and that the tiny balls affixed to Oscar are the digital receptors that translate his physical movements into digital representations. (SEE FIG. 22)

The remainder of the scene, some eight-and-a-half minutes, is a mesmerizing study of the body in motion rendered as the dance of white dots against a black background. Absent the cues provided by shadow, relative size, back- or foreground, any suggestion of a z-axis falls away: depth is in effect erased. Generally utilized to make cinematic space cohere, the conventions of continuity editing prove wholly disorienting in this environment, and even more so than under “normal” conditions, jump cuts are especially jarring. All of this Carax playfully exploits, using sudden camera angle switches and almost imperceptible ramps in and out of slow-motion in such a way that the immediate narrative thrust of
Oscar’s actions become less important than the immediacy of his motion and the sheer pliability of his body. Indeed, for me, the spatial relations of the scene only come into relief when I slowly review them shot-by-shot, over and over, altering, to paraphrase Laura Mulvey, the very flow of the film with my remote control. At times, Oscar seems to hang in space, as if momentarily free from gravity, like some Riefenstahlian diver. Moreover, the audible thuds of his landings the only thing reminding us of the floor that we, if only for a second, forget is there. Without spatial orientation and without the more recognizable features of the human body that illumination provides, we are left with just the fluidity of the movement itself, the “beauté de la geste” (“beauty of the gesture”), as Oscar puts it later in the film.

At the unseen director’s behest, Oscar begins to wield his weapons in what we surmise is a battle simulation. From the point of view of the audience, there is no clear delineation between hand and object: his arms fuse with his arms like prosthetic appendages or bodily outgrowths. Yet this is fusion is hardly the most remarkable one on offer in the scene. Moments later, when the lights come up again, a woman (Russian acrobat Zlata) in a similarly orb-studded, red leather body suit joins Oscar in the space. The two figures face one another as if a Spaghetti Western duel before slithering together to perform an assortment of simulated sex acts.

Down go the lights once again: as with earlier, figure and ground blur, but here, so to do the boundaries between the two bodies, their contortionistic poses rendering the pair as an constantly morphing, inextricably entangled bodily amalgam. Even more so than in Her, this scene renders lovemaking (or the performance thereof) as two bodies becoming one, as an in-corp-oration. The glowing orbs thus do not mark out a corporeal boundary or border; instead, they reveal the body in all its atomistic porosity: as the two bodies begin to snake and twist around one another, the unit of analysis ceases to

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2 The English subtitles in the Region 1 Blu-ray release of *Holy Motors* render “geste” as “act” rather than, as I have, “gesture.” Given that Oscar is an actor, “act” would seem to convey something specific to theatrical performance, while the French “geste” is more general, meaning “movement” and “symbolic gesture.” What’s more, I’ve chosen this translation for its resonances with the recent work on cinema and gesture. See, for instance, Giorgio Agamben, “Notes on Gesture,” in *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. by Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000): 49–62; and Pasi Väliaho, *Mapping the Moving Image: Gesture, Thought and Cinema Circa 1900* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010).
be the singular body but rather the shifting constellation of dots. The relationship of one to the other is thus refigured as a relationship of even more elemental physical parts—parts that in this depiction can no longer be said to belong definitively to one body or the other. In this regard, the scene serves as a visual figuration of a provocative line from Gaytari Chakravorty Spivak: “[I]f one really thinks of the body as such, there is no possible outline of the body as such.”

![Image](image.jpg)

**Figure 22 - Oscar dotted with motion capture sensors in *Holy Motors***

It must be underscored, though, that in both of these examples (*Her, Holy Motors*), sex, in however “performative” a fashion, is the primary means by which bodies incorporate, as if following from Aristophanes’ logic of sexual (re-)union. But if as I’ve argued heretofore that bodies are inherently porous and protean, that they scatter and coalesce and enter into peculiar intersubjective assemblages, then it stands to reason that they might do so under circumstances that are less explicitly “carnal” and that do not rely upon physical proximity.

Indeed, this is what I find at work in Shane Carruth’s mind-bending science fiction love story *Upstream Color*, the primary object of analysis in this chapter. In it, we find an ever more thoroughgoing type of integration, one that widens out in space and time to include not just two bodies but multiple others—human and non—, the consequences of which demand nothing short of a fundamental re-

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thinking of (inter)subjectivity. This fact alone would make Carruth’s film a candidate for inclusion in this study. But it’s not simply what *Upstream Color* does with regards to subjectivity that warrants our attention but also how it goes about it, the physical, material interactions that set the film into motion. Two related, albeit independent “channels” make possible the expansive, interconnected field of subjectivity found in *Upstream Color*: water and sound. It therefore serves as a fitting film with which to end the dissertation, for a number of this project’s earlier concerns here converge. But before we may venture down that path, we must first unravel what is an extraordinarily oblique text.

**An Anti-expository Film**

*Upstream Color* is a “difficult” film by most any measure, both aesthetically and narratively.

Let’s start with its style. As many critics have noted, the movie bears in some respects a resemblance to the work of Terrence Malick, whose *The Tree of Life* we took up in Chapter 3, and whom Carruth cites as an influence. Like Malick, Carruth is drawn to the natural world, his camera sumptuously taking in leaves and stones and sunshine peeking through tree limbs. Another similarity: throughout *Upstream Color*, Carruth frequently employs close-ups of outstretched fingers feeling their way through grass, water, or the air—imagery straight out of the Malick playbook (I’ll have more to say on this point momentarily). Be that as it may, unlike Malick, Carruth’s serene shots of nature are punctuated by restless, precise editing. What’s more, Carruth often foregoes the wide establishing shots favored by

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Malick, relying instead on shallow depth of field and fragmentary, meticulously composed close-ups to only gradually reveal the environs.

Sonically, Carruth’s approach also departs from Malick. Rather than dense orchestral scores, Carruth’s music, which he composes himself, is minimalist, electronic, and quiet to the point of almost lulling. Often this music covers over most if not all of the noises of the diegetic world. And unlike Malick, Carruth largely eschews voiceover. *Upstream Color*, therefore, is a film of few words, standing in stark contrast to the “vococentrism” of most mainstream cinema. What dialogue we do hear is often slightly muted and meant to convey the tone or cadence of a conversation more so than its actual content. Important lines, however, are slightly more prominent in the sound mix, though they are frequently doled out in tiny, elliptical fragments that are intermittently repeated for emphasis. Taken on the whole, *Upstream Color* is perhaps the quietest film in recent American cinema, a cinema somewhat notorious for its noisiness.

Carruth’s aesthetic is thus one of audiovisual juxtaposition, though not strictly in the contrapuntal manner of, say, Godard. Rather, the mismatch has more to do with rhythms: swift, elliptical cutting occurs against a calm, languid soundscape. Much of the movie’s hypnotic quality is owed to the net effect of these contrasting aural and visual tempos, their “relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness.”

Carruth’s aesthetic and narrative inclinations dovetail to form a highly fragmentary, “anti-expository” style. The director seems to have taken to heart the filmmaking adage of “show, don’t tell,” as evinced by his forthright mistrust of dialogue:

> I absolutely do not like exposition. It feels to me like every time I need it, it seems like there must be some other way to get around this. We cannot have a scene where Jeff Goldblum explains Chaos Theory [as he does in *Jurassic Park*]. We cannot do that. […] The script probably had a line or two in it that would technically have been exposition, and those were excised out once the visual language started to really develop.

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7 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 266.

What is most odd about this position is that Carruth makes films—his earlier, debut film *Primer* (2004) is an impenetrable time travel movie with a sizeable cult following—that are almost inscrutable: they withhold exposition from elaborate plots that would seem most in need of it.

So elaborate is the narrative of *Upstream Color*, in fact, that nearly every reviewer admits a certain degree of bafflement with it.¹⁰ Many in fact praise the film even as they struggle to describe its plot. One critic, for example, notes that the film “edges close to absurdity,” a sentiment echoed by another who concedes that his inadequate synopsis makes the film “sound impossibly silly and arch.”¹¹ Critic Scott Tobias gives it a valiant (and humorous) go:

To describe the plot of *Upstream Color* is an exercise in comical futility, but here goes: Amy Seimetz stars as an effects artist who is abducted and implanted with a bioengineered grub that holds her in a hypnotic trance. By the time she recovers—via some sort of pig-related resuscitation process engineered by Andrew Sensenig (see: comical futility)—Seimetz has no memory of what happened, but she’s mysteriously drawn to a young, disgraced trader (Carruth) who seems to have gone through a similar experience. The two share an intimate relationship, spiked by mutual fear and paranoia, and their memories and identities start to muddy and converge inexplicably. (Also: Something something orchids; something something [Thoreau’s] Walden; something something triggering sound effects.)¹²

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Do not be misled by Tobias’ tone, though, for his review is unquestionably a positive one. *Upstream Color*, he concludes, is “the type of art that inspires curiosity and obsession, like some beautiful object whose meaning remains tantalizingly out of reach,” which testifies, I think, to the conviction with which this ludicrous-on-paper film is mounted. And it’s not only Tobias who thinks so: one online review aggregator estimates that 84% of critics regarded the movie favorably.

