

cinophile

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CINEPHILE

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Contributors

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Presently, he is working on a book chapter for an edited volume on Daniel Craig’s James Bond, discussing a critical analysis of queer masculine performances in the contemporary James Bond movies as well as on several entries for an LGBTQIA Encyclopedia on American Films edited by Erica Dymond. He is also writing his book proposal laying out a new framework on the “Dandy Effect.”

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Austin Svedjan is a doctoral student in the Department of English at Louisiana State University, where he studies queer theory and 20/21st century cultural production. His work appears or is forthcoming in *The Southern Quarterly*, *South Atlantic Review*, and *ASAP/J*. He is currently at work on a long-form project concerning voyeurism, sexual fantasy, and antisociality.

Aaron Tucker is the author of two film studies monographs, *Interfacing with the Internet* and *Virtual Weaponry* (both with Palgrave Macmillan) as well as a novel and two books of poetry; his most recent scholarly work analyzes facial recognition software. He is currently a Ph.D. candidate in the Cinema and Media Studies Department at York University (Toronto, Canada) where he is an Elia Scholar, a VISTA Doctoral Scholar, and 2020 recipient of the Joseph-Armand Bombardier Doctoral Scholarship.

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Steven Shaviro is the DeRoy Professor of English at Wayne State University. He is the author of *Postcinematic Affect* (2010), *Digital Music Videos* (2017), and other writings about film, video, and science fiction.

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Letter from the Editors

Dear readers,

Just before Vancouver went into lockdown last year, we conceived this issue from our shared interests. Bodies and screens: how are bodies shown on screen? what kinds of bodies is the screen? what exchanges occur between the screen and the body? This was meant to take part in the long history of work on bodies and screens in cinema and media scholarship, but it took on new meaning during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. For those who could work from home, living space and working space became indistinguishable. The screens of our laptops and cellphones became, even more than before, points of social contact—even contact with the world full stop. For many others, however, work could not be done remotely. That point of contact with the world was maintained by delivery drivers, factory workers, and service employees who were put in disproportionate danger by our local and federal governments.

Less drastically, movie theatres closed and streaming reigned. One kind of cinematic body—public, bigger than life—was replaced by another—private, small and buffering. The same screens we used for work we used to relax and socialize, often through the Zoom tile. Our homes became an extension of our bodies because our backgrounds became an image on others' screens and thus an extension of ourselves, seen. As some places begin to relax pandemic restrictions, how these viewing and living configurations will or will not change remains to be seen.

In this issue, we collected a range of writing on the body and the screen, a configuration with infinite potential. For some of our authors, this relation is between specific bodies and media forms. Writing on Ali Wong's standup comedy special *Baby Cobra*, Amila Li shows how Wong's presence, as a pregnant Asian woman, disrupts anti-Asian racist stereotypes. Dany Jacob explores Leonardo DiCaprio's performance and memeification as Jay Gatsby to question the place of the modern *flâneur* and their relation to white masculinity. Haley Rose Malouin, looking at Tod Browning's feature film *Freaks*, offers a reading of the film and its bodies as rhizomatic assemblages. Turning to TV, Kim Wilkins

writes on *Babylon Berlin's* Lotte and how her body is overworked in terms of femininity, prestige TV, and as an allegory for a changing Berlin. Lastly in this loose category, but not least, Steven Shaviro writes on Moses Sumney's music video "Virile," and its challenge to fixed understandings of gender and race. Two of our authors take a more media-specific approach, writing on the limits and potentials of specific technologies. Aaron Tucker carefully outlines the widespread and invasive use of facial recognition technologies and their problematic data biases, while Simona Schneider offers what she terms 'proxy poetics' in considering Ali Cherri's installation piece "My Pain is Real" and the artist's position relative to an ongoing, America-led global war. Finally, Austin Svedjan's essay is something different. Reading Luchino Visconti's *Death in Venice* with Xavier Dolan's *Heartbeats*, Svedjan offers a theory on the look as an erotic, bodily exchange—one that should not be reduced to less than touch. We hope it might be a guide for you in future film viewings as well as in relation to this issue and life.

The value of this subject, the screen and the body, only became more apparent over this past year of production. This issue couldn't have been possible without the many people that helped give it a body: our editorial team scattered over two countries, our authors around the globe, and our patient and generous illustrator Quinn Rockliff, in Toronto. Thanks, as well, to our department's administrators and our *Cinephile* supervisor, Dr. Christine Evans. Thanks, finally, to all the editors who came before us, especially Jemma Dash for fielding questions long before we even took over as editors. We selected papers not only for a range of bodies and screens but also for what we loved. This love and care became a guiding principle for this issue. We hope some finds its way back to you.

Sincerely,

Harrison Wade & Kate Wise
Editors-in-Chief, 2020-2021



This issue of *Cinephile* is dedicated to the memory of Brock Poulin.

Brock Poulin, the inaugural editor of *Cinephile*, has passed away. All *Cinephile* staff, past and present, mourn this huge loss of a wonderful and talented colleague. Brock was a vibrant, genuine, and wholly unpretentious scholar, critic, and journalist whose passion for cinema inspired everyone he met. His wit, talent for sparkling wordplay, and propensity to spontaneously burst into song will always be fondly remembered by the people who were lucky enough to know him.

Brock held an MA in Film Studies from the University of British Columbia (2005), an MA in Journalism from Ryerson University (2002), and a BA in Film Studies from the University of Regina (2000). After graduation he lived in Korea for several years teaching English, and taught international students at St. George International College in Vancouver from 2013 until his death.

As *Cinephile's* first editor, he was responsible for naming the journal (although it was titled *UBCinephile* for its first two volumes), assembling its first editorial board, and starting its trajectory and building its philosophy. He also served in an advisory capacity for the journal for several years after his graduation. Simply put, there would be no *Cinephile* without Brock, as his original vision for the journal has carried over through the years, passed from editor to editor.

Some of Brock's friends have created a memorial scholarship in his name to support students from Yorkton Regional High School in Saskatchewan, including students intending to start a career or pursue further study in the arts, students from the school's Rainbow Club, or students entering a care profession. They are also accepting donations for Heads Up Guys, a mental health initiative through UBC that focuses on the wellbeing of our male friends, brothers, coworkers, partners, and family members.

Thank you, Brock. We'll miss you.

Steven Shaviro

Moses Sumney insists that love is not the answer; and he's not too keen on traditional formations of masculinity. He seeks through his music both to redefine gender roles and also to question the all-too-often-taken-for-granted social norm of the romantic couple. The latter, even more than the former, is unusual in a popular music context, since so much of that music is focused on love, sex, and romance. In his early releases – the EP *Lamentations* (2016), and the full-length album *Aromanticism* (2017) – Sumney rejects the clichés about love that are so prevalent both in pop music and in American culture more generally. Sumney notes in an interview that romance “can’t be separated from a patriarchal structure” that dominates and restricts our lives in so many respects. Indeed, “someone can love you and still be oppressing you, still not listen to your voice” (Cliff 2017). In these early works, Sumney both mourns, and yet finds comfort and strength in, a fundamental condition of existential loneliness.

Sumney continues and expands his gender-revisionist project in his second full-length album, *grae* (2020). The album’s title is homonymous with the achromatic color “gray,” which is both the absence of color and the result of mixing together all colors. Sumney seeks to explore an “in-between” space for himself (“Neither/Nor”), which has no single definition, and cannot be contained within our society’s “edifice of boxes to put people in” (“boxes”), but where his “inherent multiplicity” (“also also also and and and”) can flourish. This means that Sumney, much like the Black radical theorist and poet Fred Moten, asks us to “consent not to be a single being” (Moten 2017).

Sumney’s musical style, like his persona, is intrinsically difficult to categorize. His sound is sufficiently idiosyncratic that it is not likely to be confused with anyone else’s. But for that very reason, it cannot easily be slotted into any particular musical genre. Simply because he is Black, Sumney’s music has often been characterized as a sort of r&b. But this is one attribution that he summarily rejects, saying that “it’s very obviously racist when people call me an r&b act” (Pearce 2020). In positive terms, Sumney’s songs range from the bare minimalism of “Worth It” (where his falsetto voice is set against nothing more than finger snaps and

The Virility Fades: Moses Sumney's "Virile"

hand claps), through the folkie riffs of “Polly” (with its backing of solo acoustic guitar, occasionally supplemented by long-held synthesizer notes), all the way to the multi-instrumental, heavy rave-up of “Virile.” Sumney’s melodies tend to avoid strong profiles; instead, they have a floating, unresolved feel. Sumney’s voice, often multitracked and nearly always mixed upfront, is the most distinctive feature of his music. Sumney slips easily back and forth between his rich, modal vocal register and a quivering, vibrant falsetto. His words are always clear, but he also often draws them out in ways that could not happen in ordinary speech. The intonations of Sumney’s voice express both yearning and resolution.

Sumney’s music always has an intense corporeal focus, despite his heavy use of synthesizers and filters. Some electronic dance music sounds and feels disembodied, as if it were made for robots; but this is never the case with Sumney’s songs. A lot of the music’s densely physical feel is due to the power and weight of Sumney’s voice. In both its modal and falsetto registers, and despite being so heavily processed electronically, Sumney’s vocalizations never float free, but always remind us of their embedded origin in the chest, larynx, and lungs. TERFs (trans-exclusionary radical feminists) and other bigots often blather on about supposedly fixed biological categories. But Sumney knows that doubts, hesitations, and fluctuations of identity are themselves most powerfully manifested and played out in the flesh.

In addition to his albums, Sumney has released a number of extraordinary music videos. And his self-presentation, in live performance as well as in videos, is a pointedly expressive one. He usually wears loose, all-black clothing; this sartorial style, together with his falsetto voice, suggests a flowing smoothness far from the hardbodied masculine norm. His body is strong and impressively muscled, but also relaxed and graceful. It suggests an openness to touch and to affection, rather than any sort of self-enclosed masculine mastery. Thanks to his videos, as well as to his form of self-presentation, Sumney must be regarded as a fully audiovisual artist, rather than just a strictly musical one.

Sumney made lyric videos, with various collaborators, for nearly all of the songs on *grae*. These videos are usually fairly minimal in set-up. They invoke a low-fi aesthetic, recalling the look and feel of 1980s VHS tape. For instance, in the video for “Polly” Sumney simply sits in his room, staring at the camera, listening to the music without lip-syncing. The lyrics scroll by at the bottom of the screen, speaking of a polyamorous lover whose split affections make Sumney feel belittled and undervalued. Behind Sumney, we see two guitars hung on the wall to the left of the frame, and a piano on the right. Sunlight also streams in through a window way in the back left. Sumney simply sits there and softly cries for most of the video. Tears stream down his face, and his mouth occasionally convulses in sobs. But all these reactions are fairly restrained, as if Sumney were willfully holding himself back. Several times, he wipes his hands over his face, and back through his hair. At one

point, he momentarily breaks into a winning smile. But by the end of the video, he is crying again. Throughout, Sumney continues to stare at the camera, never breaking eye contact. This music demands intimacy, even when it proclaims distance and solitude.

Alongside these low-fi lyric videos, Sumney has also made a number of full-fledged music videos, with higher production values and more intricate scenarios. To date, these have all been directed either by Allie Avital or by Sumney himself (in one case, “Quarrel,” they are both listed as co-directors). I have written elsewhere about Avital’s videos for “Worth It” (Shaviro 2019) and for “Me in 20 Years” (Shaviro 2021). Here I would like to focus on Sumney’s self-directed video for “Virile” (2019), the first song from *grae* to be released. This song overtly rejects the mainstream social conception of masculinity: “You wanna slip right in/ Amp up the masculine/ You’ve got the wrong idea, son.”

Sumney has said that the “Virile” video “takes place in a post-human world; the last remaining man is caught between Beauty and Brutality’s battle to dominate the earth and his body” (Aku 2019). The overall *look* of the video isn’t as science-fictional as this description might imply; but it is definitely strange and alienating, with its outdoor sequences in a barren landscape, and its indoor ones in the oddly lit decor of what seems to be a meat locker. “Virile” is mostly a dance video, with the dancing choreographed by Sumney in collaboration with Chris Emile, whose work is also concerned with redefining the Black male body (Emile 2021).





The opening shot shows Sumney lying on the ground, amidst dried grass. His shirt is open, and his chest exposed. The camera is way up in the sky, and the sound is indeterminate ambient noise; then the camera lowers itself, moving in on Sumney. The song proper begins with Sumney's a cappella voice, crying out wordlessly: "Ah, ah, ah, ah, ah, ah, ah..." Then we hear a series of shimmering runs on the harp. The video cuts to a new indoor location, the meat locker, just as a piano joins the harp, and Sumney starts singing the first verse of the song. In this verse, he comments on his awareness of mortality, which makes "virile" masculine postures ridiculous: "none/ Of this matters/ 'Cause I will return/ To dust and matter."

The lighting in the meat locker is bluish and indirect; it mostly seems to come from way back. Fumes of dry ice swirl around, close to the floor. Enormous slabs of dead meat hang from hooks. Some of the meat slabs are entirely still, while others cross the space, suspended on horizontal poles that slide back and forth. Sumney enters the scene from in between the moving slabs, also hanging down from a horizontal bar; with his hands gripping a small trapeze. Soon, he lets go of the bar, and jumps to the floor. His chest and torso are bare; below them he wears loose, flared black pants. His dark skin glistens, and his muscles stand out in clear definition.

The sound thickens as the song proceeds. Flutes screech, and vigorous treble percussive rhythms cut across the melody and the singing. In the pre-chorus,

guitar and drums join in, and Sumney's voice battles to stand out against the wall of sound, as he belts out some of his most sarcastic lines: "Cheers to the patriarchs/ And the marble arch." When the song reaches the chorus, the mix gets even denser, with harsh skittering beats and bombastic emphasis at the beginning of each bar. This is where Sumney most overtly states his scorn for normative ideals of masculinity and virility. He is almost screaming, drawing out syllables as his voice fluctuates back and forth between modal and falsetto registers.

As we hear all this, Sumney engages in a furious dance. The camera moves forward towards him, and then pulls back again. For the most part, it remains far enough away to show either his whole body, or his body from the waist up. Sumney's dance adopts a start-and-stop rhythm. At times his body ripples and flows, while at other times it freezes momentarily into tight, contorted poses. Occasionally, his back is to the camera; we see his shoulder muscles vibrating with tension, in a way that is reminiscent of Martha Nichols in Sumney's earlier video for "Worth It." All in all, it seems as if Sumney were both trying to free some energy trapped inside him, and yet also trying to bottle that energy up and prevent it from escaping. Everything is taut and tensely wound up. It is as if Sumney were taking the patriarchal, virile postures that he has been socially conditioned to adopt, and shaking them out, and twisting them into harsh and bizarre shapes, in order to exorcise them once and for all.

When the song reaches the second verse – in which Sumney sarcastically sings, “To stake dominion over all that one surveys/ Is the virile, viral way” – the video moves into another room. This room is reddish in tone, and it is set up like a religious chapel. There are rows of pews on both sides of a central aisle that leads to a kind of altar. Candles are burning on the altar, and to both sides of it there are giant slabs of meat hanging. Is this a site for the worship of meat-eating and masculine violence? The camera moves down the aisle towards the altar, as Sumney writhes in front of it. His motions are a bit less frantic than before; he almost seems to be doing some sort of exercise routine, alternately stretching his arms up high and having them touch fixed points on his shoulders and face. As the song moves to the intensified beat of the second pre-chorus, Sumney writhes and gesticulates before the altar, in a parody of prayer.

Then the camera moves back and away from the altar. This is followed by a sudden cut to a metallic wall lit in cool blue, against which Sumney is now dancing. We get extremely brief jump cuts back to the red room, though mostly we see Sumney writhing against the wall in blue. These violent disjunctions of the image correspond to the musical ferocity of the second chorus, with its raving power chords and heavy percussion.

Finally we get a shot of the entire blue room. It contains still more giant slabs of meat. Some of the slabs are hanging from hooks as before, while one slab lies on a long work table, as if it has been prepared for dissection. As the chorus continues – grimly warn-

ing us that “too much is not enough” – Sumney skips across the room in a boxer’s pose. His fists are nearly clenched, as if he is going to punch out the meat, and he skips backwards across the room, almost like Muhammad Ali when he would “float like a butterfly.” But then – after a shot that pans across the ceiling of the blue room – Sumney crouches before one of the slabs of meat, seeming to caress it. When he pulls himself back upright, his right hand arm, all the way up to the elbow, is covered with some blue, glittery substance. As the chorus continues, we are reminded that “you pick your own prison.”

The camera backs out of the room, and as it does so, the room lighting changes from blue back to red (recalling the light of the “chapel”). The room has no door, but it is separated from the rest of the space by hanging plastic strips (such as are often used at the edge of a refrigerated area). The camera, looking through these strips, shows us Sumney in silhouette, dancing just behind the strips, still in the (now red) room. Sumney’s dancing is considerably gentler and more fluid than it was before; he waves his arms upward in alternation. All this takes place during the song’s bridge, with a somewhat gentler sound than the chorus. The lyrics are once again sarcastic, with their accusation against masculine imperialism: “You want dominion to make minions of the stars,/ Made up of what you are...” The word “are” is repeated many times, as if Sumney were testing it out on his tongue. The instrumentals are still quite thick and loud, but now they play in unison with Sumney’s voice.



While the stream of “are’s continues, the video cuts from the meat locker to a long shot in which the camera rapidly moves over a landscape, mostly dry grass with a sparse scattering of trees. The instruments suddenly drop out, so that for a moment we just hear Sumney’s voice once more reciting wordless “ah’s. The video cuts to an extreme closeup of meat, with ladybugs crawling over it. This is slightly reminiscent of the closeup of maggots on meat in Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* (1926, though ladybugs are far less disgusting than maggots). Then full instrumentation resumes, for the last reprise of the chorus; and we cut back to the outdoors. We see Sumney running along a path; from high up in the sky, we see that the path on which he runs is really a closed loop. Then the camera, from somewhat closer in, and closer to ground level, circles around Sumney as he dances in place. The sky behind him is filled with an ominous, spiraling swarm of insects or birds (it is hard to tell which; evidently this is a CGI construct).

There are a number of quick jump cuts as Sumney dances ever more energetically, waving his arms towards the sky, and with an expression of ecstasy. At the same time, the swarm fills more and more of the sky. Just as the singing ends, and the music fades out, we cut to a shot of Sumney lying on the ground, panting heavily as if exhausted. In the absence of music, his breaths are quite loud on the soundtrack. An enormous mass of ladybugs (like the ones on the meat earlier) crawl all over his face and torso. The camera slowly moves closer and closer to Sumney’s face, with the bugs in disturbing profusion. Finally, the video cuts to black, though the heavy panting continues on the soundtrack for a few more seconds.

The emotional power of the “Virile” music video comes from its accretion of details, both in the music and in the visuals. Though the song is a rave-up, meant to overwhelm, its instrumentation is finely articulated, and continually varies over the four minutes or so of the song. At times, staccato beats and ferocious treble riffs cut across the melody, while at other times the instrumentation closely follows it. Meanwhile, Sumney’s singing repeatedly shifts its register, as its mood varies between longing, anger and sarcasm, and resignation. Throughout the swirl of the music, our attention always comes back to Sumney’s singing, which is to say his embodied breathing.

Visually, the “Virile” music video is stylized in ways that open up the message of the lyrics, but without literalizing them, or forming them into a narrative. The subdued lighting of the meat locker, alternately

reddish and bluish, sets off, in contrast, the sheen of Sumney’s dark skin. (It’s only recently that cinematographers have learned to overcome the built-in white bias of the cinematic apparatus, in order to light black peoples’ skin properly – Latif 2017). Sumney’s dancing moves through a variety of gestures and postures; it is highly energetic and dynamic, as it both enacts what we might call the character armor of normative masculinity, and pushes to break free of it. If Sumney’s dancing expresses a conflict between Beauty and Brutality, it demonstrates the difficulty – no less than the necessity – of escaping from the latter. The video continually reminds us of death and carnivorous predation: we have taken life from the animals now reduced to slabs of meat, and this violence is very nearly our implicit religion.

We might see Sumney’s dancing, and the video as a whole, as expressing the struggle of life against death – and in particular, against the violent putting-to-death that characterizes hegemonic masculinity and virility. But Sumney also reminds us that life itself is finite. Indeed, this is part of what makes normative masculinity’s pretensions of mastery so absurd. The slabs of meat, no less than the ladybugs and the CGI swarms, remind us how life always gives way to other life. The music video is a living demonstration – as Sumney sings in the chorus – of how “the virility fades,” and how efforts to “amp up the masculine” are futile.

✱

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Austin Svedjan

Speculum Sexualis: Voyeuristic Pessimism, or the Body at a Distance

speculum, n.

1. A surgical instrument of various forms, used for dilating orifices of the body so as to facilitate examination or operations.

2. A mirror or reflector (of glass or metal) used for some scientific purpose. (“speculum”)

We are all, to varying degrees of intensity and devotion, voyeurs. In his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud depicts the maximal outlier of these degrees in the “scopophile,” a sexual subject who, finding “pleasure in looking,” becomes perverse insofar as that looking supplants the “normal sexual aim” (23). However, in contrast to the other inventoried “aberrations” avoiding the genital contact of het-

erosex (mouths, asses, feet), Freud includes scopophilia as a “fixation of the preliminary sexual aim” (21). Voyeurism, then, is not one of many possible misdirections of erotic attention toward other objects of affection, but rather a lingering over a sexual relation’s inciting interest—a relational nonstarter.

Perhaps it is this Freudian scopophile that Luchino Visconti had in mind while directing the

1971 adaptation of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, wherein Dirk Bogarde's Gustav von Aschenbach is best remembered for the resolute gaze he affixes to the object of his—exclusively voyeuristic—longing: the Polish youth Tadzio (Björn Andrésen). Reflected in many of the film's steadily approaching shots of him, Aschenbach's time on-screen is predominantly dedicated to displaying his attentions to Tadzio, who is usually just out of view. From the more circumstantial instances of benign curiosity that decorate the film's onset to the voyeuristic fidelity which eventually comes to monolithically organize Aschenbach's life, we are made to watch his watch, not as a means to identify with Aschenbach but instead to be ever aware of his gaze's propagation. In the film's alternating shots of Aschenbach's voyeuristic desire and the distant Tadzio, Visconti places the film's spectator in the circuit between the two, imbuing every scene with a stifling potential that leaves the possibility of a bodily resolution to Aschenbach's voyeuristic pursuit ever opaque.

However relentless, to both Freud and Visconti, this looking ultimately leads us nowhere relationally. Aschenbach never bridges the haptic gap between Tadzio's body and his; never speaks to him in order to confess, much less confirm, his presumed desires. Indeed, as D. A. Miller has recently reminded us, more appalling than the tenacious distance between Aschenbach and Tadzio for the film's spectator is the "implied permanence of the arrangement. As in some cruel myth, or preemptive *contrapasso*, the two lovers can never touch, never talk...Thus does love come to [Aschenbach], as the eroticization of avoidance." By eroticizing avoidance and, as a friend accuses him of in the film, "keeping distance," the recurrent look cements itself as the gravitational aim of Aschenbach's (non)relation to Tadzio, through which all other peripheral desires may only orbit.

Contrary to the voyeuristic distance of Aschenbach, and recalling my opening maxim, Freud suggests that, outside of perversion, "visual impressions" concurrently exist as "the most frequent pathway along which libidinal excitation is aroused" (22). Thoroughly roused: this look, no longer set at an eroticized distance, would facilitate the tactual union of bodies in relation. Much like Visconti's Aschenbach, the protagonists of Xavier Dolan's 2010 film *Les Amours Imaginaires* also take

pleasure in looking at their mutual object of desire. The camera fastens to the two friends, Francis (Dolan) and Marie (Monia Chokri), as they look upon their aspirational lover Nicholas (Niels Schneider). Though no longer passionately set at a distance, the voyeuristic rivals grow intimately close with Nicholas, seemingly on track toward a sexual relationship indebted to, but noticeably not imbedded in, scopophilic excitement. Similar to the oscillation of "will-they-won't-they" that pervades *Death in Venice*, the central tension of Dolan's film that lends the narrative its kinetic commencement is the question of for whom this relationship, free from threat of premature fixation, will be realized. Like Dolan's protagonists, we are made close readers of the most minute of acts made by Nicholas, hoping to capture the nature and direction of his unknown desire in our crosshairs.

For instance, when our trio takes a trip into the country together, Nicholas insists on teaching Francis the *correct* way to eat a roasted marshmallow (he eats them too fast), as "a marshmallow's like a striptease." Nicholas places the marshmallow, still attached to the stick, on Francis's tongue. Their eyes remain fixed on each other while Nicholas walks Francis through the steps of proper marshmallow consumption. It is a scene, one immediately notices, charged with fellatious eroticism. Much like Francis, our curiosities pique at the possibility of reciprocity offered in this moment, mirrored by the beguiled stare Francis answers Nicholas with. It's these suggestive, yet stubbornly uncertain, gestures that permeate the film, often employing the sensual experience of the character's body as guarantor of the gesture's seductive aim.

While less intense and certainly less devoted than the hyperbolized scopophilia of Aschenbach, the voyeurism of this variety equally facilitates an imagining of its object. Though we are aware that Francis and Marie are fantasizing about being with Nicholas—each of their longing glances read more as an invitation than Aschenbach's one-sided visual interest—Dolan makes this erotic imaginary explicit during a party that Nicholas hosts. Sitting at the far end of the room while their fellow partygoers engage in interactions that may at once be called love, affection, lust, and amity, our pair of voyeurs watch as Nicholas

dances with his mother. The music changes tracks, the ambient light dims, the room only lit by the recurring strobe. Dolan fixates on the eyes of our impassioned fabulists, every recurrent flash of light alternating between Nicholas and the respective voyeur's scene of fantasy: for Marie, Michelangelo's *David*, for Francis, the homoerotic sketches of Jean Cocteau. Similarly, after Nicholas stops returning his calls, Francis frantically buys marshmallows from a convenience store, ardently ripping the bag open and shoving one in his mouth before leaving. Dolan again lets us in on the scene playing out in Francis's imagination, as Francis attempts with palpable desperation to return to the potential relation epitomized by their prior,

Nicholas undermines the formulaically amorous scene with as much comedic as tragic effect: "How could you think I was gay?" Likewise, Marie writes a love poem—rife with all the impassioned cachet the form grants—that goes unanswered. Running into Nicholas sometime later and, forgoing her initial attempts to blame the poem on a mistaken addressee, she asks, "What would you say if, I'd sent the poem to you?" Nicholas, hurrying toward his apartment, answers that he'd "still have something on the stove." Nicholas subverts our voyeurs' expectations of reciprocation or, at the very least, of understanding their affection. Dolan makes clear in these scenes that Francis and Marie's respective fantasies were doomed



bodily, moment together. Francis's lips tighten, the fantasy proving not enough. The film's narrative, a chain of these imaginative scenes seemingly answered by Nicholas, culminates, however, in the moment we and Francis demand, the same moment that Aschenbach eternally forestalls: realization.

When Francis professes his love to Nicholas, we expect that Nicholas will reciprocate. Like Francis himself, we've been trained for the last hour and a half to be an expert interpreter of every gesture, every excitingly long hug, every look that fixates a bit *too much*. After Francis finishes his confession,

from the start. By not being "gay" or not being interested enough to reply to Marie's poem, the relation was inescapably never going to happen. Dolan, after implicating us in the same voyeuristic imaginary as his protagonists, pulls the rug out from our feet, making our anxiety reality: from the onset we had misrecognized our fantasy for truth. But, unlike Aschenbach, these voyeurs actually closed the distance between their bodies and Nicholas's. Rather than eroticize their avoidance they confronted the object of their desire. What, then, has gone wrong here?

“What the voyeur is looking for,” Jacques Lacan argues in his seminar on fundamental psychoanalytic concepts, “is merely a shadow, a shadow behind a curtain. There he will phantasize any magic of presence” (*Seminar XI* 182). Considering that what lies “behind [the] curtain,” continually eludes our total comprehension, fantasizing is the mechanism that facilitates the knowledge of another by glossing over knowledge’s gaps. This may be one of the many avowals Lacan implies in his axiom “There is no sexual relationship” (*Seminar XVII* 116). Indeed no relationship avoids being two shadows miscommunicating from behind their curtains. Consequently, what we, Francis, and Marie perceive when looking at Nicholas is only ever a silhouette refracted by a screen of our own making. Mercédès Baillargeon, in a similar reading of Dolan’s film, notes that “the Self...is always already a fantasized Self, reflected back by a fantasized Other” (181). It is here that we see the definitional singularity of the “speculum” promised by my epigraph emerge: as we peer into the bodies around us, searching for the knowledge of another that we necessitate to concretize our relation with them, we inevitably find only our own idealization reflected back to us. As subjects bound to the borders of our own consciousness, endlessly arbitrated by our imaginary and symbolic interpellations, we are inevitably curbed by what Lauren Berlant has called “the impossibility of getting the account precisely right” (66). Rather than push too hard on this structuring incoherency and thereby confront our own inseparability to nonknowledge, we fantasize over the gaps. Put another way, we colour in—ever-pedantically within the lines—the bodies we bear in relation with a crayon we ourselves have made. Francis and Marie, misrecognizing their fantasies as Nicholas’s reciprocation, collide with the contingency of their own knowledge. We might consider, when a lover touches us, to what does our enjoyment respond? Is it the haptic sensation alone? I would hardly describe the plethora of bodily interactions experienced in a day—the graze against the shoulder of another patron of the café, the brush of knuckles when both reaching for “DOOR CLOSE” on an elevator—as similarly euphoric. We might offer that our enjoyment responds, then, to their intention: I feel pleasure because I believe this person has touched me with

the aim of inducing pleasure. But how do we know this? How do we know they do not merely have an itch, to which the friction of our skin serves as the most immediate remedy? Even if we ask them this and they confirm their purpose, how do we know for sure?

Dolan, as it were, seems to be in on this particular joke. In an early scene, our trio read separately in a bookshop. “This is so beautiful,” Nicholas whispers poignantly before stepping into the frame’s foreground, bridging the distance between the two voyeurs, and quotes Lacan as if reciting Rimbaud: “When, in love, I solicit a look, what is profoundly unsatisfying and always missing is that—*You never look at me from the place from which I see you*” (*Seminar XI* 103). What is foundationally unsatisfying is precisely the reciprocation that Francis and Marie demand, the reciprocation they attempt to read as naturally signified in each of Nicholas’s aforementioned gestures. In their reading of every gesture as sign, Francis and Marie presume their affections reciprocated, even assured. Yet fundamentally they are not seen from the same place (or with the same look) from which they see Nicholas. Baillargeon concurs in her assertion that Dolan’s film admits “that there is no substance behind the illusion of [love]” (174). This admission, she adds, illustrates “the failure to create meaningful relationships with others, which are typically cornerstones of our understanding of attachment and intimacy” (174). While Baillargeon’s reflection on the failure to occupy relations meaningfully confronts the anxieties of Francis and Marie, she nevertheless mimics them in the slippage she creates between illusion’s failure and lack of meaning. From where, exactly, does the immediacy of a relation’s salience to its illusory realization arise? What Baillargeon mistakes for “meaning”—the fatal misapprehension that she, Francis, and Marie share in making—is the demand for a relationship’s disillusionment. Although Francis and Marie close the physical distance between their bodies and Nicholas’s, they ultimately prevent a “meaningful relationship” by conflating meaning itself with the absence of fantasy; they demand the real thing. Though, as Berlant notes, “problems of radical incoherence and relational out-of-synchness...threateningly traverse the subject and the world” (66). In spite

of their fleshy proximity, there remains a distance that nevertheless saturates their relation.

If we find ourselves in the same double bind as Francis and Marie of a relationality, that is to say, a kind of closeness necessarily interposed by distance, then we might do well to return to Aschenbach, Miller's miserable "keeper of distances." Like his Québécois counterparts, he also fantasizes the object of his desire through a voyeuristic relation. Yet, while Francis and Marie attempt and fail to consummate their relationship with Nicholas, which would corroborate the fantasies that Dolan's film exposes as constituting the relationship itself, Aschenbach, as we have already noted, avoids that consummation. But if he refuses to attempt the same leap over nonknowledge undertaken by Francis and Marie, it is not because he is fundamentally keen on avoiding the possible reciprocation, but perhaps because he expects his fantasy will inevitably go unfulfilled. Similarly, attempting to conceptualize sex without "the fantasy, and so the optimism, of a successfully realized relation" (2), Lee Edelman urges us to "account for the disturbance of imaginary reality by a Real with which we can never have a relation" (28). While Aschenbach's keeping of distance accounts for Edelman's polemic, it does not embrace fantasy on the optimistic belief that relation will eventually be realized. Rather, it proliferates fantasy in lieu of that relation, eroticizing the very avoidance of that relation's realization, rendering not a "sex without optimism" but a sex *with* the pessimism of that relation's everlasting suspension.

Armed with this new frame of relationality, let us briefly undertake one of the most tenuous of interpretive practices: taking our character at their word. In a relatively late scene, Aschenbach, having just been smiled at by Tadzio moments before, sits alone on a bench and confesses aloud: "I love you." What does this utterance mean in the context of Aschenbach's keeping of the distance between his body and Tadzio's? While critics like Miller presumably view this moment as only emblematic of distance's poignant tragedy, a hermeneutic of pessimism suggests relational unity as already conceded, compelling us to read "love" here as more of distance's extolment than lament. "Love," Sam See convincingly argues, "is the pleasure of ignorance: the pleasure of renouncing our desire

to fill the hole of knowledge, to make knowledge whole, to master those to whom we bear relation" (196). Insofar as Aschenbach derives his pleasure from the fantasies he crafts of Tadzio and thereby forestalls the knowledge, the "mastery" of Tadzio that Francis and Marie correspondingly demand of Nicholas, Aschenbach's "eroticizing of avoidance" resonates with a "pleasure of ignorance." Taken this way, a way which could not be more opposed to critics like Miller, Aschenbach's love finds its realization *only* because of the nonknowledge structuring the distance between him and Tadzio.