All of this is to say: writing about *Upstream Color* is no easy task. It will require a longer than normal recounting of plot events in order to take stock of the implications of, to paraphrase Scott Tobias, its strange network of humans, pigs, worms, and flowers. I therefore ask the reader’s patience as we move through this complex film. In the first half of what follows, I suggest a material basis for the subjective interconnectedness the film’s central characters, while in the second, I consider the circumstances of how these connections were forged. As one might guess from the above excerpts from the critical reception of *Upstream Color* and the general thrust of the dissertation to this point, sound plays a significant role here. How, however, is a question that we will have to set to the side for time being.

**Entangled States**

Let’s begin in the middle, at a point of connection, and then work our way backward: Kris (Amy Seimetz) and Jeff (Carruth) meet on a train and are instantly drawn to one another for reasons they cannot explain, seemingly for something beyond mere physical attraction. Despite this being their first encounter, they both seem to sense that they know each other, which makes for a somewhat testy meet-cute: Kris appears perturbed by her vague familiarity with Jeff, whereas he romantically pursues her immediately and aggressively—to the point of stalking her—, as if their match were preordained and their coupling a fait accompli. What is the nature of their magnetism, their simultaneous push and pull from and to one another? We come to find that they were both victims of an unnamed character (Thiago Martins), listed in the credits only as “The Thief,” who brainwashes his targets by introducing, by hook or by crook, strange

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13 Tobias, “*Upstream Color*”

worms into their bodies, worms he harvests from rare blue orchids he purchases at an exotic flower shop. His primary means of getting his victims to ingest the worms is to slide them into medicine capsules, pose as a drug dealer, and pass them off on unsuspecting buyers. Unfortunately for Kris, she happens to be in the same bar as The Thief on a night when he fails to land a sale. In a sequence of events that disturbingly resembles a sexual assault, The Thief incapacitates Kris with a taser while she waits in line for the bathroom, drags her to the building’s backalley, straddles her body, and using a bag valve mask filled with water, forces a worm down her throat. This parasite, we learn, renders their hosts especially open to suggestion, and The Thief exploits this vulnerability by directing Kris and his other victims in a series of monotonous tasks (gluing strips of paper into long daisy chains, stacking poker chips, transcribing Thoreau’s *Walden* [1845] in its entirety) in order to make them docile and robotic, at which time they, at his behest, obligingly drain their bank accounts.

Once robbed, the Thief’s victims awake from their trances with no memory of the crimes perpetrated against themselves, by themselves, and since they signed over their own assets, they have no legal recourse for recovery, no plausible scenario to give to the police as to why they liquefied their assets. Indeed, Jeff, formerly a stockbroker, handed over not only his own money but also that of his clients, leading to his being fired for embezzlement; and Kris, unable to account for her absence from her job as visual effects supervisor in the film industry, is likewise terminated. Unemployed, broke, and doubting their own mental stability, Jeff and Kris are effectively reset to zero.

Now working as a clerk at a copy/print store, Kris moves through her post-theft life as if in a foggy haze. Yet in Jeff, she seems to detect something kindred, like a faint signal only she can hear breaking through what is otherwise a world of noise, and ditto for him. The characters thus gravitate toward one another not (only) because of physical attraction but (also) on account of shared but not consciously recalled experiences of their conditioning at the hands of the Thief. Indeed, much of the couple’s bonding, such that it is, revolves initially around their gradual discovery that they both have similar, sizeable gaps in their personal histories for which they cannot account.
As their courtship continues, other oddities start to crop up. Memory, for instance, becomes a site of contestation. They bicker, at first teasingly then later more heatedly, about the “ownership” of certain recollections. For example, Kris and Jeff both tell stories of family vacations in Vermont and of being almost drowned by an overweight neighbor name Renny, similarities which seem to them beyond coincidence. They each begin to suspect that the other is purposefully intermixing their personal narrative, a charge they both deny.

Stranger still, Kris becomes convinced she is pregnant even though tests reveal that not only is she without child but also that she is unable to conceive, a conclusion doctors reach when they discover scars on her uterus consistent with a surgical intervention for cancer, a diagnosis and a procedure for which she has no recollection. But while she is probed at her doctor’s office, Jeff doubles over at work, clutching his abdomen as if he, too, had suddenly become aware of something amiss internally, as if he were experiencing something akin to the symptoms of Couvade syndrome (“sympathetic pregnancy”)—this despite Kris not actually being pregnant.15

It is evident that the bond that unites Kris and Jeff is not simply metaphorical; indeed, there seems to be some sort of material bond between them, with the thoughts and sensations of one half of the couple intruding upon the other. Unlike the brief coital unification of Samantha and Theodore in Her or the boundary-blurring contortions of Oscar and his fellow performer in Holy Motors, the “affiliation” between Jeff and Kris is far more prolonged and perhaps even indissoluble. To refer back to some of the conceptual language from elsewhere in this study, we might say that the two lovers in Upstream Color “resonate” with one another in profound ways, or that they are deeply “intertwined,” or perhaps that they have incorporated at a molecular level into a single body or “assemblage.” This latter term is closer to the mark, for it acknowledges the material circumstances—more on that shortly—of Kris and Jeff’s

connection, but it doesn’t quite go far enough. A better description, I think, for this strange state of exchange in which these two lovers find themselves? *Entangled.*

In quantum physics, entanglement names a type of particle-level phenomenon that “def[ies] the physics governing life at human scale.”16 A popular podcast recently explored entangled states by describing for a lay audience an experiment conducted at the University of Maryland. As the hosts reported, two atoms were isolated beneath metal boxes on opposite ends of a table. Then, with a complex assortment of lasers and mirrors, scientists were able to accelerate the motion of these atoms so that they each emit a photon. The researchers forced these photons to collide with one another, which in turn caused the two atoms from whence they came to become linked or “entangled”.17 Now, every atom possesses an intrinsic angular momentum that physicists call “spin,” the direction of which can be altered under laboratory conditions by scientists. Here’s where it gets interesting: “bizarrely, if the direction of one atom’s spin is altered, its entangled fellows will change their spins accordingly, and instantaneously.”18 What happens to one, in other words, affects the other instantly, no matter the distance between them. They no longer operate as discrete entities but as a single object—even though they are separate from one another in space. The entanglement experiment at the University of Maryland spanned a mere four feet, but to date, similar results have been obtained across a distance of just over 186 miles (300km).19 “Theoretically,” though, “you could fly one atom to the moon, and still if you affected it in some way, the other atom back on earth would be affected instantaneously in the same way.”20


20 “Entanglement,” podcast. Scientists have begun to ponder the possibility of a “quantum internet.” ADD.
As evinced by his famous public debates with Niels Bohr in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the notion of quantum entanglement greatly troubled Albert Einstein, for he contended that the theory was either flawed or incomplete because it failed to account for how entangled atoms could “transfer” information with one another without physical contact and faster than the speed of light. The implication was that “particles do not take on physical properties until they are measured or observed in some way. Until then, they can exist simultaneously in two or more places. Once measured, however, they snap into a more classical reality, existing in only one place.”\(^{21}\) Einstein’s derisive term for this strange phenomenon: “spooky action at a distance.” But since the time of the Bohr–Einstein debates, quantum entanglement has been proven, first with some qualifying assumptions by John Stewart Bell in 1964 and definitively by Dutch physicist Robert Hanson and others in 2015.\(^{22}\)

“To be entangled,” writes philosopher of science Karen Barad, “is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in joining separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence.”\(^{23}\) How fitting this line is for the situation Kris and Jeff finds themselves in in *Upstream Color*, for they not only feel one another’s pains and emotional highs and lows but also share an almost telepathic link and what amounts to a shared pool of experiences and memories from which they indiscriminately draw. Jeff and Kris do not consciously or willfully seek to affect one another, but they are affected by one another nonetheless. For this reason, I prefer Abner Shimony’s term “passion at a distance” over Einstein’s “spooky” action at a distance. Shimony’s phrasing harks back to Aristotle’s distinction between “action” and “passion” found in his *Categories* and *Physics*. In its contemporary usage, “passion” connotes strong emotion, suffering (specifically in the context of Jesus Chris), or great enthusiasm. In Aristotle’s usage, however, “passion” is meant to convey a sense of passivity: one is either the “mover” (action) or the


\(^{22}\) Ibid.

\(^{23}\) Karen Barad, *Meeting the University Halfway*, ix.
“moved” (passion). Far down the list in its entry in *The Oxford English Dictionary* one will find these meanings for “passion”: “the fact or condition of being acted upon” and the “way in which a thing is or may be affected by external agency.” In his election of this term, Shimony shifts the emphasis away from causality in quantum entanglement to effect, the receiving end. In other words, he is underscoring the role of affect in entangled states. Shimony, in 1983, argued that altering one atom of an entangled pair does not cause an alteration in the other; rather, as physicist M. P. Seevinck explains, one atom “passively comes to know more about a faraway situation, [i.e., its entangled partner] but [it] cannot actively change it. […] Instead of ‘transmission of a message’ think of ‘extra information being available’.” This conception of entanglement aligns better with *Upstream Color* than the active thrust of Einstein’s. What happens to Kris is not duplicated in Jeff in a one-to-one correspondence, or vice-versa. Rather, the experiences of one are felt as a vague percept or even a premonition, and even then only sometimes. Moreover, it is not as though Jeff or Kris seeks to intentionally affect the other through their own self-affectations. Jeff does not, to contrive an example, place his hand in the fire so that Kris might feel the burn as if he were some corporeal voodoo doll. Finally, and conveniently for me, outside the context of quantum physics, “passion” tends to conjure the image of romantic love or erotic desire, which syncs up nicely with the love story aspects of *Upstream Color*. In fact, in one scene Jeff entangles these two meanings in his highly unconventional marriage proposal to Kris: “I want to marry you. I’m already married to you.”