Consider the following scene: At dinner, Tadzio and Aschenbach place themselves at opposite ends of the hotel's veranda as busking musicians perform for the hotel's guests. While the band plays inches from them, our pair remain staring at each other, relishing in the pure potential, the pure ignorance, the pure *love* that occupies the distance between them. If the keeping of this distance, of renouncing a desire for a complete, yet persistently inaccessible, knowledge fashions Aschenbach's love, not only do these scenes—which make up the majority of the film—gain a new affective import, but the titular ending does as well. Aschenbach stays in Venice despite the obvious correlation between a looming epidemic and his failing health only to further pursue his singular pleasure of looking upon Tadzio. *Death in Venice's* voyeurism, in this way, functions as akin to a crescendo that never ends but only continues to rise. The film ends with Aschenbach's prophesied demise, sitting in a chair on the Lido, watching his distant lover in the ocean, his life a final oblation to love.

Recalling my initial charge of voyeurism's universality—the fantasy we craft over those gaps of nonknowledge in any and all relations—Aschenbach's love, a love *dependent* on nonknowledge, offers the potential for releasing ourselves from that double bind of attempting to be close in spite of distance. While some scholars like Tim Dean might see Aschenbach's keeping of distance as synonymous with an "[a]bstraction [that] enables the maintenance of a hygienic distance from the messiness of embodied desire" (621), the distance Aschenbach keeps is less tied to the body itself as it is to a demand for relation's realization that is popularly fastened to the body.



As in an oft-quoted interview, Luce Irigaray might charge Aschenbach as having an “eye [that] objectifies and masters. It sets at a distance, and maintains a distance. In our culture the predominance of the look over smell, taste, touch and hearing has brought about an impoverishment of bodily relations” (50).¹ But, in doing so, such a claim would only act to limit bodily relations to the most explicit of haptic interactions, returning voyeurism to the same place Freud left it. Thus, challenging the very possibility of realization, Aschenbach’s voyeuristic pessimism dethrones the figural body and the optimism of realization that it is made to symbolize enshrined at the center of contemporary sexuality studies. In Dolan’s final

scene, Francis and Marie stare at a new object of desire, an uncanny facsimile of Nicholas. Though they may “smell, taste, touch and hea[r]” this new object, Dolan suggests their fate to repeat the same clash with nonknowledge so long as they look through the speculum of another and demand anything other than themselves reflected back. Aschenbach, instead, invites us to gaze through the speculum longer, to take pleasure in our fantasies, to pessimistically renounce our demand for their actualization—to fall in love.

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1. Translation cited in Pollock: 70.

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Lotte in Weimar: Sex and Poverty in *Babylon Berlin*

The most internationally successful and expensive German-language television series ever produced (Dowling, Grey), *Babylon Berlin* (2017–) overburdens the body of its female lead, Charlotte Ritter, known to most as Lotte, played by Liv Lisa Fries. *Babylon Berlin* is a detective drama series set in Weimar-era Berlin that follows Gereon Rath (Volker Bruch), a police detective and traumatized WWI veteran from Cologne who arrives in the German capital with the covert mission of dismantling a sadomasochistic pornography ring. Once in Berlin, Gereon navigates a myriad of conspiracies—from a *noir*-inspired mystery plot involving a missing Russian freight train transporting poison gas and Imperial gold, to the widespread right-wing collusions marching towards a historically inevitable Nazism. To aid in his investigations of the unknown Babylonian capital, Gereon—and the spectator—is gifted Lotte, a casually employed stenographer at Berlin’s Police Headquarters by day and flapper-come-prostitute by night, when Weimar Berlin’s cutting-edge artistic, hedonistic, and liberal culture comes alive.

Babylon Berlin’s high production values, serious subject matter, labyrinthine plot structure, and distinctive visual style—often attributed to showrunner Tom Tykwer’s authorial vision—positions the series firmly within the recent “quality European TV” canon alongside other international successes such as *The Young Pope* (2016), *The Crown* (2016–), *Gomorrah* (2014–), *Borgia* (2011–2014), and *The Bureau* (2015–) (Eichner 193, Barra and Scaglioni 1–10). Quality European television is a discursive category formulated as a transatlantic iteration of the American “quality” tradition, which heralded series such as *The Sopranos* (1999–2007), *The Wire* (2002–2007), *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013), and *Mad Men* (2007–2015) as more culturally legitimate offerings than their mass-appeal television counterparts on the basis of their employment of characteristics found in supposedly “higher” arts, such as literature and cinema. American “quality”

television has been characterized as an overtly masculinist tradition (Lotz, Fuller and Driscoll, DeFino). Indeed, recent series such as *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019), *True Detective* (2014–2019), or *Westworld* (2017–) that court association with this “quality” label often position women as ciphers for investigations into the male psyche (Wilkins 37). As such, my opening claim may invite similar assumptions regarding Lotte. Yet, although frequently placed in situations that threaten gender-based violence and the associated male-serving corporeal traumas that recur in series like *True Detective*, Lotte’s body is not used as a site for the explication of male psychological crises. Rather, Lotte is overburdened by the sheer volume of work *Babylon Berlin* requires her to perform. Lotte’s work is represented narratively as a female member of the Weimar precariat and metatextually as a figure called upon to embody a range of competing historical and cultural referents and their respective ideologies in line with “quality” television’s intertextual repertoires. On both levels, Lotte is overworked and ultimately, underpaid.

The most obvious of Lotte’s tasks is the embodiment of competing notions of femininity and feminism. Lotte is at once the series’ projection of a sexually emancipated feminist figure striving for economic independence in the shape of the Weimar New Woman and a reflexive disclosure of the ideals of that new gendered demarcation as merely a mirage (McBride 220). Redolent of Irmgard Keun’s Doris in *The Artificial Silk Girl* (1932), Lotte is an aspirational young woman who, like Keun’s demi-monde, self-assuredly exercises all financial avenues open to her under Berlin’s glittering lights. Lotte’s confidence, bobbed hair, glitzy flapper dresses, and frank attitudes toward sex may evoke the image of the New Woman, however, as the series progresses it becomes clear any implied independence is an illusion. Lotte is forced to depend on men for survival—financially, professionally, and, in a manner that always threatens to surrender her body to televi-

sion crime fiction's necropornographic gaze through her *Perils of Pauline*-esque (1914) brushes with death, literally (Stanley 4). In turn, she must submit to their demands or conditions. To most, Lotte is little more than an enticing spectacle of sex, or a warm body for purchase. Her independence is restricted to a matter of spirit and mind, made manifest in her ability to intellectually parley with men. As such, Lotte is equally reminiscent of the New Woman's muted inheritor, the classical Hollywood screwball comedy leading lady (Deleyto 83-84) who repackages her libidinous desires deemed incompatible with the patriarchal constraints of late 1930s and 40s Hollywood (and U.S. culture more generally) as quick-witted dialogue.

Lotte embodies both the image of the sexually liberated Weimar woman and a critique of such female sexuality subsequently denied by Hollywood. This could be read as a reflexive comment on female agency and sexuality, a critique often ascribed to period dramas, where the embrace of period detail is in service of the politics of the present (Black and Driscoll 188). I do not deny Lotte performs these functions. However, *Babylon Berlin* layers Lotte's symbolic value with another tension between celebration and critique that certainly waters down its potency. After all, Lotte is not the only woman in Weimar, or Berlin for that matter, although the official *Babylon Berlin* website suggests otherwise. It describes Lotte in this way:

Determined and resourceful, poor but sexy. Stenotypist for murder investigations, over the course of the story becomes more than just Rath's assistant. The only woman among a host of crusty officials. Few take her seriously – but she can defend herself: by talking a lot, and quickly. By knowing a lot. By learning a lot. By partying a lot... (“Charlotte Ritter”).

While not as garrulous as a passage of Lotte's dialogue, this brief summation speaks loudly. The description's false opposition between “poor” and “sexy” highlights one of Lotte's weightiest embodied contradictions and reveals its ideological underpinnings. To Berlin tourists and denizens, the line “poor but sexy” is undoubtedly familiar as the city's unofficial slogan (“arm, aber sexy!”).

That the city's identifying tagline, “poor but sexy” was first uttered by Berlin's mayor, Klaus Wowereit in an interview with the neoliberal business magazine *Focus-Money* in 2003 is telling (Frey). Repeating the line on several occasions, Wowereit issued a clarion call to members of what Richard Florida termed the

‘creative class’ in which he proffered the city as the capital of European cool and open for business. His slogan sought to capitalize on Berlin's long history as an artistic hub for filmmakers, artists, musicians, and writers as well as its low cost of living relative to other European cities. Agata Pyzik terms “Berlinism,” the romanticization of the city as a dreamland. Berlinism, according to Pyzik, is a phenomenon traceable to the legacy of the Weimar era, heralding the city as a “capital of all sorts of debauchery and transgression, in culture, politics, literature, art, music and theatre. What built Berlin's reputation is a combination of German expressionism and cheap rents...Berlinism means the conscious use of this ambiguous cultural capital, made of sweat, camp, and danger” (80). It is precisely this image that *Babylon Berlin* courts and projects through Lotte—a romanticized spectacle of present Berlin's licentious and creative past. She is the Weimar era's “divine decadence,” to borrow a phrase from Christopher Isherwood's Sally Bowles (Wilkins “Babylon Berlin” n.p). Lotte is an exemplar of Berlin's glamour, creativity, and permissiveness: qualities that are, as Wowereit proclaimed, uniquely tied to its poverty.

Lotte's embodiment of this “poor but sexy” ideal is established in her introduction. Around a third of the way into the pilot, the action cuts from an early-morning police raid on a pornography shoot to an interior shot of a dilapidated and overpopulated apartment. Laundry hangs from the ceiling. A baby wails. Bathed in a cool blue light reminiscent of tinted film stock frequently employed in Weimar cinema (Rogowski 68), a young girl suddenly bolts upright in bed. She checks for her bedfellow but finds only an unused pillow. In a manner that somewhat recalls the anticipation of Rick's appearance through delay and deferral in *Casablanca* (1942), Toni asks her eldest sister “Where is Lotte?”¹ who exhaustedly attempts to nurse the crying baby while penned in between another child and a snoring husband. Receiving only an indifferent shrug, Toni continues her search and in doing so guides the spectator through their dilapidated apartment, solidifying the family's socioeconomic standing. She peers through a broken glass window at her bedridden mother writhing in syphilitic discomfort and passes by her dementing grandfather murmuring incoherently in his sleep. Finally, Toni enters another room and spies a young woman smoking out a window. Still wearing her

1. All translations from German to English are my own, unless otherwise specified.



Lotte revealed, episode one.

overcoat, and with her bobbed brown hair tousled, it is clear she has not been home long. In contrast to the drab grey and brown walls the woman's face is illuminated by the early morning sun, the intended focal point of the image, and sequence. Confirming this, Toni calls out "Lotte?"

The juxtaposition of Lotte's luminosity and her gritty dwelling divulges *Babylon Berlin's* vision of poverty as an enticing spectacle. Indeed, somewhat perversely, the series' expense is made visible in the lavish design and sumptuous depiction of squalor, which in turn contributes to its status as "quality" television. The tension between poverty and the series' high production values results in a seductive, glossy view of these living conditions in line with Lotte's summative "poor but sexy" characterization. Presented in the right light, shabby becomes chic. Turning to her sister, and the camera, Lotte is revealed as a vision of pulchritude and exhaustion in battle. Her hair is ruffled and her make-up smudged in a manner that suggests a night of revelry rather than toil—although, as is made clear in the next episode, for Lotte the two are inseparable. She removes her overcoat and unveils a beaded shift dress beneath. A close-up on her cast-off Mary-Jane heels confirms that Lotte is a flapper.

Time poor, Lotte enlists Toni's assistance to prepare for clerical work at the Berlin Police Head-

quarters, where she must scramble for piecemeal jobs among hordes of underemployed women. Brimming with admiration for her older sister, Toni asks how Lotte can function in this way, in spite of her utter lack of sleep to which Lotte matter-of-factly replies, "You know the deal. If you sleep, you miss being awake." She scrubs her armpits and crotch with a wet rag and peers into a small mirror affixed to the wall with chewed gum to wipe the rogue makeup from her face. She and Toni joyously sing along to Hermann Leopoldi's *Deine Augen sind Magnete* ("Your Eyes are Magnets") as it blares from a neighbour's open window. Suddenly, the exhausted Lotte of only a minute prior is transformed into a perky, industrious young woman determined to provide the rent for which she is badgered by both her sickly mother and misogynist brother-in-law. Alone on Berlin's early morning city streets, Lotte smiles to herself and runs for a streetcar. This five-minute sequence establishes both the series' spectacle of poverty and Lotte's socioeconomic position and work ethic. It also juxtaposes her demeanour with her lot. This introduction explicitly declares Lotte as poor, while her physical attractiveness and good humour are indicative of what will come to be visualized as her sexiness. Yet, for the German-speaking audience, Lotte is explicitly tied to Berlin in a more subtle manner than the overt visualized embodiment

of its identifying slogan. Throughout the series, Lotte and her family speak “Berlinisch,” a regional dialect with specific grammatical, vocabulary, and pronunciation characteristics. In *Babylon Berlin*, these linguistic qualities are only one aspect of the dialect’s use as a marker of regional and cultural distinction.² Most obviously, Gereon’s consistent use of *Hochdeutsch* (High German) and *Höflichkeitsform* (formal form) is placed in contrast with Lotte’s casual use of the informal form and directness, consonant with Berlinisch conventions. Narratively, Gereon’s polite formality indicates his Rhineland rigidity, however, it also signifies his higher socioeconomic status in comparison with Lotte, as the dialect is stereotypically associated with the working-class. Of course, Lotte can—and does—speak *Hochdeutsch*. She simply selects to use the vernacular with other native Berliners. Indeed, Lotte embodies all that is commonly celebrated as typically “Berlin” in the popular imaginary. More than a Berlinisch-speaker, she has “Berliner Schnauze” (Berlin snout), a term describing a stereotypical Ber-

liner attitude or persona, characterized by cynical quick-wittedness, directness (or even brashness), and pragmatism (Schlobinski 56). As such, Lotte’s use of the vernacular and attitude points both to her lower socioeconomic status and desirable insider cultural cachet, further aligning her with the image that Berlin is, and always has been, “poor, but sexy.” Thus, Lotte serves not only as Gereon’s, but the spectator’s guide to what is commonly projected as the “real” Berlin: its sex, poverty, creativity, and gumption.

A sequence in episode two literalizes Lotte’s role as a guide to Babylonian Berlin. Echoing Curt Moreck’s *Guide Through ‘Depraved’ Berlin* (1931) city guide, which “paradoxically both glamorised and defamed Berlin as the city of sexual exploits” (Smith 231), Lotte exposes the inner workings of the Moka Efti nightclub, a sprawling and glamorous cabaret club housing an up-market clandestine brothel in its labyrinthine underground dungeons. Following the series’ most famous cabaret dance number “Zu Asche zu Staub” (To Ashes to Dust) in which Nikoros (Severija Janušauskaitė), a cabaret performer in dandy male drag, conducts a crowd of revellers in a choreographed number, Lotte is subtly summoned from her joyous participation at the helm of the ecstatic throng for her sexual services. Lotte instantly shifts between what is projected as a leisure activity and work in a manner that aligns

2. The edited collection *The Sociolinguistic Economy of Berlin: Cosmopolitan Perspectives on Language, Diversity and Social Space* has a good English-language essays on Berlin’s sociolinguistic specificities.



Lotte as spectacle.

with what Anja Schwanhäußer calls “Berlin Capitalism,” a concept denoting “a certain way of life [based on] consumption needs that are mass-produced, and is linked to a work ethic that gradually changes from bourgeois discipline and industry to creativity, flexibility, anti-hierarchy and network production” (105). As Schwanhäußer describes in relation to Berlin’s organized party scene, such conditions blur the line between commercial exchange and leisure activities (109-110). While Lotte’s commercial exchange may not be in line with the type of creative work identified by Schwanhäußer, her work-life balance, where prostitution is but one (paid) element of revelry among multiple income streams, certainly mirrors the fuzzy demarcations between work, leisure, and experience associated with the neoliberal structures that promote cultural entrepreneurialism, which underpin Berlin’s “new” creative economy (Oktay 212).

Lotte guides the man, and the spectator, through the brothel’s corridors. They pass flapper and businessman pairings in all stages and varieties of copulation, from shots of passionate kissing to bondage. Crucially, these shots portray the woman frontally such that their bodies and faces are exposed to the spectator while, with the exception of Lotte’s customer, their male companions are little more than anonymous bodies—as in the case of a bare-breasted woman in a leather corset who gyrates against a male customer pinned to a wall and the to-camera positioning of another as the grateful recipient of cunnilingus. In her sex act, Lotte’s body is projected as a spectacle. A low-angle shot aligns the viewer with Lotte’s male customer as he gazes up at her naked body, but for a metal chain collar and leather body harness, astride him (Wilkins “Babylon Berlin” n.p). In this sequence, Lotte is not only projected in the adjectival sense as “sexy” but is presented as consonant with the noun. She becomes a promise of spectacular fornication in the city.

As her quick turnaround from nighttime flapper and prostitute to daylight clerk illustrates, Lotte is a member of the precariat, a cohort of society acutely identified with the rise of the creative industries and creative city who rely on freelance work. Without the income stability of a consistent wage, the precariat must constantly seek employment even during periods of hire, resulting in a new situation of constant activity and hard work to maintain livelihoods and support families (McRobbie 12). Lotte must constantly hustle—in many senses of the term—to keep her family fed and housed within the Neukölln tenement

slums.³ Yet, as Lotte’s introductory demeanour suggests, her unstable employment is not depicted as wholly undesirable. Lotte’s life is shown as vibrant and exciting. Her casual police clerk work involves her in mysteries and political conspiracies while at night she haunts venues brimming with music, recreational drug use, and uninhibited sex. Importantly, she does not view her prostitution as anything other than a constructive means of ensuring financial security and even encourages her destitute friend, Greta (Leonie Benesch), to take up the trade by assuring her there is nothing to fear from the customers.

Lotte’s prostitution is only one aspect of her multi-job existence, and in a narrative sense, it is not the most exploitative. Rather it is the exploitation of her Berlin cultural ken by the police force who issue her temporary, but legal employment that best illustrates the inequitable nature of precarious work. At times Lotte herself probes the equitability of her labour expenditure and remuneration, as in a sequence where her knowledge and access to Berlin’s underground scenes results in a vital break in Gereon’s case. During their departing words, Lotte suddenly stops and asks Gereon, “Do I get paid by someone for this? For my work?” Gereon chuckles, “I have no idea”. Lotte’s smile fades, “What do you mean...?” Gereon replies, “We’re just getting started”. This nonresponse satisfies Lotte. She grins and runs to catch the metro to her next appointment. The promise of experience, and potential future employment successfully defers the obligation of payment for services rendered.

The colloquial term “LIME” (“Less Income, More Experience”) is used to refer to members of Berlin’s creative-industry precariat tied to the increasingly prominent cultural economy of the “New Berlin”—a brand developed by city marketers and planners since reunification. As Geoff Stahl writes, LIMES are fundamental to “new” Berlin’s creative life “where entrepreneurship, creativity, innovation and cultural labour are activities shaped by an ideology that values flexibility, mobility, immediacy, efficiency, and adaptability” (“Getting By” 193). In spite of her poverty, and the physical and emotional exhaustion that accompanies a life of insecurity and overwork, Lotte is most alive in the glamorous cabaret nightlife, and as bright as

3. Neukölln is an area that has since tipped over from poverty into an aestheticized shabby chic. Indeed, it is now considered among the city’s most creative, hip, and gentrified locales, particularly popular among international students and creative industry practitioners (McRobbie 123).

any of the assorted colourful characters with whom she rubs shoulders. Lotte is industrious, adventurous, and brimming with moxie—in short, although she is not a member of the traditional creative class, she is the model LIME. As Stahl continues:

For many artists (and countless others) living and working in the New Berlin... there are no guarantees, no assurances of a sustainable career, and decreasing purchase in a creative field which privileges uncertainty as the necessary force driving its competitiveness. The restless energies generated through this restless quest for a creative life in Berlin now serve as a semiotic resource, a city-as-scene that can be used to market the virtues, and certainly many of the vices, of its creative life to artists, entrepreneurs, investors and, lately, tourists from around the world. (“Getting By” 193)

Lotte personifies this advertisement of Berlin as a city of vice under the “poor but sexy” banner and reveals its deceptions. While the suggestion that someone may be sexy *in spite* of their low socioeconomic status is at least unkind, if not outright offensive, Wowerit’s statement is employed here to more insidious ends. For the young female body, poverty is sold as sex appeal. Lotte is not sexy *in spite* of her poverty, but because of it. While the series casts her nakedness and sexuality as principal sights in its spectacle of poverty, she is ambivalent toward her own prostitution. Her rationale for this form of employment is simple: “I need money.” In fact, Lotte is never seen engaging in sexual activity that is not mercenary. However, as Lotte is the series’ guide to hedonistic Weimar Berlin, for the city to remain Babylon, Lotte must remain poor. As such, luxuriating in Lotte’s “poor but sexy” existence and the spectacles that such characterization facilitates must, on some level, make one complicit in endorsing the structural mechanisms that will keep her in that position. Without Lotte’s prostitution, there is no narrative justification for spectacles of her naked body, BDSM costumes, or scenes of her engaged in sex acts. In the absence of these sequences, Lotte is a quick-witted, vivacious, and attractive (but modestly clad) ambitious young woman driven to succeed in a career society deems just out of her reach—attributes that can undoubtedly be considered sexy, but hardly Babylonian.

As Stahl points out, almost two decades on from Wowerit’s initial proclamation, the slogan has been “reduced to a faint-praise brand, stretched to break-

ing point over thousands of handbags, its meaning thinned out across t-shirts, postcards, documentaries, songs, and websites” (“Introduction” 13). Perhaps Lotte’s depiction as a matter-of-fact young woman who enjoys the cultural offerings of Berlin’s nightlife but restricts her “hedonistic” sexual exploits to those paid in line with an overall ambition toward economic stability and increased social status does embody this diluted, commercialized version of the city’s identifying motto. In part through the genericity of her characterization as the screwball leading lady and in part a response to contemporary Berlin’s ethos as a creative city with a uniquely “laid-back coolness, pleasant scruffiness, urban-idyll and *carpe diem*,” (Otkay 219) Lotte regards her lifestyle as an exciting adventure. After all, she is called upon to project the illusion of Weimar’s debauchery at the same time as the outwardly sanitized Hollywood screwball leading lady. As such, it cannot be her own libidinous desires that drive her inculcation in Berlin’s “depraved” scenes—it must be financial with the view to upward mobility.

Echoing some of the more tedious aspects of the well-worn “quality” television debates, *Babylon Berlin*’s expense has been lauded as a virtue in and of itself (Connolly). That much of this expense is visible in lavish spectacles of both nightlife decadence and poverty that are narratively facilitated by Lotte’s “poor but sexy” characterization unveils the series’ relationship to that demarcation and its implications. Poverty may be sexy when its embodiment can temporarily move out of squalor and into scenes of choreographed cabaret, high-end prostitution, and non-dependent drug use—in short, when poverty is not too proximate. Bodies may be “poor but sexy” provided they are not too poor—the spectacle of poverty cannot abide those that are unwell, unintelligent, or unattractive as a result of their lot. Indeed, Lotte’s ability to work around the clock is a product of her determination and her privileges while the need to do so is a product of systemic inequality. Ultimately, Lotte’s “poor but sexy” aesthetic is the result of her relative poverty rubbing against the illusory promises of neoliberal entrepreneurialism under the guise of the creative economy. As such, perhaps Lotte does embody Wowerit’s statement, but in its modified, more prosaic iteration from 2011, “We want Berlin to become richer and still remain sexy” (“Introduction” 14).

Babylon Berlin’s spectacle of poverty traps Lotte between the promise of feminist autonomy through upward mobility and its ultimate disavowal. Lotte must work tirelessly to improve her lot and yet, as

Babylon Berlin exploits her sex work and poverty as spectacle, this ambition explicitly hinders any true movement. The harder Lotte works to alleviate her poverty, the more numerous the opportunities to project her prostitution as spectacle. Each instance is justified by the notion that her labour follows from her motivation to change her socio-economic condition. But, it is not her increased sex work, rather the conditional assistance of her male employers in the police force that ultimately lifts Lotte out of poverty and prostitution. In keeping with the conservative heterosexual coupling ideals associated with Hollywood narrative traditions, Lotte is only released from the spectacle of poverty by trading her image as an erotic object for a potential romantic interest for Gereon, the series' protagonist, and her employer. It is, after all, no coincidence that Gereon and Lotte's initial encounter in the first episode takes the form of a classic meet-cute: a workplace collision. Neither is it a coincidence that the two do not share their first romantic kiss until Lotte is no longer a sex worker, twenty-four episodes later. Across *Babylon Berlin*'s first three seasons, Lotte is promised a compromised payoff that is delayed to keep her poor—or poor enough—to be sexy.

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Hayley Rose Malouin

"Gooble Gobble, One, or Several of Us": Becoming-Molecular, Becoming-Imperceptible in Tod Browning's *Freaks*

"Children? Monsters!"

"Oh, you're a circus. I understand."

— *Freaks*, 1932

The midnight procession of caravans halts. Beautiful but conniving aerialist Cleo is chased through the rain and mud by a group of sideshow 'freaks,' her shrill screams amplified in darkness as a multitude of bodies descend. Later, the camera cuts to the same Cleo, now a squawking, disfigured woman-chicken hybrid on display in a freak show of her own.

Cleo's deceptive monstrosity and her mutilation serve as the seductively horrific linchpins of Tod Browning's pre-Code box office bomb *Freaks*. The predominant—if overly moralizing—takeaway is that monstrosity is a state of mind; by comparison, the titular *freaks* are veritably normal. But this inversion of monstrosity serves to subsume difference, couching freakery in a comfortably reductive chain of cause, effect, and identification: you commit monstrous acts, you become a monster—materially, biologically, irrevocably. Freakishness, in this context, becomes what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari describe as a "molar aggregate," the perception of which can grasp the movement of freakery "only as the displacement of a moving body or the development of a form" (280-81).

Dangling just the other side of this cosily grotesque equation are the 'born freaks'¹ who make up

1. As distinguished from other sideshow performers who augment their bodies in order to gain a freakish status and allure (tattooed painted ladies, muscular strongmen, and so on), 'born freaks' are performers whose main attraction as entertainers is their singular physicality (conjoined twins, little people, performers with missing limbs, among others). This dichotomy between born

much of the supporting cast in Browning's film. These freaks are coded, first, as children and, second, as righteous avengers in order to evade the slippery territory (or, rather, de-territorialization) produced by the film's reductive imperative. In this slippage, we find the potential for a distinctly freakish becoming-imperceptible, which can erode narratives of infantilization and vilification alike. This elusive freakery is in motion "below and above the threshold of perception" and, indeed, below and above *Freaks*' cinematic lens (Deleuze and Guattari 281).

The elucidation of such a freakish becoming-imperceptible is the purpose of this brief consideration. The freaks of *Freaks* are irreducible to the moralizing—and molarizing—ideology presented by the very narrative they inhabit. They exist, instead, in moments of suspended, freakish contemplation, and in so doing they work to unravel the neatly woven filmic tapestry that situates monstrosity as a punitive response to wrongdoing. In turn, this becoming-imperceptible acts upon *Freaks* to un-work it as a cohesive fiction and dilute its narrative linearity, enabling cinematic *lines of flight* to rupture and emerge in its place and rendering *Freaks* as rhizome—an assemblage in a constant state of de-stratification and re-stratification and overtaken by "a transversal movement that sweeps one way *and* the other" (Deleuze and Guattari 25). Both *Freaks* and its freaks are rhizomatic assemblages continually be-

and acquired freakishness is central to discourses on the circus as a site of both the veneration and exploitation of difference, disability, and otherness. See Fricker and Malouin (2018) and Carter (2018).

coming-imperceptible, slipping in and out of reach of the moralizing and molarizing framework to which they putatively swear fealty.

Concerning Freaks

There is much contention, in both circus and critical disability scholarship, about the use of the term ‘freak’ to denote the sometimes disabled, often ostracized, and almost always marginalized performers of many 20th century sideshows. This contention merits a brief discussion here, as I am electing to use the term ‘freak’ to refer to the titular characters of Browning’s film. While it is true that many who performed under the banner of freak fall along axes of ability, race, sexuality, and gender that place them at odds with prevailing ableist, racist, and heteronormative mores, it does not follow that *freakishness* is merely the amalgamation of deviations from the norm of these identitarian categories. ‘Freak’ is not merely an antiquated slur, though it may possess pejorative connotations because of its use alongside other derogatory language, as well as the experiences of many to whom it was and remains a willing or unwilling title. Rather, I argue that ‘freak’ constitutes a historically, culturally, and aesthetically situated mode of performance that intentionally stages difference and deviation from received categories of normative identity. While this difference can be perceived along axes of ability, sex, gender, race, and so on, it is not wholly contained, defined, or eclipsed by these categories. ‘Freak’ always points to something more than what can be perceived or received by any categorical notion of identity or subjectivity.

I base this definition of ‘freak’ on that of Rachel Adams, who in *Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination* claims that the label freak cannot be “neatly aligned with any particular identity or ideological position” (10). Indeed, Adams’ task of providing a history of the American freak and sideshow would be an easier one, she claims, if freak was a term “more firmly bound to a recognizable political configuration” (9). Adams claims identitarian categories like race, ability, and gender no doubt play a part in determining what counts as sufficiently freakish, exotic, or *other* enough to warrant inclusion in sideshows. For this reason, it is easy to see why the term ‘freak’ would be treated similarly to the archaic slurs so often used to describe sideshow performers—as an outdated, insulting, practically violent term that needs to be substituted for terms and labels chosen by the historically and contemporarily excluded groups

they have referred to and marginalized. The removal of derogatory slurs from linguistic circulation is a vital aspect of emancipation for historically excluded groups. Adams argues, however, that ‘freak’ is not one of these terms because it does not refer to any clearly identifiable identitarian category or group. Rather, and importantly, freak connotes “the absence of any known category of identity” (10).

As the absence of identity, ‘freak’ functions as a performative concept rather than an identitarian category. In this context, sideshow performers stage otherness—otherness that can be perceived through identitarian categories but does not belong to and is not totalized by these categories. Freakishness is thus that which is produced by the highly stylized performance of difference. Adams writes, “To characterize *freak* as a performance restores agency to the actors in the sideshow, who participate, albeit not always voluntarily, in a dramatic fantasy that the division between freak and normal is obvious, visible, and quantifiable” (6). This claim—that the putative obviousness of the freak as fundamentally different to the normative spectator is a fiction staged and performed by the freak themselves, and that the membrane between freak and non-freak is in actuality treacherously thin—is backed up by the wealth of documentation that reveals freakishness to be “a historically variable quality, derived less from particular physical attributes than the spectacle of the extraordinary body” as self-consciously performative (5). Adams makes reference to sideshow performers such as Naomi Sutherland—whose only claim to freakishness was her exceptionally long hair, but who was nevertheless exhibited as a sideshow attraction—to demonstrate “the plasticity of the category of *freak*” (ibid).

The history of the circus freak’s compelling and contradictory place in 20th-century culture is a long one, for which there is not space here to consider in any further detail. Returning, then, to Browning’s film, and following Adams’ contextualization of freakishness as a mode of performance that gauges and stages cultural attunement to difference, I elect to use the term ‘freaks’ when referring to the main characters of *Freaks*. I choose thusly, not because it is convenient shorthand, but because ‘freaks’ is both an evocative and multiplicitous notion. As the absence of identity that points to and performs this very lack of any categorical subjectivity, ‘freak’ functions in a similar fashion as Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the assemblage, to which I will momentarily turn. ‘Freak’ faces, on one hand, a *stratifying* force, in the form of the varied and diverse identities and communities dis-

played under the moniker of freak; on the other hand, it faces a *destratifying* force that points to the impossibility of capturing or stabilizing ‘freak’ in any identitarian position. Freak is thus multiplicitous, in that it resists “the abstract opposition between the multiple and the one” (Deleuze and Guattari 32). Rather than a subjective form of being, ‘freak’ is an assemblage of becoming that continually evades capture by the very identitarian categories that are used to determine and stage the fantasy of freakishness in the first place. It is thus crucial for a Deleuzo-Guattarian exploration of Browning’s *Freaks* to mobilize the titular term, evoking concepts of freakishness in order to grasp more deeply the affinity between freaks and notions of becoming and assemblage.

Assemblage, Becoming, Movement, Molecularity, & Imperceptibility

The elucidation of becoming as distinct from being is a cornerstone of Deleuzo-Guattarian thought, in their widely influential *A Thousand Plateaus* and elsewhere. For Deleuze and Guattari, becoming is the process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization that enables an entity, or assemblage, to exist between complete organization and subjectification and total abstraction. One side of the assemblage faces the strata, which organizes and endows the assemblage with a “signifying totality, or determination attributable to a subject” (4). Meanwhile, another side of the assemblage faces what they call a *body without organs*, an intensive force that is “continually dismantling the organism, causing asignifying particles or pure intensities to pass or circulate” (ibid). The assemblage is thus always being made and unmade, deterritorialized and reterritorialized in a process of becoming; becoming is the simultaneous de- and re-stratification of the assemblage.

Importantly, becoming is not a progression or regression along a prescribed scale, upon which the assemblage either becomes a subject or organism or becomes fully undone. Rather, “[b]ecoming is a verb with a consistency all its own; it does not reduce to, lead back to, ‘appearing,’ ‘being,’ ‘equaling,’ or ‘producing’” (Deleuze and Guattari 239). In other words, becoming is process *qua* process, a verb without a subject because it necessarily involves the dismantling of the organism it putatively pertains to. As such, while the process of becoming possesses no telos in that it does not aim to produce and organize a discrete subject, all becoming nevertheless drives towards a certain always-somewhat-unattainable imperceptibility—

what Deleuze and Guattari call becoming-imperceptible. Becoming-imperceptible occurs, crucially, on a molecular level and resists the formation of molar aggregates, subjects fully realized and organized by the strata. “All becomings,” Deleuze and Guattari argue, “are already molecular” because the very process of de- and re-territorialization that *is* becoming entails the extraction of particles from the assemblage, “between which one establishes the relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness” (272). In other words, becoming engages in the iterative reduction of an assemblage to the molecular level, thus rendering it imperceptible because the continual extraction of particles ensures the assemblage can never be fully organized or stratified.