What I hope to achieve with this discussion of quantum entanglement is to frame *Upstream Color* as a film that uses the science-fiction form to ponder the philosophical implications of a science fact—that at the particle level, discrete bodies interact with one another and that this impacts how we might think

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about the supposed circumscription of the self. In the controlled environment of the laboratory, physicists can force quantum entanglement to occur—but the implication is that entanglement can and does happen “in nature.” We can make entanglement happen, but it can happen without our intervention—invisibly and outside our conscious awareness. As one of the hosts of the podcast mentioned above put it, “[Y]ou don’t even need lasers to get [entanglement] to work. It … probably happens all the time in the natural world. Like, there could be one particle of you right now entangled with the person you just passed on the street.”

Even though *Upstream Color* contrives an extraordinary set of circumstances to entangle its characters, it nevertheless goes to great lengths to attribute them to “natural” (albeit fictional) processes. For the sake of comparison, though not exactly the same thing as entanglement, forms of telepathic communication as depicted in cinema tend to be tied to supernatural (*The Shining* [Kubrick, 1980]), extraterrestrial (*Independence Day* [Emmerich, 1996]), or otherwise “cosmic” occurrences (*The Double Life of Véronique* [Kiéslowski, 1991]). In contrast, Carruth depicts the film’s mysterious organism as something that occurs in nature and is only subsequently utilized by humans who happen upon the organism’s affective powers by chance. Furthermore, the characters wind up entangled with one another not because of some vast conspiracy or some malevolent mastermind but as a result of a trio of unrelated parties operating not in concert but in pursuit of their own economic self-interests. So what, in the final analysis, is the driving force behind the strange entangled states in which these characters find themselves? Capitalism.

**Trans-species Intersubjective Loops**

Our discussion of quantum entanglement has largely confined itself to paired entities, but what’s remarkable about *Upstream Color* is the entangled states it presents extend far beyond the two principal characters we’ve considered thus far. Indeed, the film lays the groundwork early on for an intricate affective chain that only becomes clear in its second half. The turning point: while at work, Jeff suddenly

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27 “Entanglement,” podcast
and without provocation attacks two co-workers, while Kris, also at work and absent any manifest threat, is just as suddenly and just as inexplicably roused into a state of panic. She abandons the shop and bolts towards a building that draws her for no apparent reason. When she phones Jeff, now driving feverishly, she cannot provide an address or even describe her location. Nevertheless, Jeff knows that she is at the office from which he just left, most likely because he, himself, was on the way to her workplace. Something compelled them to seek each other out, like an intuition of the impending possibility of grave harm to one or both of them. Upon finding one another, they rush home and barricade themselves in the bathroom, cowering in the tub. Flanking them are the items they hurriedly gathered: a flashlight, food and water, a first-aid kit, a handgun. Oddly enough, intercut with shots of their self-sequestration are images of piglets being corralled and placed into a large sack.

What is the relationship between these two characters and these farm animals? Kris and Jeff’s intense connection was established, we learn, not merely through their brainwashing at the hands of The Thief or their exposure to the worm but rather, more significantly, through an even stranger bond between the grubs and their subsequent hosts, for the worms do not permanently reside in The Thief’s victims.

In a harrowing scene from very early in the film, Kris tries in vain to remove the subcutaneous creature with a carving knife. Without knowing why, she hops in her car and drives to a remote location to which she has never before been, and there she encounters an unnamed farmer, listed in the credits only as “The Sampler,” who sits in a field at night with large loudspeakers pointed at the ground playing a low, loud, repetitive rumble. Kris, one surmises, is lured to his location by this monotonous sound for reasons she cannot articulate. By all appearances, the Sampler is not in the least bit surprised when she arrives seeking his help. In fact, he nonchalantly leads her to a tent where he anesthetizes her and surgically extracts the worm from her body and transposes it into that of a pig, also unconscious. Afterwards, The Sampler tags the pig’s ear with a number and records it in a logbook alongside Kris’ name, which is preceded by dozens of others. When next we see her, she is asleep at the wheel of a car stopped on the side of the highway. She has no idea how she got there nor does she have any recollection of her encounter with The Sampler.
Through this process, Kris and the pig now hosting the worm that once resided in her become affectively linked in an trans-species, intersubjective loop: what happens to one is somehow sensed and felt by the other. What’s more, though Carruth never explicitly depicts it, we gather that Jeff has undergone the same procedure, too. Complicating matters further, the two pigs entangled with Kris and Jeff are themselves drawn to one another on the farm, where they mate, which is what precipitates Kris’ false “motherly intuition,” a literal and figurative gut feeling that stems not from her own body but from the sow’s. Or might it be the other way around? Could it be that Jeff and Kris’ chance encounter on the train is what set into motion the pigs’ mating on the farm? These are questions the film leaves unresolved, for, again, causality is less important in Upstream Color than is effect (or affect).

This much is clear: the sudden onset of paranoia that leads our human protagonists to hole up in the bathroom is in some way tied to The Sampler’s removal from the farm and subsequent drowning of their swine counterparts’ piglets after they begin to behave erratically. Now, before continuing with the effect of this act on the film’s protagonists, let’s pause to touch upon the role The Sampler’s disposal of the pigs in a nearby tributary plays in the grander scheme. Once the pigs’ bodies begin to decompose underwater, the worms within them release an unusual blue-hued fluid that is carried with the stream’s current, eventually seeping into the root system of orchid plants downstream, which turns their blooms from white to blue, drawing the attention of the exotic flower dealers who uproot them and sell them in their shop—to customers such as The Theif, who extracts from them the worms he uses to drug his victims. The tributary is thus, in addition to sound, the second linking branch in the film’s complex network of entanglements. Hence, Upstream Color presents us with the classic “chicken or the egg” paradox, except in this case the dilemma is in three parts: The Sampler, as far as we can discern, only tosses the parasite-hosting pig carcasses in the stream if they had first been implanted with the worms he had extracted from The Thief’s victims; yet The Thief would have no access to said worms had he not first purchased the worm-carrying orchids for the flower retailers, who are unwittingly reliant on The Sampler’s unorthodox method of pig disposal for the rare plants they sell at a premium. Let me reiterate,
However, that this is not a paradox I shall endeavor to solve: effects—and affects—are what I’m after, passions rather than actions.

So, to return to the film’s central characters, Jeff and Kris both feel their swine counterparts’ fear when The Sampler carts off their young, which suggests why Jeff attacks his coworkers out of the blue and why Kris enters into what Carruth problematically describes as an episode of fugue-like “hysteria” triggered by the mother pig’s loss of her offspring. I say “problematically” because of the gendered nature of their differing responses: Jeff is to “fight” as Kris is to “flight”—though her retreat is not to some elsewhere physical location but deep into the recesses of her self. Following the piglets’ death, Kris borders on catatonia, which Carruth in interviews links directly to her felt if not “real” role as a mother. Kris, he says, “is dealing with the mania and hysteria of having her children taken from her, without her ever being able to consciously know she has children. So she is experiencing a level of, in my mind, maybe the greatest, the most powerful emotion you might be able to feel, … what I imagine it might feel like to lose her children.” 28 Though Jeff clearly feels the same familial loss that Kris does, the only “natural” response Carruth can imagine (or project) for her is that most troublesome and highly gendered of diagnoses: hysteria.

With that said, it bears noting that Kris’ behavior in response to this “most powerful of emotions” is to immerse herself in water, the formless and fluid realm that, as we’ve seen in the previous chapters, is so often associated with the feminine. Kris takes to an indoor swimming pool, where she repeatedly dives for rocks she tosses to its depths, as if in search for the offspring she senses linger at the bottom of a body of water. Interestingly, even though Carruth falls back on gendered assumptions of emotional excess, he nevertheless turns the pool not into a metaphor for the womb or some other protective enclosure or space of undifferentiatedness but an almost ritualistic site of mourning. Like the films of Lynne Ramsay we took up in Chapter 2, water is for Carruth a feminine realm of birth, flow, regeneration, and continuation that is also simultaneously imbued with melancholy and death. Furthermore, in keeping with the trope of

the retaliative, wronged mother, it is Kris rather than Jeff who in the end who avenges the death of the piglets. To this retribution we shall return. In the meantime, I want to home back in on the question of sound, that other constant of the present study, for *Upstream Color* hinges on it like no other film since perhaps Coppola’s *The Conversation* (1974).

**Affective Antennae**

A consequential question we’ve yet to explore: why would The Sampler go to such lengths to remove these odd worms from strangers and then place them into his pigs, and why does the rumbly noise he plays into the ground seem to attract The Thief’s victims to him? Relatedly, is The Sampler in any way affiliated with The Thief? Here’s where sound becomes especially important. When not tending to his animals, The Sampler engages in what at first appears to be a hobby and later a preoccupation: composing electroacoustic music. The Sampler does not play a traditional instrument like, say, a guitar or a clarinet as would be the case with conventional musics; instead, he makes electronic recordings of noises from the natural world (rushing water, the rustle of tree branches in the wind) and subsequently manipulates—bends, stretches, distorts—they with a synthesizer to construct ambient compositions, to build ambience out of ambience, in other words.

Not just any sound will do, though, as The Sampler pursues extremely particular noises. Early in the film, he abruptly departs his pickup truck when he hears a faint hum, which he traces to a nearby utility pole. In the next shot, he stands before it with boom microphone in hand and headphones donned, capturing the sound to a digital recorder. The Sampler is not content, however, to wait for certain noises to present themselves via chance encounters. At one point, he samples the sounds produced when he topples a tower of bricks, rolls stones down the grooves of a corrugated culvert pipe, and drags an iron file across the edges of that pipe’s opening, like a cellist bowing her instrument. Why? The answer has to do with The Sampler’s impossibly keen sense of hearing and his idiosyncratic compositional mode. But, rather than begin with his ear, I want to focus instead on his hands. Earlier, I noted the evident influence of Malick in *Upstream Color*’s cinematography, and this is nowhere more apparent than in the scenes
involving The Sampler as he walks with his fingers outstretched before him (SEE FIGS. 23–24). In Malick, close-ups such as these, of hands as they stroke tall grass, wheat, or the bark of a tree, are, in Ann Rutherford’s words, like cinematic “exclamation points,” “gestural moments of intensity” that conjure in the viewer the tactile sensation of touching these same objects.²⁹ In Upstream Color, images such as these are not “merely” haptic: The Sampler’s hand in this case is neither primarily prehensile in its function nor is it foremost meant to conjure the act of touching through an appeal to the “knowledge” of the viewer’s own fingers.³⁰ Instead, it becomes something more like an antenna, which I mean in both the thrust of an insect’s multi-function sensory appendage and a device for the reception of radio waves.³¹ The relatively recent “phenomenological turn” in film studies has compellingly demonstrated the tactility of vision in the cinematic experience.³² What’s unique about Upstream Color is that it recasts the hand not as an extension or complement of vision but as an augmentation of the ear. Jean-Luc Nancy evokes the French phrase tender l’oreille—“literally, to stretch the ear”—to convey what he describes as an “intensified” form of listening in which one becomes “all ears.”³³ The Sampler’s hand functions in this manner, turning the hand into what Deleuze might call a “polyvalent and transitory organ.”³⁴


³¹ For most insects, the antenna is primarily an olfactory receptor, though it has a vast array of functions depending upon the species. In some cases, antennae function as tactile “feelers,” proprioceptive aids, near-field hearing organs, conduits for breathing, and so on. R. F. Chapman, The Insects: Structure and Function (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998): 10–11.


³³ Nancy, Listening, 5.

³⁴ Deleuze, Francis Bacon, 52.
Let’s examine a complex sequence some 40 minutes into the film to see how this use of the hand as antenna plays out. It opens with The Sampler overlooking the pigpen from his deck, and the camera catches glimpse of his fingers as he taps the wood banister as if he were playing an invisible piano. Next, we see him in the pen, walking slowly with his hand outstretched as he stops in front of each individual animal, as if seeking out one to anoint with the mud on his fingertips. Shortly thereafter appears a series of eight shots that is of the utmost importance for discerning the role sound plays in this film, for its re-working of the standard shot-reverse-shot structure tells us a great deal not only about the Sampler’s motives but also about the manner in which he hears:

1) The Sampler squats in front of a pig (A) and dangles his hand over its head;

2) A man, in his first appearance in the film, driving a car;

3) The Sampler in CU, peering downward towards pig A, as if in deep concentration;

4) Back to the man in the car, now joined by The Sampler, who sits in the passenger seat staring at the driver, who seems entirely unaware of his presence;
5) CU, The Sampler in the pigpen, glancing away from pig A below him to something offscreen left;

6) The Sampler, now in medium shot, crouching before a new pig (B);

7) A woman, new to the film, dining alone in an otherwise crowded restaurant. Another patron crosses in the foreground, masking a cut that reveals

8) The Sampler now sitting across from the woman, though she, like the driver in (4), does not seem to note his presence.

A pattern emerges: in one shot, The Sampler places his hand near a pig (SEE FIG. 25); in the next one, he inexplicably appears in an entirely different setting, often positioned close enough to others that one might expect them to take notice of him, but yet they do not (SEE FIG. 26). This pattern repeats six more times in a span of 38 seconds, with The Sampler relocating from the farm to several different urban locations: first we see him standing behind a window shopper, then following a man to a bank of elevators, then alongside a person feeding a parking meter, then next to a woman at a coffee shop, then staring at a passerby, then inches away from a construction worker.

![Figure 25 - The Sampler communes with a pig](image1)

![Figure 26 - The Sampler “eavesdrops” on a window shopper](image2)
This rapid-fire alternation between locations soon slows itself down. Following the shot of the construction worker, we cut back to The Sampler on the farm with ambulance sirens audible offscreen. He turns toward the implied direction of the sound, and as he does, pulsing lights from the rescue vehicle dance across his face. Yet the first responders are not actually there at the pen; they hail from another location (a residential neighborhood) entirely, as subsequent shots indicate. Spaces collapse: those that The Sampler physically inhabits, those to which he gains audiovisual access when in “commune” with the pigs. We see The Sampler looking on as paramedics cart off an unconscious woman (Carolyn King). A cut takes us back to the farm: in tight CU, The Sampler’s mud-covered fingers outstretched. In the next shot, he stands in the back of ambulance while the husband (Frank Mosley) clings to his wife’s hand. Seconds later, The Sampler leans against the wall outside her hospital room. There, like a ghost, he sits directly in front of the husband but remains undetected as he leans in towards the anxious man, as if straining to hear some miniscule sound, like a whisper or even his heartbeat. A fragmentary, iterative scene of loveless kisses and domestic quarrels over trivial matters between the married couple follows.35 From these sketches, one draws the conclusion that the woman, suffering through an unhappy marriage, has attempted to take her own life.

The Sampler’s hand acts as a conduit of sorts, a portal into the lives of those people affectively tethered with his pigs—though Carruth’s refusal of exposition leaves it unclear as to the exact mechanics of this. It is clear to me, though, that touch operates for The Sampler as a crucial supplement to his already keen sense of hearing. Rather than playing merely a complementary role to his sight, hearing is his “dominant” sense modality and the precondition for his preternatural vision. Or in slightly different terms, for this character, the sense of touch is an extension of his sense of hearing, and his vision is a function thereof. The Sampler’s voyeurism follows from his singular proficiency at what we might call “affective eavesdropping.”

This brings us back to the question of what compels him to listen in on one particular moment of one particular life over another? Why does he elect, for instance, to linger on the plight of a desperate women and a guilt-laden man yet so swiftly turn away from the lonely diners and construction workers and window shoppers earlier? The ostensible answer is that unlike these other mundane affairs, the suicide plot is, to an outside observer, more interesting, more dramatic. One might say, too, that such a conclusion is corroborated by the image of The Sampler sitting in a beach chair in the middle of the pigpen with a pile of grain directly beside him, hastily placed there, it would seem, to entice the pig to remain in close proximity to him to facilitate his viewing pleasure.

I grant that one could make the argument that The Sampler’s movement from pig to pig in the sequence above is a form of voyeuristic channel surfing, hopping from one situation to the next until he comes across something titillating. That said, the beginning and ending of this sequence mirror one another in ways that suggest something more complex—and more morally ambiguous—is at work. In the final image of the suicide plotline sequence, we see The Sampler stand watch in the background as the husband waits by the telephone in foreground and gently raps his fingers across the kitchen table in precisely the same manner The Sampler did on the deck railing at the beginning of the sequence. This suggests that The Sampler enters the pig pen not (solely) to entertain himself by watching the tribulations of others but to feed a more fundamental compulsion within him—to seek out the source of the sounds he hears in his head, sounds that he then attempts to replicate for later incorporation into his musical compositions.36

Indeed, this is what drives him throughout much of the film and not simply in this one example. For instance, in the scene mentioned above in which The Sampler captures audio of bricks tumbling and rocks sliding across metal, Carruth intercuts shots of our protagonists performing monotonous—and noisy—tasks: Jeff running a mail sorter and a photocopier, Kris operating a large-scale printer and sewing a vinyl sign. Upon first viewing, these would seem to be simple auditory “rhymes” (i.e., analogous to the

36 Shades of Blow Out (De Palma, 1981), wherein a man seeks to reconstruct a sequence of events based on an assortment of recorded noises.
perhaps more familiar “graphic match” or “match cut”), but the similarity between these sounds is important. Note how when Kris cuts the thread on the sewing machine with a razor, its prominent, audible snap carries over into the shot of The Sampler just as he abruptly cuts short his sussing out of the musical idea he’d been chasing. We have a causal link: when Kris stops the sewing machine’s racket, the sound that The Sampler hears from “elsewhere” and that he models his composition on goes silent. Thus, the aural correspondence we find between the sounds in The Sampler’s environment and those in Kris and Jeff’s is not meant to suggest a simple synchronicity but rather that The Sampler is quite literally hearing the sounds that Jeff and Kris hear. Another instance of this can be found even earlier in the film when a shot of Jeff folding disposable drinking straw wrappers into daisy chains (presumably a holdover compulsion from The Thief’s brainwashing) is immediately followed by a shot of The Sampler recording crispy autumn leaves in the breeze. Here, The Sampler mistakes the sound of the paper wrappers for the crackling leaves, or at the very least he tries to approximate the wrapper noises with whatever materials he has available to him. Either way, this suggests why The Sampler is so willing to drop whatever task is at hand in order to pursue a certain noise: he must recreate the sound before the original he hears from elsewhere fades from audibility. He has only a short window of time within which to work.