The relations of speed and slowness that the process of becoming instigates occur both “below and above the threshold of perception,” continually uncatchable in their movement because this movement “continues to occur elsewhere” than the threshold of perception (Deleuze and Guattari 281). As such, movement enjoys a unique relationship with imperceptibility, being the necessary predicate for becoming-imperceptible. While the threshold of perception can only understand movement as “the displacement of a moving body or the development of a form,” true movement is always imperceptible because it occurs on the molecular level—that is, as inscrutable to the perceptible realm of molar forms (280-81). All assemblages rush towards imperceptibility through molecular movement; “[t]he imperceptible is the immanent end of becoming, its cosmic formula” (279).

It is this cosmic formula that is present in *Freaks*, and this becoming-imperceptible that the freaks ultimately move towards, despite the narrative’s ethical misgivings. Even as the film’s moralizing pearl-clutching begs its audience to fear the childlike fury of the freaks, its episodic nature and indulgence in long, empathetic shots of these same freaks in scenes of domestic, professional, and even criminal life betrays its own inability to neatly tuck away these extraordinary people—these assemblages becoming-imperceptible—into tidy moral-molar aggregates. What is more, the imperceptibility of the freaks works to render *Freaks* imperceptible as a linear fiction, enabling it to move rhizomatically between episodes of movement, affect, and sensation without ever congealing into an organized being of strata.

The notion of the rhizome is a crucial aspect of Deleuze and Guattari’s conceptual framework, encapsulating much of the differential processes of becoming that are essential to their ontological perspective.

Deleuze and Guattari use 'rhizome' to refer to those assemblages that engage in becoming. Like the flora that is its namesake, the rhizome is vast, tentacular, and many-faced, shooting off in all directions and lacking a cohesive nucleus that serves as a point of origin. Lacking such an originating point, the rhizome does not exist as a subject or object, but rather as a multiplicity that is in motion between and beneath stratifying processes of subjectification and signification. Rhizomes are *becoming*, not being; the rhizome denies logics of being, subjectification, and total organization by continually and simultaneously facing both the strata that would organize it and the body without organs that undoes it.

Deleuze and Guattari emphasize rhizomes as distinct from 'root-books,' which follow the logic of being and possess a "noble, signifying, and subjective organic interiority" (5). In contrast with the subterranean, multi-nodal, decentred image of a rhizome, Deleuze and Guattari assign the root-book the image of a tree. In this image, the tree purports to possess a kind of inevitable, inherent logic: beginning from a single seed or nucleus, the tree grows upwards and outwards from this nuclear point of origin, which always remains the central and eternal site of its subjectivity and which dictates its signification. In this way, the root-book builds on itself *arborescently*, in that it assumes a rooted nucleus that functions as a central point that grounds it as a perceivable, signifiable subject. Root-books thus follow the law of "the One that becomes two," continually expanding from a central node that serves as the locus of origin (*ibid.*).

In contrast with this image of the tree as wholly subjectified and signified, rhizomes are both asubjective and asignifying. They do not sprout from a single seed that serves as their site of origin. Rather, rhizomes possess both an internal and external multiplicity—that is, they are irreducible to a singular subject- or object-hood, and they are instead heterogeneous and multi-nodal, with no signifiable nucleus or centre. Deleuze and Guattari write, "There is no unity to serve as a pivot in the object, or to divide into a subject" (8). Rhizomes are neither subjects nor objects, but rather multiplicities that continually eschew the stratification that would assign them as such. In place of subject-hood and signification, rhizomes possess "only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions" that move, heave, and interact, but never wholly localize or stratify (*ibid.*).

Returning to Browning's film, I argue that *Freaks* proceeds rhizomatically, as a multiplicitous filmic assemblage of asignifying and asubjective ruptures

lacking a nucleic point of origin that would cause it to congeal into a totalizing moral fiction. By invoking rhizomatic movement through its episodic, perhaps even disjointed, nature, *Freaks* succeeds in resisting the subjectification and signification that would neatly close the loop on its moral ruminations. Instead of a well-oiled cautionary tale, *Freaks* is a pastiche of asignifying movements and sensations, imperceptible in its motions and never coalescing into a cinematic organism, even as it stratifies and destratifies around its characters and plot.

Freaks: Children, Criminals, Creatures

Freaks opens with a hand ripping through the title card. The viewer alights mid-sideshow, as a carnival barker entices the crowd with a menagerie of "living, breathing monstrosities." These freaks, the barker warns his audience both onscreen and off, have a code "unto themselves. Offend one, and you offend them all." Someone screams as the crowd peers into a fenced pit housing, while the barker describes what was "once a beautiful woman."

On this ominous note, the story flashes back. The carnival shtick of the barker acts as a framing device, the film's characteristic dissonance immediately evident from the first optimistic twangs of circus music. The viewer appears to be set up for a fairly cut and dry reversal of expectations, a cautionary tale in good moral standing. Beauty becomes beast; spectacle of wonder becomes spectacle of terror; and, as always, things are never what they seem.

The first time we see the freaks themselves, however, they are idyllically situated outside of the sideshow context, on the grounds of a French estate. Their 'caretaker' explains to the estate owner that she likes "to take them into the sunshine and let them play like children." Seeing the freaks likened to children of God in an Eden-like context endears them to the estate owner and, by extension, positions the audience to also think favourably—if paternalistically—about them.

The words of the carnival barker hint at something more sinister, even as the viewer is brought inside with both the freaks and their able-bodied comrades, such as dancer Venus and clown Phroso. This sinister overhang problematizes the patronizing simplicity of the garden scene, as close-ups of the performers' faces work to distinguish them as individuals rather than freaks *en masse*.

The perception of the freaks as children, and therefore innocent of adult sin, is also problematized

in the first scene between protagonist Hans and his fiancé Frieda. Played by real-life siblings Harry and Daisy Earles, Hans and Frieda both have a form of dwarfism that results in proportionately small statures, most likely pituitary dwarfism. Unlike fellow cast member Angelo Rossitto, whose dwarfism was classified as disproportionate, Harry and Daisy resemble physio-typical children even at full adult maturity.

When we first meet Hans, he is smitten with aerialist and “big woman” Cleo and is worried that she will scoff at his attempts at gallantry. Offering Cleo her cape, Hans asks, “Are you laughing at me?” Cleo responds, “Why no monsieur [...] Why should I laugh at you?” Hans: “Most big people do. They don’t realize I’m a man, with the same feelings they have.” That Hans is, first, both a sexual and romantic being and, second, capable of adultery—as we see later on when he leaves Frieda and marries Cleo—contradicts the chaste, Christian imagery of the freaks in nature. Hans is a man as we conventionally and historically classify them: he’s employed, owns property, is physically fit and proportionate, and is intent on procuring a wife. Yet frequent close-ups of his resoundingly boyish appearance no doubt intend to discomfit the viewer, even as they form a sense of attachment to Hans as protagonist.

Already, then, the viewer’s perception of the freaks is in flux, as the film’s own stance territorializes and deterritorializes around them. To this assemblage, *Freaks* adds a series of quick scenes and vignettes introducing other sideshow performers in resolutely ‘adult’ contexts: intersex performer Josephine/Joseph is catcalled by male acrobats, and she is herself sexually attracted to strongman Hercules; conjoined twins Daisy and Violet bicker about Daisy’s fiancé Roscoe, a female impersonator who wants Violet to stop drinking so Daisy won’t be hung-over in the morning; Olga Roderick, a ‘bearded lady,’ gives birth to a baby delivered into the capable feet of ‘armless wonder’ Frances O’Connor.

Freaks thus proceeds rhizomatically, as an asignifying, asubjective multiplicity “of *n* dimensions” (Deleuze and Guattari 9). Differential iteration is inherent to the film, and its disjointed nature is a result of the nullification of its overarching narrative’s supremacy. Not a root-book with sedentary points, *Freaks* is “always in the middle” of its own moral and narrative considerations (25).

Asignifying Episode-ism

Other readings of the film criticize its disjointed, episodic structure as an aesthetic flaw and, even, a moral failing. In their article on benevolent exploitation and visual culture, Jay McRoy and Guy Crucianelli claim that *Freaks*’ simultaneous eliciting of audience sympathy and alienation of the viewer works to “reinscribe the very binary logics through which ‘normalcy’ is policed and reaffirmed” (257).

McRoy and Crucianelli seem to only conceive of ‘freakishness’ as the dark side of normalcy, however. The binary logic they attribute to *Freaks* is in fact a logic they impose on the film, precisely because they cannot reconcile its differential episode-ism alongside their own under-interrogated notions of normality and abnormality. They seem perturbed by the very idea of freakishness, admonishing with the same fell swoop both the exploitation and fascination of *Freaks*’ cinematic gaze and the ambivalent nature of the freaks it gazes upon. Aesthetically, they criticize the film for the seemingly random sequences featuring the ‘actual freaks’ that disrupt the main storyline. These sequences, they claim, “destabilize” the plot (McRoy and Crucianelli 260). Thematically, they criticize the film for manufacturing these sequences in order to stress the humanity of the performers in such a way that enables the viewer to cling onto their own sense of putative normality. It is the very disparate nature of these sequences, however, their asignifying episode-ism, that works to disrupt this normative chain of signification—something McRoy and Crucianelli fail to address.

Instead, McRoy and Crucianelli emphasize and rebuke these sequences as throwing “into further relief the freaks’ physical differences” (McRoy and Crucianelli 260). In other words, McRoy and Crucianelli can only perceive of the freaks as stratified organisms—“hierarchized organizations, organized transcendences” (Deleuze and Guattari 159)—and not as assemblages facing bodies without organs and open to passages of intensities. Deleuze and Guattari write, “The BwO howls: ‘They’ve made me an organism! They’ve wrongfully folded me! They’ve stolen my body!’” (ibid). I argue that McRoy and Crucianelli do a similar disservice to the freaks, wrongfully folding them, stratifying them, and suspending their difference in oppositional paralysis to a fixed notion of embodied, identitarian sameness.

McRoy and Crucianelli claim that the episodic structure of *Freaks* mirrors that of an actual sideshow, and as such it promotes, they write, “divergent

responses simultaneously refuting and reaffirming the dichotomy between ‘normal/abnormal,’ and denying explicit identification at every turn” (McRoy and Crucianelli 262). Importantly—and, I would argue, incorrectly—they intend this as a critique. But they also unintentionally demonstrate a Deleuzo-Guattarian point: that these titular freaks evade identitarian capture. They cannot be over-coded; they are multiplicities defined only by abstract lines of flight or deterritorialization.

McRoy and Crucianelli thus impose onto *Freaks* not only the binary logic of normalcy-freakishness that they criticize the film for reifying, but also the expectation of narrative linearity that they admonish it for lacking. Reading *Freaks* as instead self-consciously and intentionally episodic helps elucidate the formal ways in which the film un-works itself as a cohesive fiction and actively resists the very binary logic McRoy and Crucianelli accuse it of possessing. In particular, scenes that showcase the ‘freak’ performers act as asignifying ruptures, “lines of deterritorialization down which [the film] constantly flees” (Deleuze and Guattari 9). These vignettes, as Rachel Adams writes, demonstrate the performers’ “talents and personalities but make little effort to unify the characters through a common storyline” (Adams 65).

In one such scene, the Human Worm, played by performer Prince Randian, rolls and lights a cigarette using only his teeth. Randian, who was born with tetra-amelia syndrome, characterized by the absence of all four limbs, also performed the cigarette trick as part of his sideshow routine outside the diegesis of the film.

The scene occurs just before the halfway point and constitutes a more or less complete narrative break. As Randian lights a cigarette, another character—Rollo, an able-bodied acrobat—is speaking at length about his own act. While the contents of Rollo’s speech are essentially unimportant—in that they are a non sequitur and wholly unrelated to the main plot—the monologue creates an auditory backdrop, against which the viewer both watches Randian’s trick and watches him listening, establishing a certain temporary subjectivity.

Randian is positioned stomach-down on an elevated stage floor so that his face is level with Rollo’s. Beginning the trick, he makes brief direct eye contact with the camera, just before the shot switches to a close-up of his face and mouth. In the close-up, Randian again makes eye contact with the camera, this time for a more sustained period. As

he manipulates the cigarette and match, the closely trained shot creates a sense of physical intimacy and conspiratorial camaraderie. Randian lights the cigarette and finishes the trick, and the shot switches back to its previous, wider vantage point. Rollo the acrobat exits, and we are left with a solo shot of Randian smoking his lit cigarette. The intimacy of the close-up is disrupted somewhat by this final shot, in which the viewer is reminded of Randian’s corporeality and its perceived alterity. This intimacy is never fully extinguished, however, reinforced by the camera lingering on Randian’s solo form.

The oscillation between close-up and wide shot has a destabilizing effect, in which the viewer is left uncertain of their own positionality—and, by extension, their own corporeality. Movement is emphasized on a number of levels: on the micro, in the minute re-positionings of Randian’s mouth and lips as he manipulates the cigarette and matchbox; on the macro, in the seeming ‘immobility’ of Randian’s body in relation to the fast-talking, fast-walking Rollo; and on the cinematic, in the camera’s vacillating relationship to subject and viewer.

“Movement has an essential relation to the imperceptible,” Deleuze and Guattari write; it is “always in relation to a given threshold of perception” (280-81). The thresholds of perception in this scene are in flux, in such a way that *what* they perceive is never pinned down for long. Randian’s movements, even in conspiratorial close-up, continue to “occur elsewhere” than the viewer’s fixed gaze (281). Thus, our perception—that which we can view and describe—does not, in the words of Deleuze and Guattari, “reside between a subject and object, but rather in the movement serving as the limit of that relation” (282). We can look “only at the movements,” which remain consistently below and above the threshold of cinematic perception (ibid).

Vignettes such as this invite the viewer to peek and pass *between* scenes, *between* points on a line of becoming, constituting “a zone of proximity and indiscernibility” (Deleuze and Guattari 293). Existing intermezzo as such, they not only trouble the film’s narrative cohesion, but they also work to unravel the closed-circuit moralism of its main plot.

In perhaps *Freaks*’ most infamous scene, the freaks welcome Cleo as one of their own at the reception following her marriage to Hans. The feast marks the first time the viewer sees the freaks together as a collective, having previously only been featured solo or in small groups. It is also the only scene in the film demarcated by its own title card.

The narrative flow is thus held in suspense for a brief moment, even as the scene constitutes a significant turning point in the plot. By this point, the audience is well aware of both Cleo's hatred of the freaks she is being invited to join and her plot to poison Hans, inherit his massive fortune, and marry her lover, the strongman Hercules. As the night goes on, Cleo gets increasingly drunk, and her ability to mask her true disgust and contempt for her new husband is compromised.

During the feast, the visibly disabled are entertained by more seemingly able-bodied comrades, such as a sword swallower and fire-eater. Johnny Eck the Half Boy jokingly calls out for KooKoo the Bird Girl to stop dancing on the table and give someone else a chance. The consumption of sideshow entertainment by the freaks themselves troubles received notions of exploitation and spectacle, as well as the assumption that displays of freakery and alterity serve primarily to reassure spectators of their own normality. When freaks perform for fellow freaks, whose normality is on the line?

"We'll make her one of us—a loving cup!" cries dwarf Angeleno. The freaks begin to chant, as Angeleno passes around a communal goblet: "We accept her, we accept her. One of us, one of us."

"They're going to make you one of them, my peacock," Cleo's illicit lover Hercules croons, using her stage name—The Peacock of the Air—as a pejorative. In doing so, the boundary between Circassian and freakish moniker is eroded. Cleo, as an organized organism and a subject, is destabilized. The becoming of the wedding feast—a becoming-one-of-us, a becoming-made-one-of-them—threatens her sense of identitarian cohesion. Cleo clings to her subjectivity, screaming "Freaks! You filth! Make me one of you, will you!"

The freaks invite Cleo to form rhizomes with them; as multiplicities, they invite her to increase their dimensions, to "change in nature and connect with other multiplicities" (Deleuze and Guattari 9). This invitation horrifies Cleo and offends her subjectivity because, in the "relative deterritorialization" of being accepted by the freaks, the "perpetual immanence of absolute deterritorialization" comes into view (56). It is a "fearsome involution calling [her] toward unheard-of becomings" and freakish alliances (240). In rejecting this alliance, Cleo rejects a becoming-molecular that has the potential to undermine "the great moral powers of family, career, and conjugality" (233). In other words, Cleo denies the process

of becoming that would enable her to become-imperceptible, and in so doing she makes her own villainy painfully clear.

Later, as Cleo carries a sick, poisoned Hans to his caravan, the freaks watch her closely. Rejecting their alliance, clinging to her own subjectivity, to the strata of organism and signification, Cleo and her murderous plot are most assuredly perceived. The veil is lifted, and Cleo the molar aggregate—the molar *aggressor*—becomes all too perceptible. The remainder of the film, up to the murder of Hercules and Cleo's mutilation, is peppered with sustained shots of the freaks watching from variously concealed locations, intently focused on the middle distance just beyond the camera's filmic grasp.