“A Weird Flowing Sound”

In *Upstream Color*, sound performs a bridging function, not only between The Sampler and the people linked to his menagerie of pigs, but also, more generally, between all of those in the film’s vast, interconnected network. This is to say, in true cyclical fashion, The Sampler uses his compositions to lure The Thief’s victims so that he may in turn make more compositions. His recordings are thus at once a means to and end as well as an end in and of themselves. They are both bait and meal.

Take Kris’s first encounter with The Sampler, for instance. To a human like her, the repetitive, droning noise he transmits into the ground has no significance, but to the parasite she hosts, it most certainly does. Worms do not have ears, of course, but they do feel vibrations, and as Darwin tells us, “if the ground is beaten or otherwise made to tremble, worms believe that they are pursued by a mole and
leave their burrows.”37 Hence, The Sampler is practicing, perhaps unbeknownst to himself, a technologically reproduced mode of “worm grunting,” a pre-modern technique for harvesting earthworms for bait once common in the worm-rich Apalachicola National Forest in Florida.38 One writer describes the worm grunters sound and its effect thus:

The sound [a worm grunter] makes is otherworldly. Somewhere between a rusted door creaking open and a bullfrog with a sore throat. The simple materials he uses to create the sound—a strip of metal rubbing against a wooden rod pounded into the earth—make it all the weirder, but that’s nothing compared to its effects on the environment around it. Like magic, the noise drives hundreds of earthworms out of the ground as if reporting for duty.39

Strictly speaking, the sound does not attract Kris and her fellow victims, *per se*; rather, its mechanical vibration animates the worms within their bodies, rousing the parasites to flee by activating their fight-or-flight mechanisms.

Yet, the noisy music The Sampler makes is not only the means by which Kris and Jeff (and others) wind up entangled with the pigs but also a crucially important clue that leads to them (partially) unraveling the central mystery of the film. Not long after the episode in the bathtub, we see the couple in bed at night as Kris complains that she hears a faint, high-pitched sound emanating from underneath their home, a claim Jeff quickly dismisses. We cut to the next day to find that he, in an effort appease her, has sought out the noise’s source by digging a sizeable hole in the backyard that stretches below the house. She tries to replicate the pitch of the sound with her voice so that Jeff might listen for it, too. But he corrects her: it’s lower in tone, he says. He, too, has been hearing this “weird flowing sound,” but he was afraid to admit it.

So much of *Upstream Color* involves the location of a noise’s source. Much like with The Sampler, these sounds from nowhere beckon Kris and Jeff, and they set out on a feverish search for them.


Failing to uncover the whistling noise at home, Jeff and Kris take to their car, giving chase to the sounds that they hear intermittently and faintly. Indeed, their efforts lead them to the same culvert and the identical utility pole that had attracted The Sampler, both of which are located adjacent to his farm. Mere feet from there, they see a mailbox labeled QUINOA VALLEY RECORDING COMPANY, a clue that sends them to their local record store, where they find a handful of CDs—with titles such as *Extractions* and *Reverberations*—produced by The Sampler and distributed under the very same moniker found on the mailbox. Back at home, they take turns listening to these recordings via headphones, and both Kris and Jeff immediately recognize the sounds found therein as those they’ve been hearing during their sleepwalking days and, farther back perhaps, as those that lured them to The Sampler long ago. (SEE FIG. 27) His sounds lead them to him twice: first, when he initially extracted their worms, and again later, when they discovered the sources of the sounds that constitute his electroacoustic albums.

![Figure 27 - Kris recognizes The Sampler’s compositions](image)

This discovery of an overlap between the sounds heard on The Sampler’s CDs, those they vaguely recall from their brainwashing, and those Kris and Jeff hear pulsing throughout their day-to-day lives is sufficient evidence for them to conclude that The Sampler is the culprit behind the crimes committed against them, crimes they cannot consciously recall but that they feel the residues of nonetheless. They plot their revenge, which will involve a luring of their own—and it is to transpire amid a complete withdrawal of diegetic sound: no dialogue, no environmental noise; only score—and a powerful exchange of glances.
At his otherwise empty office building, Jeff sits down to eat lunch, during which time Carruth begins to crosscut to various shots of The Sampler walking through the pigpen, his hand outstretched and hovering alternately from animal to animal, each pause “placing” him into diverse spaces (a tennis court, a streetcar) occupied by his former “patients.” But then he comes across Jeff’s pig and, instantaneously, The Sampler appears in Jeff’s office space. He takes a seat across from Jeff, who stares blankly ahead. In walks Kris, who joins Jeff at the table (SEE FIG. 28), a coalescence of two of The Sampler’s pigs’ counterparts that he appears to regard with equal parts curiosity and amusement. Like the beholder before a painting, he stares at Kris, cocking his head at different angles so as to study her more fully from his position of invisibility and, thus, power. (SEE FIG. 29)

Figure 28 - The Sampler (foreground) watches Kris (L) and Jeff

Figure 29 - The Sampler studies Kris' face
Figure 30 - Kris returns his gaze

But then she looks up and meets his gaze, a returned glance that visibly stuns The Sampler: she can see him. (SEE FIG. 30) It’s a beautiful performance by Sensenig, whose facial expressions subtly shift among an array of emotions in only a few seconds: first shock followed by shame, doubt, and fear, culminating in resignation. No words are exchanged. He stands up from the table and slowly walks away, aware that he is about to die.

Once again, Carruth collapses two distinct spaces. There in the office, The Sampler, literally and figuratively, backs up against a wall. He slides to the floor while reaching for his chest as if he had been shot. And indeed he has been, despite the fact that no wound or no blood are visible on his shirt. This is because he has not been shot at the office, but rather on the farm, which Carruth conveys via a striking graphical match. In the office, Kris slowly approaches from screen right the slouched over man on the left side of the frame (SE FIG. 31). In mid-step, we cut from this space to that of the farm, where in the same spatial arrangement, sits a despondent Sampler and a determined Kris continuing her movement across the frame. (SEE FIG. 32) Given that it is almost entirely cloaked by her body, one might not notice the gun in her hand until she, in the next shot, faces the Sampler, raises the weapon, and fire three rounds into him—a “mother” avenging the death of her “children.” (SEE FIG. 33)

How is it, though, that Kris was finally able to recognize the man who up until this point had been the subject of vision but not the object of vision? Kris’ pivotal moment of seeing is predicated upon her being able to listen—first to the seemingly hallucinatory sounds that keep her up at night, then to
electricity coursing through a utility pole, and then finally to The Sampler’s CD. It is this sequence of events that ultimately unveils the man who brought about the entangled relationship between her, her husband, and the two distant farm animals. Over the course of the film, Kris and Jeff construct something of a “sound map,” sleuthing out the sources (the actual physical locations) from which the sounds they hear emit—sounds that they had until late in the proceedings thought to entirely hallucinatory. And from this map, the couple derives a lesson. We might productively apply Deleuze’s remark about the Ingrid Bergman character in Rossellini’s Europa ‘51 (“she sees, she has learnt to see”), but with one small but significant modification: Kris learns to see precisely because she has learnt to hear.\(^40\) Or to frame it in terms consistent with those I put forth in an earlier chapter of this dissertation, an aural revelation about the nature of the sounds she hears—where they come from, why they exercise this uncanny power over her—is transfigured into the realm of the visible.

\(^{40}\) Deleuze, Cinema 2, 2.
We might say, therefore, that *Upstream Color*’s project is pedagogical. It is only when Jeff and Kris learn to listen, when they cease to believe that the unsourced sounds they hear are false perceptions, that they are able to unravel their entangled pasts. Furthermore, once The Sampler is dead, they assume the role of teachers, sharing with others the lessons they have learned. Kris removes from the farm The Sampler’s files, which reveal not only the circumstances of her’s and Jeff’s first encounters with The Sampler but also of those who came before and after them. Armed with their names, they ship copies of *Walden* to all who had undergone the same transplant procedure at the hands of The Sampler in the hopes that Thoreau’s words will stir in them some recollection of their same or similar ordeal. In the film’s final scene, Kris, Jeff, and some half dozen others gather en masse at the farm, all awakened to the fact of their shared victimhood, to “meet” face-to-face the pigs that had unbeknownst to them been affecting them at a distance. Little do Kris and Jeff realize, though, that their conclusion, their lesson, is an incomplete one.

![Figure 33 - Kris takes aim The Sampler](image)

**Life Cycles and Porous Boundaries**

The irony of Kris’s retributory execution of The Sampler, of course, is that he is not the origin of her plight so much as an exploiter of it after the fact—and The Thief is still at large, to boot. However, her killing of The Sampler does, in fact, put an end to The Thief’s ability to victimize others. It was when Jeff’s and Kris’s swine counterparts began to act violently towards the farmer, the reader will recall, that he disposed of their piglets by gathering them in a sack and tossing it into a stream, killing them. But with The Sampler dead, no more pig carcasses will find their way to the stream, and thus no more blue orchids
shall sprout, and The Thief will no longer have access to the worms, which, like their swine upon which they depend for their existence, shall perish in that shallow water, thus ending the “worm-pig-orchid life cycle,” as Carruth calls it.  

If we reckon with *Upstream Color* solely from the standpoint of the mysterious organism at its center that forges these strange connections, then “cycle” is an apposite term. Yet to think of the film in this way requires that we isolate and bracket off each stage of the organism’s journey, which fails to account, I think, for precisely that which is so intriguing about the film, namely, that those who come into contact with the organism continue to be indirectly affected by it long after their direct contact with it has ended. We see something similar to this is in Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the “rhizome,” which in contrast to the linear verticality that is a tree, forms a horizontal network of connections between disparate elements. Coincidentally enough, one of the examples they give of rhizomatic relations is that shared between the wasp and the orchid. The orchid, they say, “de-territorializes” itself by making itself resemble a wasp, which in turn lures the insect, who upon departure from the plant carries with it the flower’s pollen, which it later deposits on yet another orchid. The wasp, in effect, has become part of “the orchid’s reproductive apparatus.” Yet the wasp does so unwittingly. The orchid’s visual de-territorialization is thus the start of an “*aperallel evolution* of two beings that have absolutely nothing to do with one another” directly.”  

Leaning too heavily on the “worm-pig-orchid” cycle, I think, overly simplifies this complex film, for it overlooks that which rhizomatically unites all of the vastly different agents in *Upstream Color*; it misses those crucial linkages that mediate in a parallel fashion each of those discrete “embodiments” in the parasite’s life cycle: materially, sound and water; and volitionally, as those who precipitate its taking up a new host, The Thief, The Sampler, and the orchid harvesters. Furthermore, a three-term model also excises the two types of exchange that subtend the entire network of beings entangled in *Upstream Color*:

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42 The authors are here quoting the biologist Remy Chauvin. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 10.
on the one hand, affect, and on the other, money. Therefore, in lieu of Carruth’s proposed triangular “worm-pig-orchid lifecycle” model, which, while elegant, oversimplifies his own film, I offer the following diagram which better captures, I think, the full scope of the rhizomatic relations found in the movie. (SEE FIG. 34)

A few things should be noted about the diagram in Figure 4.13. First, I’ve categorized the various entities into two primary groups: one for the human agents whose roles in the film’s network of exchange are motivated to greater or lesser extents (and with greater or lesser degrees of malevolence) by the drive for monetary gain, and one for the various bodily “homes” of the parasitical organism. Second, my model differs from the triangular model Carruth proposes, which is necessarily hierarchical insofar as one of the parasite’s bodily hosts must occupy the topmost position at any given instant. My diagram renders these cycles not as a rotation but as a pair of parallel, horizontal flows that are linked along the vertical axis so as to unite human and nonhuman beings. This arrangement is preferable, I think, in that it avoids a triangular relation that would frame the film in terms of a linear, forward progression rather than as a multifarious and coextensive network or simultaneous affects. Furthermore, my model places all the related entities on a more or less even horizontal plane, capturing what Jane Bennett describes in her book
Vibrant Matter as “encounters between ontologically diverse actants.” Bennett defines “actants,” a concept she takes from Bruno Latour, as “a source of action that can be either human or nonhuman; it is that which has efficacy, can do things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produces effects, alter the course of events.” Thus, considering Upstream Color not solely in relation to the human characters allows us to better grasp the extent to which agency is “distributed” in the film. My model thus flattens categories of being in much the same way the film does. Case in point: throughout Upstream Color, Kris literally and metaphorically clings to Jeff. Yet in the film’s final images, we see Kris on the farm, a piglet in her arms, bouncing it like a baby, cooing at it, cuddling it warmly, embracing it—literally and figuratively—like she would her lover or her own child. (SEE FIG. 35)

Figure 35 - Kris warmly embraces a pig on the farm

Let’s return to the diagram. One will note the presence of two types of line (solid and dashed). Solid lines are meant to indicate discrete, bounded bodies and linkages that are seemingly more “concrete” or otherwise directly attributable to someone else (i.e., The Thief utilizes the worms, The Sampler utilizes the swine), whereas dashed ones connote what we might more broadly call processes,

44 Ibid., viii, emphasis in original.
45 Carruth’s problematic treatment of Kris in terms of gender norms registers most fully when considered alongside the deeply ambivalent Eva from We Need to Talk About Kevin (see Chapter 2). Kris’s hysterical state is remedied only when she “adopts” an ersatz child.
activities or operations that occur among the various actants.\textsuperscript{46} Unlike the hard-lined arrows, which are clearly unidirectional, dashed processes are looser, more open-ended, harder to pin down, not “fixed.” This is why \textsc{sound} and \textsc{water} (which share a conceptual association with formlessness and movement, as we saw in Chapter 2) are situated between two paired sets of actants (the organism’s hosts [worm-pig-orchid] and those that exploit that organism [Thief-Sampler-Harvesters]), both of which are entirely dependent upon another and bound up in both natural processes (vibration, gravity) and capitalist impulses (the pursuit of profit or pleasure) that nevertheless happen entirely independently of one another.\textsuperscript{47} For instance, The Thief does not know how or why these particular orchids carry this particular worm, nor do the harvesters have any inkling that these plants, which they first come across by chance, could be and have been weaponized. Each is operating according to her or his own self-interests, which is why \textsc{capital} is situated above all of the underlying “transcations” and “exchanges,” and why, furthermore, it touches all phases of the more exploitative cycle. Similarly, at the bottom of the diagram lies \textsc{affect}, which like capital subtends the entire system.\textsuperscript{48} Every encounter between the parasitic organism and another actant either increases or diminishes that actant’s capacity to change or be changed (Spinoza’s definition)—and, indeed, in the case of Kris, Jeff, and their pig counterparts, the organism’s influence persists long after the initial encounter, like “a microscopic event [that] upsets the local balance of power.”\textsuperscript{49}

Perhaps “influence” is not the correct word here. Recall the distinction Abner Shimony drew between his understanding of quantum entanglement and Einstein’s. For the latter, the implications of

\textsuperscript{46} I’ve taken the solid/dashed model from Blanke and Mohr’s diagram of autoscopic phenomena that I reproduced in Chapter 3 (see figure 16). There, the material body was outlined solidly, whereas the illusory, autoscopic body was represented in dashed lines. Further, Blanke and Mohr also utilize single- and two-way arrows to indicate the direction of vision, which I modify here to suggest the “nature” of the relationality of the various connections.

\textsuperscript{47} Amy Herzog, “Rendering the Audible: Resonance, Synchrony, and Hue in \textit{Upstream Color}” (paper presented at the Rendering (the) Visible II: Figure conference, Atlanta, Georgia, February 6–8, 2014.

\textsuperscript{48} My placement of capital at the top of the diagram and affect at the bottom is not meant to suggest a hierarchy. Indeed, my arrangement could be completely inverted and the logic of the diagram would not in any way be affected.

\textsuperscript{49} Deleuze and Guattari, \textit{A Thousand Plateaus}, 15.
entanglement were “spooky” insofar as it implied an instantaneous (i.e., superluminal, or faster than the speed of light, and thus, for Einstein, impossible) and *causal* relationship between atoms separated in space. For Shimony, however, entanglement was not a question of causality so much as one of affection—of being done to rather than of doing. My use of the dashed lines is intended to convey this very idea: in contrast to the solid lines of my model, the dashed lines carry no directional arrows or have one at each end, thereby indicating no active subject and no passive object as well as no beginning nor end. Dashed lines are not vectors—they are two-way streets.

Now, the attentive reader has no doubt noticed that two crucial actants are missing from the diagram above: Kris and Jeff. Their situation, indeed, demands a diagram all its own. (SEE FIG. 36)

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 36 - An inter-affective Map**

The most notable aspect of this illustration is that, unlike the first one in which discrete actants are demarcated by solid lines, Jeff, Kris, and their respective entangled pigs are rendered with dashed
lines. Why? Like Spivak in the line that opened this chapter, I want to suggest that there is no hard and fast outline of the body as such. As Karan Barad writes,

> At first glance, the outside boundary of the body may seem evident, indeed incontrovertible. A coffee mug ends at its outside surface just as surely as people end at their skins. On the face of it, reliance on visual cues seems to constitute a solid empirical approach, but are faces and solids really what they seem? … \[I\]t has become increasingly clear that the seemingly self-evidentiary nature of bodily boundaries, including their seeming visual self-evidence, is a repetition of (culturally and historically) specific bodily performance."\(^{50}\)

She goes on to write:

> Physics tells us that edges or boundaries are not determinate either ontologically or visually. […] It is a well-documented fact of physical optics that if one looks closely at an “edge,” what one sees is not a sharp boundary between light and dark but rather a series of light and dark bands—that is, a diffraction pattern.\(^{51}\)

> My aim in using a dashed line is to suggest to the naked eye what is an *invisible* reality about the nature of bodies: that they are not discrete, bounded, or as integral as they seem, that at a microscopic, particle level, all bodies are coalescing and sharing in one another. The dashed line also represents the body in precisely the same manner as I’ve represented affect, as that which is said to be indeterminate, indefinable, free-flowing, that which penetrates boundaries.