The tense, silent montage is immediately juxtaposed by the film's climax. The freaks (who, throughout the film, have been featured in mostly static or closely trained shots) move rapidly, surreptitiously, and stealthily through a storm that has rendered the circus caravan procession motionless. Movement is again emphasized and 'enfreaked.'² The camera tracks Johnny Eck as he ducks beneath caravan wheels, barely keeping pace with him. Jerry Austin hurls a switchblade into Hercules' side too fast for the camera to catch.

As both Cleo and Hercules frantically cast around for a glimpse of their attackers, the freaks remain undetectable—imperceptible. They are a swarming, a freaking, a becoming of freakish imperceptibility.

The camera fades to black, and the specificities of Cleo's torture are left uncertain.³ When the audience next sees her, it is as she was at the film's opening—a bloated, monstrous chicken with a woman's head, squawking limply in a sideshow cage. On one level, therefore, justice plays out in *Freaks* as the inversion of freakishness as a moral category. Cleo is undoubtedly the most monstrously evil of *Freaks*' cast of characters, her outer beauty masking a cruel, sadistic nature. By rendering her a freak, Cleo's monstrosity of character is revealed and externalized as a monstrosity of form. What is more, she is made the most

2. From David Fancy's "Affirmative Freakery, Freaky Methodologies" (2018).

3. Significant modifications were made to the final cut of *Freaks* following overwhelmingly negative test screening scores, including the conclusion of the chase scene, Cleo's mutilation, and the original epilogue depicting a castrated Hercules. The cut footage is considered lost (Mank 2005, Matthews 2009, Smith 2012).

freakish of all the freaks, matching her profound villainy. Nevertheless, chicken-Cleo is categorically different than the freaks whom she despises. While these freaks are continually undergoing a process of becoming-imperceptible, chicken-Cleo is unable to follow suit. Instead, she is hyper-perceptible as an object of disgust, fear, disdain, and pity by spectators both within and outside of the film's diegesis. She is not a body without organs, despite her literal mutilation, but rather an organism that has been totally stratified, made visible, rendered perceptible as a subject, and closed off from rhizomatic processes of becoming. In this light, Cleo's punishment is not so much being made into a freak as it is being made a molar aggregate, a wholly stratified organism that cannot move imperceptibly and cannot proceed rhizomatically. Indeed, the hyper-perceptibility of chicken-Cleo's monstrosity demonstrates her to not be a freak at all. Thus, despite the superficial moralism of Cleo's fate, 'freak' as a formal classification remains imperceptible in *Freaks*, as the very absence or deterritorialization of the category to which it purports to refer.

Immobility & Imperceptibility

My own personal affective response to the film makes it difficult for me to perceive the freaks in this instance as cold-blooded killers; the terror this scene might incite is instead felt as a judicious thrill. As the freaks descend on Cleo and Hercules, I feel a swell of anticipatory satisfaction. But the peace that comes with the delivery of justice is troubled by the film's final scene, in which we see Hans—now retired and living in opulence—genuinely remorseful for his part in Cleo's demise. He stammers to his former lover Frieda, who has come to console him, "Please, go away. I can't see no one." Just as Cleo's punishment can be seen as not so much being made a freak as being rendered a molar aggregate, Hans' remorse pertains not so much to his hand in her mutilation as to his role in stratifying her, in making her an organism and robbing her once and for all of her chance of becoming assemblage, of becoming-imperceptible, of becoming *one of them*. Chicken-Cleo is hyper-perceptible, and Hans "can't see no one;" perhaps Hans' role in Cleo's stratification also robs him of his own freakishness, his own imperceptibility, rendering him unable to perceive the freaks' movement as anything other than the creation of monstrous, molar forms.

The freakishness of *Freaks*' is thus also imperceptible because it does not graft easily onto

the moral equation that it itself establishes, in which the simple inversion of exterior beauty and interior monstrosity can absolve the world of evil. The mutilation of Cleo is not merely retribution for her hoodwinking and poisoning of Hans, although a certain amount of justice is no doubt at play. More than this: Cleo is not made into a freak among freaks. She is not a freak like them; she is not accepted; she is not 'one of us.' Cleo does not become imperceptible, but on the contrary, she becomes resoundingly perceptible—becomes spectacle. Despite her seeming otherness, chicken-Cleo is not a dismantled body without organs. She is a subject, "nailed down as one" and bound by the great strata of significance and subjectification (Deleuze and Guattari 159). The freaks, in other words, have made Cleo an organism; they have folded her; they have stolen her body. As such, and despite the undoubted monstrosity of chicken-Cleo, she remains welded to the strata, unable to become-imperceptible despite her new freakish status. She is a stranger to the cosmic formula of imperceptibility and becoming—and everyone can see it.

Thus *Freaks/freaks*, both the film and the multitude, move imperceptibly down lines of deterritorialization. The film's disjointed, episodic structure—far from detracting from its overall aesthetic value—is a formal dismantling of film-artefact-as-organism, perhaps even the production of a filmic body without organs. This drive towards absolute deterritorialization destabilizes the main narrative's moralistic foundation, denying a simple inversion of monstrosity and instead enabling a proliferation of freakish difference. What becomes momentarily visible, intermezzo through the rain, lightning, and muddy caravan wheels, is a vacillating, rupturing, asignifying multiplicity of molecular freaks; a *freaking*, proliferating and picking up speed so as to undermine the great molar—and moral—powers at play.



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Against the Deterministic Moving Images of Facial Recognition Software

The moving images of facial recognition technologies (FRTs) is a biopolitical tactic that targets the bodily site of the face, operating as a mode of deterministic control by translating moving images of the face into calculable material that are adapted into contemporary governmentality.¹ While much of the current critiques of FRT are focused on privacy and surveillance, in particular as they relate to ubiquitous State and corporate big data practices, FRT's most effective form of biopolitical control is as a gatekeeper to the resources of citizenship wherein the moving images generated by FRT acts to identify, verify, and sort access to a hierarchy of resources such as wealth, health care, and education (to name only three).² As an example, *The New York Times* article "How It Feels When Software Watches You Take Tests" details the use of FRT to identify and track individu-

als within virtual testing environments. Such a case showcases how FRT operates as a moving image technology: the camera records the face within the testing environment; the software then slices that recording into still digital images which are then individually processed by the detection mechanisms of the software, which allows for the more basic facial tracking described in the article; if there are "abnormalities" the recorded moving images are then watched for suspicious behavior under the rationales of academic integrity. However, in the example of Sergine Beaubrun's experiences, her dark-skinned face was unable to be detected by the software; without a detected face, an FRT cannot progress to the identification and verification stages and hence she was unable to be "recognized" by the technology. As the article exemplifies, the test-monitoring versions of the technology struggles when operating on individuals with darker skin and/or disabilities, thereby locking entire populations by labelling such faces as abnormal or simply unrecognizable (Patil and Bromwich, 2020). Similar issues have been found when FRT is used to monitor public housing, advise on loans and mortgages, assist in job interviews, and medically diagnose skin conditions.³

The reporting from *The New York Times* adds to the abundance of research showing the varied and widespread problematics of FRT. Yet, the "errors" and lapses in recognition and malfunctioning of FRT

1. I am using the definition that the authors of the white paper "Face Technologies in the Wild" do in defining what an FRT is: "we use the term 'facial recognition technologies' as a catch all phrase to describe a set of technologies that process imaging data to perform a range of tasks on human faces, including detecting a face, identifying a unique individual, and estimating demographic attributes" (3). Erik Learned-Miller, Vicente Ordóñez, Jamie Morgenstern, and Joy Buolamwini. "Face Technologies in the Wild." Algorithmic Justice League. May 29, 2020.
2. My understanding of the concept of citizenship resources is formed in conversation with Btihaj Ajana who argues that the notion includes actual resources, such as wealth, health care, and education, but must also incorporate the fact that citizenship is "more about issues of access to resources, services, spaces and privileges" (12). In this way, biopolitical tactics like FRT can be deployed to restrict individuals and populations from even being considered for resources, to say nothing of direct access to the resources themselves. Btihaj Ajana. *Governing Through Biometrics*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

3. Ginia Bellafante. "The Landlord Wants Facial Recognition in Its Rent-Stabilized Buildings. Why?" *New York Times*. March 28, 2019; "What Your Face May Tell Lenders About Whether You're Creditworthy." *The Wall Street Journal*. June 10, 2019; Charles Hymas. "AI used for first time in job interviews in UK to find best applicants." *The Telegraph*. September 27, 2019; Rimmer, Abi. "Presenting Clinical Features on Darker Skin: Five Minutes with ... Malone Mukwende." *Bmj*, vol. 369, 2020, pp. 2578.

biopolitically target many of the same marginalized individuals and populations as when the technology functions perfectly: while various reporting makes clear that the wide and undeniably invasive surveillant net of digital technologies within China is not the Orwellian nightmare it appears to be on the surface, it is certain that the haphazard linking of regional and national big data-driven tactics have normalized an ever-present digital infrastructure that is used to track, reward, and punish its citizens (Mozur, 2018). What is more alarming is how these daily acts of algorithmic governance have been heightened into necropolitical and biopolitical applications of the same technologies within the networked infrastructure used to target the Uighur Muslim minority within China (Mozur and Pelroth, 2020). Such tactics and strategies are not limited to China: I have recently written on how the United States utilizes FRT within policies such as the Biometric Air Exit to control access to citizenship resources (Tucker, 2020), which fits within the larger American increase of interwoven big data-biometric apparatuses deployed under national security that also includes ICE's enforcement of its immigration laws (Edmondson, 2019); in Ontario, Canada, the provincial police force was found to be using FRT that was connected to the controversial, massive, and extremely opaque Clearview AI dataset, without any initial oversight or auditing (Gillis and Allen, 2020).

These examples illustrate that one of the greatest tensions in a contemporary governmentality is between a desire for deterministic systems built from stable data, often supported by apparatuses like FRT, versus the affective indeterminate bodies and populations that cannot be formed into the sort of recognizable and stable categories that the State can more easily control. Reconstructing and analyzing the moving images of FRT makes clear that contemporary governmentality very often leverages the power that big data collection and processing produces; this is possible, as this paper will explain, because data is not objective but, rather, shaped by the various forces and methodologies that gather, store, and process it. In this way, it is not simply the wielding of an FRT in the examples above that showcase the technologies' problematics; FRTs' dangers are also inscribed by the infrastructures that support its development and deployment, including data practices that value uniformity and standardization in deterministic systems.

FRT Under Biopolitical Governmentality

In a basic way, Michel Foucault, within his lecture *The Birth of Biopolitics*, argues that governmentality is conservative and serves its own continued existence and power above all else (1979; 2004). In his 2010 second edition of *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society*, Mitchell Dean contends that although contemporary governmentality is more globally-centered than that of a 19th-century nation-state, the basic mechanisms and desires of governmentality remain: the art of governing still targets, above all, the preservation of the state by way of a "preservation of a relation of forces" (231). The boundaries of an individual's freedoms and a State's interventions set the limits for the state's practices and application of governmentality. For FRT, these limits take place at the site of the face, where the technology attempts to match each face to one that fits within a predetermined category of citizenship while labelling some as threats/risks; for those with "unrecognizable" faces, the barriers to access to citizenship resources grow even taller. My own article "Meta-Watching: Towards an Ontology of Facial Recognition Technologies" explains how the specific moving images generated and processed with FRT produce a double-watching mechanism that makes the technology especially vulnerable to biopolitical tactics.⁴ As exemplified by FRT, nation-states are deeply invested in probabilistic deterministic systems of social sorting, stable categorization, and low variance, as a means to generate control, but also as a general political principle by which to run a conservative State acting always towards its own self-preservation.

The moving images of FRT are a contemporary example of such a self-preserving tactic, one that has been made much more complex and opaque by the last decade's integration of big data, artificial intelligence (AI), and machine learning into the technology. FRT exemplifies the utilization of a narrow AI that can turn extracted data into bureaucratized materials: in their essay "The Nooscope Manifested" Matteo Pasquinelli and Vladan Joler describe contemporary big data apparatuses as fueled by a computational assembly line of brute force computing that strives for a stable model that can statically replicate different aspects of the world; this stable model is built from three

4. "Meta-Watching: Towards an Ontology of Facial Recognition Technologies" won the 2019 Student Film Studies Association of Canada award and has been submitted for forthcoming publication.

modalities, “training, classification and prediction,” that aim to render the world a series of patterns that can be extracted, recognized, and generated (7). Such models are built for speed and efficiency, a process of optimization that is, by its nature, reductive; further, because machine learning and AI is built entirely on what the model already knows, it struggles to recognize and process any new element, ignoring any new element by not recognizing it, or manipulating it so that it fits the pre-existing model in some form. Given that these probabilistic models give the illusion of objectivity, it is obvious why they are eagerly included in the computational architecture of tactics such as FRT. As scholars like Meredith Broussard (2018), Safiye Umoja Noble (2018), and Cathy O’Neill (2016) have compellingly argued, these models are very often biased towards intersectional-disadvantaged populations and individuals, increasing those individuals’ and populations’ barriers to the resources of citizenship. Likewise, media scholars like Wendy Hui Kyong Chun (2013), Orit Halpern (2015), and Lorna Roth (2019) have looked at the ways in which technologies like FRT are folded into media ecologies that leverage previous biopolitically-motivated image-making and image-circulation practices to generate deterministic and data-driven moving and still images for bureaucratic management under governmentality.

The statistical thinking central to the moving images of FRT can be enacted via big data apparatuses that not only operate under the rationales of security but also, as Judith Butler argues in *Precarious Life*, becomes means by which to produce precarity: as the examples from this essay’s introduction demonstrate, contemporary biopolitical tactics and governmentality produce precarity to the point of erasure for some individuals and populations in order to generate and maintain life for other individuals and populations (xv-xx). Butler’s “injurability” and precarity are expanded further by Jasbir Puar in *The Right to Maim* and the notion of “debility”. Puar identifies the “right to maim,” via technologies of security, that aim to debilitate, disable, and injure populations so that those populations can be deterministically measured, controlled, and folded into other parts of a biopolitical economy and system, and, echoing Butler, making them vulnerable to maiming, framing its governmental rationales within “risk, prognosis, life chances...a practice of rendering populations available for statistically likely injury” (xvii-xviii). Looking again at the example of FRT’s use within testing environments, mortgage applications and health care, the moving images of FRT relies upon data that is massively ex-

tracted at the site of the body and processed through AI-driven computational models; the technology is then used to disable and injure liminal individuals and populations by way of sorting those who deserve less or lesser resources, or by ignoring, thus erasing individuals and populations altogether. Injury and debility do not have to be physical; as the current global Covid-19 pandemic has underlined, the hampering of the generational accumulation of health, wealth, and resources is another mode to make certain populations “available for statistically likely injury.”

Targeting the Face

As a media technology, the face is essential to FRT’s image-making within deterministic governmentality: the face is both unique enough to provide the materials needed for automation of the identification and authentication of unique identities; however, from a biopolitical perspective, the face is also generic enough to be a template such that the object of the face can be *datafied* and incorporated into large scale tactics and strategies. As Tom Gunning (1997) and others have argued, such logics underlie image-making practices dating back to the 19th-century work into eugenics by Francis Galton and signalitics by Alphonse Bertillon, continuing through into later cinematic treatments of the face.⁵ However, earlier versions of physiognomy have been made more complex by advances in computational biometrics, generating what Pugliese calls “biotypologies” which operate under “somatechnics” which he defines as “the indissociable way in which the body of a subject is always already technologized and mediated by cultural inscriptions” (322). Anna Munster, in conversation with Deleuze and Guattari, names the specific somatechnics at the site of the face as facialization, “a system of codifying bodies according to a centralized conception of subjectivity and agency in which the face, literally or metaphorically, is the conduit for signifying, expressing and organizing the entire body” (122). As Munster argues, however, such a system leaves little space for the unique combinations of machine and human interaction wherein affect is “a process of composition that is sustained through a relation between body and expression, representation, map and knowledge” (139).

5. I have a forthcoming chapter on this topic titled “Photogénie and Facial Recognition Software” in *Face Forward: New Approaches to the Face on Screen*. Ed. Alice Maurice. Edinburgh University Press, 2022.

This lack is especially apparent in biopolitical applications of FRT, wherein the computational models that enact FRT's vision completely eradicate the affective face so that it, and the body it represents, can be more easily deterministically rendered and controlled. Further, drawing from Levinas, Butler explains "[t]o respond to the face, to understand its meaning, means to be awake to what is precarious in another life, or, rather the precariousness of life itself...It has to be an understanding of the precariousness of the Other" (134). The tension in confronting another's face is that it also recalls one's own precarity, which biopolitical imaging of the face leverages as the fearful rationales needed to implement strategies of security that utilize FRT. Yet, as discussed in the introduction to this essay, representations and circulations of faces are also essential to an individual or population being recognized and given access to the resources of citizenship: if a face is more able to be seen, it is more likely to be accepted as human, and therefore have value within biopolitics (141-2). This paradox of visibility as it relates to the face is core to the problematics within the moving images of FRT: the presence or absence of faces within the datasets used in machine learning to train the technology greatly influences how "visible" a face is within an FRT; yet, making one's self visible to such an apparatus, via enrollment in a data system and/or making oneself available to an FRT-enabled camera, also means making one's self a potential Other who can be biopolitically targeted and sorted. In this way, the moving images of FRT perfectly illustrate the crux of contemporary governmentality: the flux between insecurity and security, stable and chaotic, which pits governmentality's rationales towards determinism against indeterminate systems of bodily affect. Biopolitics within governmentality acts at the thresholds of sites of local indeterminacy, particularly affect; big data apparatuses, like FRT, attempt to contain that indeterminacy so that it can be made logical within governmentality.