This last diagram, however, does have some solid lines for which we must account. Located on the left side of the diagram are Kris (bottom) and Jeff (top), and extending from each of them is a solid, unidirectional line running to the right to their respective pigs. This line is meant to convey the direct, physical transposition of the worm from the human bodies to those of the swine. The dashed lines throughout, however, represent the affective relationship among the actants. For instance, what affects Kris affects her pig counterpart, just as that which affects the pig affects her: thus the arrows on both ends of the line. Situated in the center is The Sampler, solidly lined. This is meant to show that he, as a voyeur and not a participant *per se*, is not subject to the same intersubjective anomalies as are the other characters in the film. That is, of course, until the moment he is seen by Kris, whereupon he becomes a visible (and vulnerable) object embedded in the film’s network of actants. Up until this point, though, The Sampler

\(^{50}\) Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 155.

\(^{51}\) Ibid., 156.
did exert some level of direct control (action, agency) over the pigs as their caretaker (and as their
murderer). I’ve therefore used solid, diagonal lines to mark this relationship. Diagonal lines also extend
from The Sampler to Kris and Jeff on the left side of the diagram, but here they are dashed. This is
because The Sampler has a “window” onto these characters but he does not possess any sovereignty over
them. And in that until the very end of the film they cannot see him, these lines’ arrows point in only one
direction. Kris, Jeff, and the pigs to which they are bound are not movers: they are the moved.

To Learn Better to Listen

How does one convey in cinematic fashion that which acts upon us, that which is felt, but that
cannot be seen? Forces such as these are, to borrow Einstein’s phrasing, “spooky” precisely because they
resist our epistemological grasp, because they disobey the observable laws of physics that dictate how
discrete entities are supposed to interact. Sound, as I’ve argued throughout this dissertation, has a special
kinship with that which escapes our ability to reckon with it.

In perhaps more literal a fashion than any other film heretofore considered in this dissertation,
Upstream Color renders seemingly impossible yet physically factual “superluminal” connections across
space, time, and bodies, as a function of sound and hearing only to then transfigure these interactions into
visible form. Indeed, this is the very culmination of the film’s narrative conflict. The movie’s central
mystery, which is handled so obliquely and in such a fragmented manner, is ultimately resolved only
when invisible forces and the most vaguely felt of affects are made concrete and rendered in the form of
that most cinematic of tropes: the Western duel, the face-to-face confrontation, the wordless meeting of
gazes. (SEE, AGAIN, FIGS. 29–30) And like any great cinematic duel, one shall live and one shall die.
The latter, in this case, is the one who took a microphone to a gunfight.

In closing, let me say that Upstream Color, despite being preposterous to the point that it would
border on comical if not for the sincerity with which it is presented, offers us something quite profound,
even if one finds herself unmoved by its story. What if those aspects of life that would most seem to
indicate the existence of the soul, the spirit, or powers higher—love, déjà vu, a feeling of connectedness
to one’s fellow man and/or to nature as a whole—in fact had a material basis? Perhaps, then, the value of a film like *Upstream Color* is that it so stubbornly insists that ours is a profoundly interconnected world and that we tend not to register it precisely because these connections exceed or outstrip our ability to see them. Maybe, then, the best way to attend to them is not to augment our vision but to learn better to listen.
CONCLUSION

“Sound must itself become an image.”\(^1\) —Gilles Deleuze

Throughout this dissertation, I’ve turned to films in which either sound or what I’ve termed soundful relations are, in Nietzsche’s terms, “transfigured” into visual form, or, in Deleuze’s, “rendered visible.” I’d like to close by considering the opposite and far rarer procedure: rendering audible that which is not itself audible. One of the objects I analyzed in Chapter 1, Alvin Lucier’s *I Am Sitting in a Room*, did something along these lines. As the reader will recall, Lucier, in both the album version of the piece and in his numerous liver performances of it, recorded himself speaking and then played the tape back into the room while recording *that* playback. Dozens of times he repeated the process so as to make the space’s natural resonant frequencies gradually “reinforce themselves,” thereby replacing his intelligible utterances with the normally inaudible vibrations of the room itself. This experiment with mechanical reproduction, repetition, and acoustics was rendered, however, at least in the LP release, entirely in and through the domain of sound—which is why I turn now to a more recent example of sound “extraction” that achieves the same end, making the inaudible audible, via audiovisual means: the “visual microphone” developed at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Researchers in the field sometimes called “visual acoustics” conducted studies utilizing ultra-high frame rate cameras to record video—and not audio—of objects such as a potato chip bag as a nearby loudspeaker plays audio of recorded speech or music. The frame rates typically used in most consumer and professional-grade video formats range between 24–30 frames per second (fps), as these rates are adequate to achieve the desired “motion effect” in which one sees not a succession of discrete images during playback but rather a continuously moving image thanks to the slight blur produced between

\(^1\) Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 278.
frames. The MIT researchers, however, utilized frame rates ranging between 2200 and 20,000 for their experiments. While these rates are hardly suitable for commercial filmmaking, they are quite helpful in laboratory settings for detecting minute movements that would normally be invisible to the human eye. In this case, researchers were able to see the tiny vibrations caused by the sound from the loudspeaker on the surface of the objects they placed before the camera. They then “decomposed” and processed the images in such a way that they were able to detect visual patterns of vibration within the images and then “partially recover” the sound that caused them, “extracting” sound, in essence, from a soundless image:

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thus, the “visual microphone” of their title.\(^3\) (SEE FIGS. 37–38) It should be emphasized, though, that, as the researchers describe it, the camera does not function like a microphone—\textit{the object itself does}, be it a candy bar wrapper, a chip bag, a box of tissues, or what have you. To put it in the terms of classical film theory, the MIT researchers were able to use the indexical trace of the heretofore invisible vibrations found in the image to reverse engineer the sound that produced them, to make, in other words, a silent image sound.

In this way, the visual microphone would seem to do precisely what the films I’ve examined in this study do—render sound visible via its affection of a body of some sort—, only in reverse. That is, the visual microphone moves from the realm of vision into the realm of hearing, to “find” the sound that caused the object in the image to quiver. Robin James astutely notes, however, that there is a third level in addition to image and sound at work here, and that is data. In the YouTube video the MIT researchers produced to promote their findings, the final “proof” of their success in extracting sound from a soundless image is not that the extracted sounds sound like a slightly nosier version of the original played during the experiment; no, the final test for the experimenters is not that the sound they’ve extracted is “recognizable” to a human subject but rather to a computer, more specifically, to the mobile app Shazam, which uses a smartphone’s microphone to “listen” to music so as to “identify” the song playing.\(^4\) “The visual microphone certainly ‘recovers sounds from objects,’” says James,

but it doesn’t necessarily or even primarily \textit{listen} to them, at least in the traditional sense of listening as attention to patterns of pressure generated by vibrating bodies. Instead of treating sound as vibration, sound is a data stream that can be variously processed and crunched, either by Shazaam [sic] or by some algorithm designed to infer the material properties of whatever recorded object they’re studying. The data is processed in ways that abstractly resemble sound’s material properties, but which are removed from sonic materiality.\(^5\)

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\(^5\) Robin James, “From ‘Video Phone’ to the Visual Microphone: Sound and the Ambivalent Politics of Feminist New Materialism” (paper presented at a colloquium at McIntire Department of Music at the University of Virginia, November 21, 2014). https://docs.google.com/document/d/1C5kWsdd5NKhNB_crrJH4_r-floAm3vDvy-G5ngtfQ94/edit.
Sound is not something to be heard in the context of the visual microphone, for it arrives already “translated” or “transduced.” James goes on to say that the Visual Microphone serves as an emblem of what she sees as a problem within new materialist philosophy generally and in feminist strands of it promulgated by Jane Bennett and Elizabeth Grosz particularly. She writes, “If new materialist ontology can be embodied by things that don’t actually vibrate, if it can work in absence of material vibration, is ‘vibration’ itself just a metaphor for something like ‘life’ or ‘health’ as dynamic”?

James describes the sound processed and studied in the Visual Microphone experiments as “non-resonant sound,” which is, of course, an oxymoron. A non-resonant sound is no sound at all.

James’ critique suggests the difficulty I’ve faced in this dissertation of striking a delicate balance between sound as an audible, sensible phenomenon and sound as a conceptual frame or theoretical “lens.” Throughout the dissertation, I’ve strived to take sound as a formal element within films that we (and the characters onscreen) quite literally hear. (SEE FIGS 39–42) Take my discussion of *Upstream Color* in Chapter 4 for instance. Carruth’s film depends entirely on sonic materiality: the re-creation of sounds by sliding rocks on a pipe, the quest for a noise’s source, the touching of a utility pole so as to feel the energy course within it. What’s more, sound makes literal the figurative “bond” of romantic love: as Jeff says, he’s married to Kris even though no matrimonial ceremony has been performed. Indeed, sound is what binds the entire network of the film.

Similarly, in *Her*, which was the central object of analysis in Chapter 1, sound operates on both levels, literal and metaphorical, simultaneously. Familiar to any actor is the maxim “acting is listening,” and if this is indeed the case, then Joaquin Phoenix’s performance in *Her* is a masterclass. He occupies nearly every shot of the film, and more often than not, his scene partner is not physically in the room with him. There are no eyes for him to gaze into, no body language to read, no touch to convey his affection. The vast majority of the film is comprised of Theodore speaking and listening, most often with his head hung downward, staring at nothing in particular. (SEE FIG. 39) Yet sound is also the means, indeed the

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6 James, “From ‘Video Phone’ to the Visual Microphone,”
only means, by which the film conveys Samantha’s purported materialization (“I can feel my body,” she says between pants). There, in what I’ve termed, following Amy Herzog, a “soundful moment,” the image is evacuated for more than a minute, and there in the dark, our couple, metaphorically speaking, incorporate. They achieve their impossible physical encounter solely via sound and listening.
The blackout in *Her* thus serves as an example of what I describe in Chapter 2 as a “transfiguration” (Nietzsche), a change of form that happens at both the level of the film and the level of human bodies. The abrupt deviation from conventional cinematic form announces or anticipates the highly unusual affective change of state that is to come between the two lovers. Central to Chapter 2 was a claim for the malleability and pliability of film form and bodily form, which I developed through the use of Nicole Brenez’s “figural” method of criticism that treats both cinematic form and material bodies as equally plastic figures, as clay to be molded over and over again. I concluded that chapter with a (trans)figural analysis of the films of Lynne Ramsay, which in ways that have been largely missed by
critics, feature repeating aesthetic elements that do not cohere into a meaningful pattern à la a motif or auteurist signature. Instead, Ramsay tends to completely invert their significations within individual films and even across texts. Water, as I demonstrated, is one such figure, which Ramsay on the one hand uses to connote familial warmth, respite, cleanliness, and health, while on the other hand, she alternatively deploys it to suggest death, carnage, and an omnipresent, ineludible melancholy. There is no better example of these processes of inversion and revision than in the scene in *We Need to Talk about Kevin* in which Eva’s face morphs under the water into that of her monstrous son as the two alternate roles of victim and victimizer. Rather than a sonorous, comforting womb, water becomes the site of a disturbing, if imagined, confrontation between mother and child.

Indeed, a thread ran throughout the dissertation that sought to complicate the forced alliance between sound, water, and the feminine in philosophy and critical theory by locating instances within my selected films that expose the flipside of that coin. In addition to the sink drowning scene in Ramsay’s film, we see something similar in *Upstream Color*, where Kris is compelled for reasons she can’t explain to dive for river rocks that she tosses into the bottom of an indoor swimming pool. We only later learn the nature of this strange behavior: she is searching for the piglets that she believes to be her own offspring and that have been drowned in the stream at the hands of The Sampler. Each time Kris dives to the bottom of the pool and returns with a rock, she is in effect undertaking a grieving ritual, symbolically, and futilely, pulling her dead children from the stream.

Along similar lines but in a vastly different film, I also attempted to chip away at some of the normative aspects of Terrence Malick’s *The Tree of Life* in Chapter 3. The consensus critical reception of the film was that it exhibits a fairly orthodox Judeo-Christian worldview in its tale of white, heteronormative nuclear family in small-town 1950s Texas, complete with idyllic, Edenic shots of trees and grass and the Oedipal longings of a pre-teen boy. Though I concur with many commentators about these hoary aspects of *The Tree of Life*, I conduct a somewhat perverse reading that suggests that beyond the surface iconography and familiar tropes is a much more philosophically rich film. I argued that *The Tree of Life* operates according to a logic of doubling and coalescence that enacts at an aesthetic level a
mode of elations consistent with both Jean-Luc Nancy’s ethics of listening, which describes the self as existing both in and outside one’s body, and the neurophenomenological accounts of heautoscopy, a particular form of autoscopic phenomena wherein one’s self is said to oscillate between two positions in space. This doubling is made visible, I argued, in the film’s highly mobile camera, which tends to veer away from the primary action of a scene without narrative motivation to examine in close-up the textural details of Jack’s boyhood home. This would suggest, I argued, not a third-person point of view but a subjective one, one, indeed, that moves about diegetic space as if it “belonged” to the adult protagonist as he revisits his childhood environs. Yet, paradoxically, his adolescent self is most frequently the object of that implied vision, which would indicate not one but two protagonists. This self-seeing is made manifest in the final scene of the film, when nearly every major character is seen in doubled form, often wearing different hair styles or clothing and even occupying the same frame simultaneously. Furthermore, this curious interaction between selves, in fact, was evident throughout The Tree of Life in its voiceovers as well, which indicates the degree to which the entire film is suffused with the soundful.

The overarching question this study pondered was this: how might we listen to images, or differently, how might an attentiveness to sound as both a formal element of cinematic expression and as a conceptual framework offer new ways to think about cinematic and bodily form? More often than not, in the films considered herein, conspicuous deviations from conventional sound-image relations heralded brief moments in which onscreen bodies underwent some sort of transformation: they doubled (The Tree of Life), they coalesced (Her), they impossibly alternated position with others (We Need to Talk about Kevin, The Tree of Life), they were affected from a vast distance by other bodies (Upstream Color). I’ve argued throughout this study that in these moments, soundful affection is made visible as it plays out at the level of the human body.

The aesthetic analyses I conducted in this dissertation are informed by various philosophies of sound and diverse theories of the relationship between sound and image, but what unites them all is a strong affinity between body, sound, and affect. Deleuze, the reader will recall from Chapter 1, develops his theory of bodily sensation with recourse to acoustic terminology such as resonance, wave, amplitude,
and vibration, and for him and Guattari, sensation carries with it the power to “de-form” the body, to “de-subjectivize” the subject. Similarly, for Nancy, listening “resolve[s] [the body] into vibrations that both return to itself and place it outside itself.” Drawing from Aristotle, he argues that sound is a sensual realm of methexis, contagion, and participation between bodies. For Nietzsche, the visual arts are redeemed only when they give visible form to music, that invisible Dionysian flux that breaks down bodily barriers and restores humankind to its primordial unity. Steven Connor suggests something similar when he describes the “wild phenomenology of sound” that precipitates a “mutative commixture” of bodies and matter.

All of these theories, of course, are abstract and based in speculative frameworks rather than in observable phenomena. This is where quantum physics and neuroscience become especially helpful. As the study of atoms and photons, quantum physics seeks to understand the mechanics of matter that happen invisibly, imperceptibly around us all the time that would nonetheless seem utterly impossible. It boggled the mind of Einstein, for instance, that affecting a particle in one location could immediately affect another one despite the two particles not being in physical contact (“action at a distance” or “non-locality”). Neuroscience, at least the subsection of it I’ve pursued here, likewise investigates that which would seem impossible and that cannot be observed: that our bodies could be doubled, that we could be in two locations at once—or that we could sense ourselves in such arrangements. In ways related to but quite distinct from the philosophers I draw from in this study, the phenomenology of autoscopic phenomena gives us a language that derives from lived experience to describe non-typical (but not exclusively or even predominantly pathological) modes of self-relation. As Oliver Sacks suggests, these hallucinatory

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7 Deleuze, Francis Bacon, 40.
8 Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, 160.
9 Nancy, Listening, 8–10.
10 Connor, “Sounding Out Film,”
perceptions are far more common than we think, and people fail to report them only out of the stigma associated with an “unsound” mind.\footnote{Oliver Sacks, *Hallucinations*, 72.}

The films I’ve taken up in this dissertation are philosophically valuable in that they, like quantum mechanics and neuroscience, help us to reckon with the seemingly impossible, invisible interactions of our bodies and those of others, defined broadly. They help us to see these invisible (but not at all imperceptible) affections manifest themselves as changes in form—in both the bodily and cinematic senses of the word. In other words, they reveal to us virtual possibilities of the body and of the self that can scarcely be thought otherwise but that can potentially be actualized in “real life.” As my title suggests, bodies—real, material ones as well as cinematic ones—sometimes take leave of their corporeal moorings and dissipate or scatter out in all directions only to subsequently congeal into new forms or fuse with other bodies into new amalgams. These changes in form are achieved only through the reception of invisible forces—*affects*—that act upon the body. I am reminded of that abiding question of Deleuze and Guattari’s. Paraphrasing Spinoza, they ask, “What can a body do?” For them, this is an unanswerable question, for the body’s horizons are not defined in advance but rather increase or diminish as it is affected from without. However, the films under consideration here, in showcasing seemingly impossible interactions, transformations, and incorporations among bodies and subjects would seem to issue a partial rejoinder to Deleuze and Guattari. What can a body do? These films answer: this, this, this, this, this, this…
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