Disruptive Relationality & Bodily Affect

René Dietrich proposes an alternative to this system which she calls "disruptive relationality," defined as "centering principles of relationality [so that those principles] exceed what officially gets to count as political in settler colonial contexts" (68). Such an approach utilizes the so-called chaos marked as dangerous within governmentality so that such zones resist creating hierarchies of life, and instead

examines who or what is given the power to define and reinforce "life" and "how" that power is enacted. This thinking is expanded by Indigenous AI's position paper which articulates "a multiplicity of Indigenous knowledge systems and technological practices that can and should be brought to bear on the 'question of AI'" (Lewis, Jason Edward et al, 4). When confronting FRT, this does not mean making more diverse data sets or programming teams: disruptive relationality leverages the chaotic and unstable elements of life to generate an entirely new conception of systems beyond governmentality, such that the indeterminacy of bodies is allowed and encouraged to exist in complex and affective relation to other bodies, species, and the land completely outside of the prior models and data-body relationships. Such disruptive relationality surfaces in the 'Ōlelo Programming initiative, a project translating the English within programming language into indigenous Hawaiian languages (Muzyka, 2018), as well as the futurity-driven work of digital artist and filmmaker Skawennati.⁶ While not directly grappling with FRT, these examples show how Indigenous epistemologies aligned with disruptive relationality can produce novel spaces to engage with current technologies as well as imagine alternate uses and futures outside of biopolitical governmentality.

Further initial materials for resistance to biopolitical applications of FRT can be found in the works of Lisa Gitelman, Virginia Jackson, and Yanni Loukissas. In their introduction to the collection *Raw Data is an Oxymoron*, Gitelman and Jackson stress that one of the first steps to such resistance is recognizing that data is always "cooked" by the productions of knowledge that generate its existence; data does not emerge from the world, but rather is gathered by various operations and methodologies that themselves are structured by normative powers that may well be invested in a larger governmentality. It is therefore essential to look at the big data biometrics, its models, and its "conditions of inquiry, conditions that are at once material, social, and ethical" (4). Gitelman, Jackson, and Loukissas all go to lengths to underline that data are not singular but are pluralistic by nature, and that the contempo-

6. Skawennati's work is wide-ranging but I am thinking specifically here of her co-establishing of AbTeC with Jason Edward Lewis: "Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace is an Aboriginally determined research-creation network whose goal is to ensure Indigenous presence in the web pages, online environments, video games, and virtual worlds that comprise cyberspace." (<http://abtec.org/#about>. Accessed January 6, 2021).

rary combination of technological and biological material present in big data are also potential spaces of intervention: Loukissas, specifically, insists that if big data biometrics like FRT aims to collect everything on a subject to operationalize it, that data also contain local and situated matter and knowledge that is unique and specific to the subject. While biopolitical applications of FRTs are invested in principles of reduction and simplification, a focus on the locality of data, in particular at the site of the affective face, demands a high allowance for indeterminacy in order to better reflect and respect the lived experiences of those bodies and populations within big data apparatuses.

Such thinking can be combined with Dietrich's "disruptive relationally" as well as further writing from David Mitchell and S. Synder's work in 2019 *The Matter of Disability*. The authors re-situate Butler and Puar's writing on precarity and debility in conversation with Karen Barad (2007) and the understanding that matter is forever in a "complex, interactive role in the configuration of knowledge and the world" (16) wherein matter is forever interactive and iteratively relational to all other matter, defined by "intra-agential encounters" (16). Like Barad, the authors focus on the specific agency of disabled bodies that is rooted in the indeterminacy of matter and the chaos of inter-material relations that are opposed to the human attempts to deterministically control the world and its bodies/matter/material. Further, such bodies are also a corporeal framework that are themselves rich with networked and affective materials in resistance, localities that make the datasets within FRT and its training team with potential narratives and relations. Focusing on the body, and the face specifically, captured within the moving images of FRT, reverses the dynamics within Munster's understanding of facialization and allows the face to be emblematic of an individual's lived materiality; the system of codifying bodies within FRT is re-engineered such that the face is a conduit for the body's indeterminacy and affect. Recognizing the interconnected chaos of affective bodies means following the principles laid out in work such as Sasha Costanza-Chock's *Design Justice* which advocates resisting how "larger systems—including norms, values, and assumptions—are encoded in and reproduced through the design of sociotechnical systems" (20); this thinking is expanded further by the Design Justice Network, whose principles resist the end products of deterministic systems and instead demand focus on the impact of technologies, such as FRT, on communities and the individual bodies they are ap-

plied to.⁷

Such a view also demands that we integrate the ways in which AI models are cooked and disrupt our understandings of technologies like FRT by way of unearthing the localities within. In a straightforward way, it means reclaiming the faces rendered data within FRT, pulling them from the black-box mechanics of its training and deployments, and seeing them as individual entities; for "unrecognizable" faces, it means offering systems that do not template and reduce faces under the rationales of automation, speed, and efficiency. Doing so means grappling with the individual differences that each complex body and system of affect creates, alongside the biopolitical manipulation of affects at the level of population as a form of both understanding and resisting biopolitics and governmentality. It is at these sites of quantum indeterminacy, which network in relationally and specific corporeal (potentially alternate) frameworks, where we might begin to establish possible strategies and tactics that, within the flux and game of governmentality itself, grant tools and resistance against the damaging aspects of biopolitical and necropolitical acts. When confronting a biopolitical tactic like FRT, a high tolerance for locality and indeterminacy allows a potential break beyond the predictive control of biopolitical regimes while also providing future resistive paths that also point beyond governmentality to imagine life beyond nonhuman species in relation with the land and the integration of technologies into human life. This tolerance resists neoliberal calls for diversity and instead insists on equity, and forms of resistance and care that are in direct opposition to the vast majority of FRT's deployments.

Conclusion

Initial resistive tools and strategies against FRT take the form of wider public knowledge of the moving images the technology generates, leading to effective and transparent policy and regulation; they may take on more individual actions like data pollution and data camouflage, overflowing the systems with an excess of information, mirroring affect, such that big data algorithms are unable to make the bodies under its vision clear and knowable. In further opposition to big data apparatuses, this

7. The full list of the Design Justice Network Principles can be found at <https://designjustice.org/read-the-principles> (Accessed January 6, 2021).

tolerance of flow and locality jams the systems that rely on stable categories, making it so that no one category, or series of interlocking categories, is capable of any operative linear knowledge. There is already a sense of this emerging in IBM's discontinuing of its FRT development and Microsoft's halting of their FRT program, as well as American cities' whole-scale banning of such technologies (Hamilton, 2020); this can also be seen in actions like MIT moving its 80 Million Tiny Images database offline in the wake of criticism about its misogynistic and racist data categorizations (Quach, 2020).

However, the ultimate solution, in following a disruptive relationality rooted in affect alongside quantum indeterminacy, is a whole-scale shift away from prior forms of governmentality and its self-preserving forms of power. Again, this requires a foregrounding of equity and abolishment of tactics and strategies that bring violence and/or gatekeeping on the resources attached to citizenship. The seeds for this can be seen in the recent calls to defund and abolish police departments across North America and reallocate those funds to local and intra-agential areas of life that have as great an impact on public safety and potential "injury," according to Butler (public education, mental health, food scarcity, affordable housing), as security-driven apparatuses. Not coincidentally, law enforcement apparatuses have long been incredible consumers of FRT, at the forefront of their use in asymmetrical application on the populations they have been tasked to protect (Electronic Frontier Foundation, 2017). While abolishment of FRT is the most clear-cut and effective solution, the first steps towards this are diverting capital and authority from those power centres that are rationalized and operationalized against perceived threats and behaviours, thereby rearranging and replacing the dominant logics of determinate categorization and hierarchization that have been in place far too long.

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Dany Jacob

Meme-ing Jay Gatsby or Dandyism à l'Américaine: Cultural Declination of *The Great Gatsby*



"If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him."

— F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (4)

The character of Jay Gatsby fascinates beyond his century and era of creation. The recent film production of *The Great Gatsby* by Baz Luhrmann (2013) indicates a renewed interest in F. Scott Fitzgerald's glamorous illustration of America's Roaring Twenties. The allure resides in Jay Gatsby's personae and tragic fate of a dandy, a distinction often

misconstrued to identify a pompous man who pays excessive attention to his attire. Luhrmann's *Great Gatsby* recontextualizes this traditional depiction of dandyism as a caricature of masculinity through Leonardo DiCaprio's play, revitalizing the philosophical and aesthetic qualities upon which dandyism is built and reiterating its cultural importance in our

society. Originating in the 19th century, the figure of the dandy elicits questions of authenticity and performance, of established identity expressions and individualism, and of reality and simulacra. Fitzgerald explores these tropes throughout his 1925 novel, illustrating the different perceptions, practices, and responses of dandiacal behaviour in the face of contested social norms. Luhrmann, in turn, modernizes and revises dandyism by inserting his *Gatsby* in a contemporary appreciation of America's 1920s, giving *The Great Gatsby* (2013) a new layer of meaning within the sociocultural expression of masculine identity and performance in media.

The transition from the big screen to the meme culture is a clear indicator of how the audience echoed and embraced DiCaprio's on-screen (dandiacal) behaviour as part of their own, inciting a series of cultural (mis)appropriation of dandyism, adding a new tier to modeling male identity and performance. As such, the significance and the use of Jay Gatsby memes hold a unique place in the construction of contemporary cultural identities. The panoply of *Gatsby* memes on the web and in different online subcultures reinforces the recent revitalization of dandyism, indicating that the dandy is not an antiquated archetype for non-conventional identity expression. Leo-as-Gatsby memes stack and condense a rich sociocultural baggage already present in Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby* with Luhrmann's interpretation through DiCaprio's body and performance on screen. Here, I unpack and weigh these interlocking layers to render a more complete picture of the cultural impact of the dandiacal *Gatsby* as well as contemporary *Gatsby* memes and their critical relevance in social interactions. Tracing the history of the dandy figure to the proliferation of Leo-as-Gatsby imagery, I show how today's meme culture encapsulates, punctuates, and comments on the sociocultural and ontological concepts of performance, reality, and simulacra as formulated by Baudrillard and Debord.

Fitzgerald relied on his sartorial interest and knowledge in creating his male protagonists—all of whom are described in terms that classify them as dandy figures. From examining his biography, we know Fitzgerald was exposed to two different kinds of dandyism: the aesthetic dandyism introduced to American culture in the 1880s by Oscar Wilde, and the nineteenth-century French artist-dandy exemplified by Charles Baudelaire, who himself was influenced by the romantic hero popularized by British Romanticism, in particular by Lord Byron (Moers, 121). Thus, having intimate knowledge of the dandy scene and its

internal conflicts, Fitzgerald had at his disposal several models of dandyism and a variety of prototypical dandies and dandy-writers from nineteenth-century British, French, and American society and literature, all of which informed his critical reconstruction of the dandy figure in his novels. Catherine Mintler argues that:

Fitzgerald's interest in twentieth-century dandyism was shaped by the same contradictory discourses about masculinity, performances of public identity, and sartorial display that caused dandiacal dress and behavior to be regarded as controversial among nineteenth-century writers and the general public for whom they wrote. Dandyism is not an opposite construct of masculinity; rather, it is a collection of various sartorial tendencies and behaviors that provide alternatives to very rigid and narrow definitions of masculinity. (109)

The tension between Tom Buchanan and Jay Gatsby at the core of Fitzgerald's storyline resides in the performance of their masculinities: Buchanan as the archetypal American-bred *alpha male* confronts Gatsby about his gender performance, his class status, and his education – the trifecta of social American upper-class norms. In her article, Mintler describes Gatsby's combination of Wildean and Baudelairean dandyism, each type protesting a set of conventional rules. Baudelairean intellectual dandyism, drawing its ontological core from the writer and thinker Charles Baudelaire, defies socio-aesthetic norms in its sartorial expression and mannerism. Baudelaire himself was part of a long dandiacal evolution, reaching as far back as to the "father of dandyism," Beau Brummell. Baudelairean dandyism thus stands against overly obtuse and power-driven bourgeois values.

As the new economic power in 19th-century France, the bourgeoisie became the only class still able to afford luxury leisure that previously belonged exclusively to the newly-weakened aristocracy (Stanton, 78). Everything revolved around the stipulation of satisfying the taste of the bourgeoisie, despite it being uncertain and conservative. For a poet like Baudelaire whose soul desires to worship Art, bourgeois values are perceived to be vile shackles and the dandy ought to deliver humanity from them. By his superiority of spirit, the dandy is a greater social being than his society because he knows exactly what role he holds in it. Being a cold and distant observer gives him the ability to perceive his appearance with the eyes of a stranger.

Such access thus gives the dandy self-knowledge and awareness of his society, the ultimate achievement for the *artiste-poète*. This transforms dandyism into the guarantor of unbiased morality in a bourgeois-governed society. The dandy expresses modernity with grace and intelligence by rejecting contemporary sartorial styles and through his artifice contrast, he expresses the idiomatic values of beauty. By incorporating these aesthetic aspects, he creates a new identity, a brand-new individual who can exercise control over his environment. The dandy is permeated by this profound paradox: to please while being unpleasant (Stanton, 148) and despite the non-presence of dandiacal rules, the dandy seems to follow a certain code of honour to make him a man of style, as well as taste.

The second iteration of dandyism originates from Oscar Wilde's interpretation of Baudelaire's ideology and thus his own sense of dandyism. The Irish poet prefers an aesthetic dandyism that contests strict conformist gender identity and performance. For Wilde, the dandy has to be the only object of his desire and his attention, not to mention of his attitude, and by this means he rises to the level of artistic creation: as a work of art or simply as a beautiful object. The individual man is emancipated with a single value that outweighs the casting in the sweltering mass of his globalizing society. "The first duty in life is to be as *artificial* as possible" (Oscar Wilde, *Miscellanies*, 176, author's emphasis), as the poet states, highlighting the deep desire rooted in the dandy to stress his personality and through this experience, (re)discover his identity during each performance. The dandy is forced to re-experience himself and all along this search, he superimposes the masks he has accumulated and keeps his audience guessing— is this his last mask or dandy's 'real' face? Wilde's dandyism stands out mostly due to the juxtaposition of his queer identity and sexuality as part of the dandiacal expression. Prior to Wilde's association, the dandy was neither associated with homosexuality nor considered to be homosexual. Wilde simply pushed the social boundaries of gender identities by wrapping them in new rules of mannerism and performance.

Both dandyisms rely on the malleability of the projection of reality and its fragility. For the dandy Jay Gatsby then, his criticism rises against American conservative economic power and values (Baudelaire) and its conformed gender identity expression (Wilde). Contrasting with Buchanan's preoccupation with sports and women, as well as his aggressive nature, Gatsby throws these ideals back into the bourgeois void and instead offers lavish parties at a grandiose

mansion, piles of fashionable clothes, and luxury cars, arranged in such a way that shifts how we previously understood reality. Gatsby plans to 'win back' Daisy by presenting her with the sensitivity and detail-oriented commitment of the dandy, as opposed to the societal values embodied by Buchanan. Unfortunately for Daisy, the Jay Gatsby of high society is a smokescreen for poor *déclassé* Jimmy Gatz, a man desperately trying to surpass himself. But, is there anything more enticing than a man who tries to become a better, more glamorous version of himself for the love of his life only to be met with a tragic demise once the glitter settles?

Jessica Feldman posits that dandyism is "an aggressively defensive pose, the pose of a man who feels isolated and threatened within a society he loathes" (*Gender on the Divide*, 80). Mintler is right to assert that Fitzgerald creates in Gatsby a "new literary evocation of dandyism" (116) that tackles the issues of social class and masculinity. As such, the freshly reinvented Jimmy Gatz compounds in his mannerism the entire dandiacal traditions — from Brummell's urge to improve oneself beyond his class origins, to Baudelaire's anti-bourgeois and new-aristocratic sentiments and Wildean mockery of masculinity conventionalism. While the sartorial expression of Luhrmann's Gatsby can hardly be coined rebellious by today's standards, it does not take away from the impact of this cinematographic take on *The Great Gatsby* in regards to performance and identity. The relevance of the literary text and the inherent cultural stacking we discussed earlier go beyond the simplistic dandiacal opposition to bourgeois norms through fashion or mannerism, it displays new layers in how society dictates conventional performances as well.

Further initial materials for resistance to bioFor a modern audience, Gatsby's getup evokes the metrosexual: groomed, fashionable, and cognizant of his looks, the metrosexual man was the early 2000's dandy. In Jeremy Kaye's words, metrosexuality is transgressive, thus dandiacal, because it adopts the homosexual lifestyle but by remaining fundamentally heterosexual. Written at the eve of Instagram and the postmodern "cult to oneself," the metrosexual will soon be folded into the mainstream of acceptable (i.e. conventional) masculinities, ironing out the two major dandiacal focuses we have seen under Baudelaire and Wilde and making them seem, outwardly, outdated 'rebellious expressions.' However, what seems to be an underlying trope since the rise of dandyism under Brummell is the importance of staging and performance.

Performance is a complex enterprise, Herbert

Blau warns: “There is nothing more illusory in performance than the illusion of the unmediated. It is a very powerful illusion in the theatre, but it *is* theatre and it is *theatre*, the truth of illusion which haunts *all* performance, whether or not it occurs in a theatre” (*The Eye of Prey*, 143). From the extensive historical research done on the dandy¹ we know that dandyism relies heavily on being seen, taking the theatrical out of the theater and onto the streets, making the world his stage, his life a constant performance: “Life just *is* appearance: a plane of images or simulations. The supposed ‘real thing’ that lies behind the images is a fiction we impose on the flux of images. What we have is appearance or imaging itself: a world of simulacra without ground” (Colebrook, 162, 163). Luhrmann taps into a rich sociocultural legacy that exists in Fitzgerald’s source material and gives it his own twist through what Chris Nashawaty described as “high-society swirl with frenzied montages, spinning newspaper headlines, and Cirque du Soleil-style party scenes where flappers on trapezes [...] seem to swing right into your lap and DJs spin 21st-century hip-hop tracks” (*Entertainment Weekly*). Jay Gatsby under Luhrmann reigns up high, in his mansion and governs it through his high-performance personae; he *is* that “little party [that] never killed anyone,” he *is* the fireworks resounding with a crashing boom every weekend, repeatedly offering a new show. He is the “great” Gatsby, a dandy in his own right because he “overtly performs for an audience” (Feldman, 151). And yet, his audience can be reduced to an exclusive person, Daisy. Deeply governed by this dichotomy, Luhrmann understands the paradox that resides in Gatsby’s dandyism: to be seen he must make a spectacle himself and his wealth, must dazzle his spectators and hold their gaze long enough to make a lasting impression, all in the hopes of reaching Daisy across the shore. Luhrmann enhances the performance effect to a maximum through audio and visual effects, showing how deep Gatsby’s need for performativity is contingent on his identity. This latter point is painfully evident when he is seen pacing and staging himself at Nick’s cottage waiting for Daisy, losing his composure under the pressure of finally having the attention of his desired audience.

Struggling to put on a performance both as a dandy and as a respectable man (and ultimately failing at both), contemporary audiences identify with Jay Gatsby’s anxieties and yearning for a truthful, autonomous identity against the pressure to assimilate

1. See Feldman, Gill, Lemaire, Moers, Nye, and Stanton to cite some references.

with the social multitude. Especially in today’s society where being “different” (or “evading conformity” (2), as Feldman articulates) is of the utmost importance, we are reminded of Guy Debord’s quote on the dangers of mass consumption, mass production, and their deeply rooted ties to performativity: “In societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into representation” (*Société du spectacle*, 2). Gatsby’s parties are symptomatic of the postmodern need to stand out and let our identity rise to the surface. This translates into a succession of performances, especially if we consider Patrice Pavis’s understanding that giving a performance is “to be endowed with a *je ne sais quoi* which triggers an immediate feeling of identification in the spectator, communicating a sense of living elsewhere and in an eternal present” (*Dictionnaire du théâtre*, 301).

Contemplating the stronghold social media has on our understanding of self-worth as well as our connections to others, performativity is deeply anchored in the social concept of identity, a point that Luhrmann embodies here through DiCaprio’s play on the screen and will later be adopted into meme culture. Yet, while Luhrmann’s Gatsby and in consequence, the memes it produces, are conveying the idea that the performance is simply a mirage in order to hide the painfully ugly truth, the meme has taken to also symbolize the triumph over the mundane, emphasizing the “living it large”-part in Gatsby’s charade. The audience recognizes in Gatsby’s struggles to survive (as a dandy, but also a crook) their own battles, but they relish in the notion of ‘going out with a bang’ as to overcome social platitudes and constrictions. As Blau’s quote underlines, the illusion of performance (and of dandyism) is two-fold: it plays with the idea that it simulates reality but it also delights in the fact that the audience is made aware of the illusion.

The use and popularity of the meme are tightly linked to DiCaprio’s embodiment of Gatsby on the big screen. Encapsulated in one still image, we find here all the core fundamentals of dandyism with a sprinkling of critical performativity. Consciously or subconsciously aware of Baudrillard and Debord’s critical framework on societal construction and reliance on performance and simulacra, Gatsby meme users celebrate the bigger-than-life opportunities only available in such high-performative, “Cirque du Soleil-style” illusions, pointing at the shortcomings of such productions as well as the desire to be part of them. While we could see in this type of behavior a fetishistic

reconciliation between reality and fantasy,² or even a sense of Bakhtinian carnivalesque exuberance in the hopes to live out the illusion even if just for a short while, the oscillating nature of Jay Gatsby as a popular icon in mainstream media is representative of the deep discrepancy within our social performativity. It responds to the continuously felt pressure to perform in congruence with narrow metrics in order to “be,” to exist as a singular individual and as a single voice in the polyphone global stage the world has become. And as such, because they embody and respond to this dual nature, these Gatsby memes can be understood in many ways as postmodern dandiacal responses to social contexts. Using the international success of *The Great Gatsby* as a cultural common ground, the memes become a centralized reference upon which individual users can generate their own cultural plug-in to comment and engage with their society.

Beyond the several catchphrases and quotes that are derived from Leonardo DiCaprio’s portrayal of Jay Gatsby (“old sport”, “can’t repeat the past”, etc.) or adjacent to his performance on the big screen (“a little party never killed nobody”, etc.), Jay Gatsby as a meme generator appeals on many levels, carrying with it a series of complex and interlocking layers of meaning, interpretation, and resonances. The small vignette, animated as a gif or as a simple still picture, draws its sway from the complex compression of DiCaprio’s Gatsby under the lens of Luhrmann’s commentary of Fitzgerald’s novel, which observes the culmination of European dandyism in the American 1920s. DiCaprio thus becomes the face and body for centuries worth of anti-normative behaviour and mannerism, a lifestyle and ideology condensed into a single snapshot. When mimicking Gatsby’s poses, gestures, or even speech pattern, memes communicate beyond the film they originate from. The greater online community recognizes the cultural reference, grasping and contextualizing the tone and intention of the message superimposed on the vignette right away. Though meme culture and its role in our cultural heritage are disputed by critics,³ the proficiency of these memes as cultural highways is incontestable. As a new form of communication, memes are a preferred tool because they not only eternalize and honour mesmerizing performances, but they also convey entire moods and meanings within one still frame. Gatsby memes in turn elevate the dazzling context and reading of Fitzgerald’s *The*

Great Gatsby through the use of a striking actor and invite us to be part of the pathos and the grandness of Gatsby. Using these memes and meme-able quotes imbues us with the power and weight of this interlocking sociocultural-dandiacal baggage, borrowing it for an instant to become the great Gatsby ourselves. Leonardo DiCaprio raising his glass against a night-sky of fireworks has become synonymous with Gatsby and his struggle, but also with dandiacal exaltation, culminating in a renewed expression of oneself when faced with subjugating social norms.



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2. See Octave Mannoni, *Les Clefs pour l’imaginaire*, 1969.

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Tiny Asian Female Seeking Analysis: Representation, Aesthetics, and Performativity in Ali Wong's *Baby Cobra*

I have noticed lately the emergence of an idiom as oft-used as it is insidious. It began when I arrived at my workplace and was met with a latte from a managing partner at the company. What I saw as a gracious gesture prompted a different response from my supervisor, a slight unbeknown to its offender, an offhand remark at once jarring and familiar: *he likes pretty Asian girls*. For me—and, surely, many others—this designation and its variants have become routine. We are categorized using a convenient formula, appearance + race + gender, which functions to condense and dismiss us as *pretty Asian girls*, *cute Asian women*, and *tiny Asian females*. In every case, our image precedes our merit.

Asian women's place in the North American lexicon indicates their peripheral existence in male-dominated Westernized societies as "figures whose role it is to represent the larger whole from which they emanate"; "bodies [without] a signifiable existence prior to the mark of their gender" and race; and "images of indifference, insignificance, and ineffectuality all [pointing] to a deficit of power" (Said 63; Butler 13; Ngai 18). Since the Western imperialist lens through which the East is imagined positions the West as "self" and the East as "Other," it follows that the former is the standard by which the latter is measured. Representations of the East are thus restrictive, passive, and non-normative as they exist solely to affirm the superiority of the West. Indeed, always regarded as small—that is to say, inconsequential—Asian women can be seen as the epitome of the cute aesthetic. In *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*, cultural critic Sianne Ngai contends that "objects already regarded as familiar and unthreat-

ening" bring forth, not only "an aestheticization [of cuteness,] but an eroticization of powerlessness, evoking tenderness for 'small things' but also, sometimes a desire to belittle or diminish them further" (3). The ambivalence with which one objectifies the pretty Asian girl is evident precisely in the word "girl"—frequently used to describe Asian women well into adulthood—which indicates her infantilization and the subsequent need to be controlled. The colloquial preference for "girl" speaks to an Orientalist tradition of fetishization, particularly as it signals a paternalistic relationship between the childlike, Asian object and the powerful, Western subject. Paradoxically, to call someone "cute" is often to offer a compliment with the inference of attractiveness. However, regarding Asian women, what may be attractive to the person deploying the compliment is not the women themselves but the appeal of asserting one's power over them.

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1. Cultural critic Edward Said theorizes Orientalism as, "in short, . . . a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient," that is, the Eastern world and its constituents (3). Examining the history of Western scholarship, he argues that the Orient is "Europe's . . . cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience" (1). The nature of Orientalism ensures that "European [or Westernized] culture [gains] in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (3).

In contemporary North American media, caricatures of Asian women are less frequent than the past, yet the ideologies behind new images remain largely unchanged. Although Hollywood has attempted to include more Asian women on screen, most of their roles remain limited to one of two trajectories: stereotypically Asian, always marked by otherness, and thus seen as a separate entity from North America; or assimilated, adopting Western imperialist ideals, and rejecting cultural ties to the East. Curiously, the latter approach to writing Asian characters is often seen as progressive because of its departure from recognizable archetypes. Rather than incorporate the cultural backgrounds of Asian characters into their narratives, much popular media insists on muting any discussion of ethnic differences.² These representations, which profess inclusivity, actually “function to domesticate and fold in colour, thereby recentering the desirability of cultural whiteness as mainstream” (Kim). In her comedy special *Baby Cobra* (2016), Ali Wong rejects being synonymous with lesser in favour of a platform from which she can control public perception. As the second Asian-American woman to achieve mainstream recognition in stand-up comedy,³ she demands visibility with her presence alone. Moreover, Wong’s performance at once exaggerates and subverts conventions of Asian femininity to deconstruct regressive social categories and, ultimately, call for new ways of imagining.

Far from conforming to the unthreatening image of the pretty Asian girl, Ali Wong’s *Baby Cobra*

2. In *Slaying the Dragon: Reloaded*, Elaine Kim includes a clip of the film *Charlie’s Angels* (2000), in which actress Lucy Liu portrays Alex Munday, a visibly Asian character belonging to a family network comprised of her white surrogate father (Charlie) and white sisters (the Angels). Munday identifies solely with Western culture, and the film makes no reference to her ethnicity. Comparable roles include Brenda Song’s London Tipton in the television series *The Suite Life of Zack & Cody* (2005–2008) and Jamie Chung’s Valerie Vale in the television series *Gotham* (2014–present).
3. Margaret Cho came to prominence on the comedy circuit in the 1990s, and she is well-known for her criticism of “mainstream prettiness not only for its implicit racism but for its relation to other hegemonic ideals about the body in culture—its sexuality, nationality, physical ability, age” (Mizejewski 126). Like Cho, Ali Wong deliberately uses Asian stereotypes to challenge traditional notions of race, giving particular attention to the Asian female body.

destabilizes viewers by working against established representations of Asian women and urging them to question gendered and racialized social roles. The comic attacks double standards for women as wives and mothers, for instance, by demarcating pressures to act in accordance with a socially constructed definition of womanhood, that is, a “regulatory regime of gender differences in which genders are divided and hierarchized under constraint” (Butler 25). Conventionally situated at the bottom of the hierarchy, women are seen as inherently powerless and capable of achieving a semblance of power only if linked to a man. Wong plays with this stereotype in detailing her journey to marriage as a “manipulation cycle” during which she “[threatens] to leave without ever actually leaving, because [she knows] that [she’s] too old and it’s too late to go back out there and find a new man and start the whole manipulation cycle all over again” (*Baby Cobra*). Giving voice to a discrepancy in the socialization of women and men, Wong acknowledges the sexist framework which at once teaches women to desire romance and marriage and teaches men to resist it: she delineates existing pressures for women to marry while simultaneously emphasizing the labour of marriage in her performance of the manipulative and shrewd future wife. Peculiarly, Wong uses elements of the dragon lady stereotype—overbearing, cruel, tyrannical, and sexually manipulative Asian women—to turn the notion that submissive “Oriental women make the best wives” on its head (Hwang 98). By exaggerating one stereotype and destabilizing another, Wong suggests the precariousness of Western assumptions about Asian women. In effect, she performs these caricatures to elicit laughter, not at their repetition but rather the farcicality of Western culture’s subscription to them.

Wong continues to exploit stereotypes about women, and particularly Asian women, as a means of deconstructing the power structures that figure them as substandard. For instance, in describing her inclination to be “very soft...very nurturing, and very domestic” around her husband, she explicitly asks audience members to trace her adherence to familiar ideas about Asian femininity which amplify the patriarchal nature of women’s roles in heteronormative marriages. She adds that “for five years,” she has “packed his lunch every single day,” demonstrating her seemingly traditional deportment before subverting it with the punchline: “I did that so that he’d become dependent on me.” The takeaway of the joke thus becomes a critique of the cultural assumptions she draws upon in its set-up, effectively necessitating viewers’ recogni-

tion of the tenuous grounds for those generalizations. As with the manipulation cycle joke, Wong reminds viewers of a societal tendency to overlook women's wit as well as the inherent labour that comes with living as a married woman. As sociologist Arlie Hochschild observes in her book *The Second Shift*, domestic responsibilities are primarily allocated and fulfilled by women when it comes to heterosexual marriages, even in the wake of rising populations of women in the workforce. Wong points to disparate standards for women as she elaborates, "I don't feed him out of the goodness of my heart. I do it as an investment in my financial future, 'cause I don't wanna work anymore."

In addition to critiquing the image of the dotting wife, Wong segues into her examination of contemporary expectations of women in relation to labour. Referring to Facebook's Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg, Wong asserts:

She wrote that book that got women all riled up about our careers. Talking about how we as women should challenge ourselves to sit at the table and rise to the top. And her book is called *Lean In*. Well, I don't wanna lean in, okay? I wanna lie down. I want to lie the fuck down. I think that feminism is the worst thing that ever happened to women. (*Baby Cobra*)

Wong's take on feminism—or, rather, Sandberg's brand of feminism—alludes to shortcomings in modern interpretations of the word. Specifically, Wong's distaste for Sandberg's advice suggests that the *Lean In* author's method of female empowerment is actually disempowering, since it burdens women with increased expectations of labour. Indeed, the self-election which Sandberg heralds as the answer to workplace gender inequality posits that there is "a universal basis for feminism...found in an identity assumed to exist cross-culturally" and accompanied by "the notion that the oppression of women has some singular form discernible in the universal or hegemonic structure of patriarchy or masculine domination" (Butler 6). What Sandberg fails to acknowledge is that marginalization exists beyond gender.

For Asian women, whose race is predominantly associated with weakness and often in direct correlation to lower socioeconomic status, self-election may not be a viable option. It is unreasonable, then, to assume that a woman marginalized by race can demand the same degree of authority as someone like Sandberg, who possesses the privileges of whiteness. Moreover,

for women of lower socioeconomic status—many of them women of colour—work is not a privilege in the sense purported by Sandberg; it is a necessary means of survival. In essence, the critique that Wong makes is not against feminism but rather white feminism, a "[domain] of exclusion" which remains "coercive and regulatory" in its "premature insistence on a stable subject of feminism, understood as a seamless category of women" despite having constructed that category for "emancipatory purposes" (Butler 7). For Wong, white feminism is damaging in that it presents increased labour for women under the guise of increased opportunity; "now [women] are *expected* to work [my emphasis]" on top of the unchanging expectation that they maintain domestic order. In fact, she stresses that this added pressure creates deeper divisions between women as she recounts how her "friends . . . get very judgmental about housewives . . . not doing anything." In response, Wong offers an alternative view: "She's not a housewife. She's retired." As she references her earlier joke (about not wanting to work anymore) and alludes to the labour implicit for married women, Wong challenges both her friends' inference that household duties do not comprise work and the idea that women should want to work more, as these ideas disproportionately discriminate against Asian women and others whose employment opportunities are limited by biases ulterior to gender. Fundamentally, Wong refuses the notion that female empowerment comes as a direct result of work because it is ineffective: oversimplified and unable to acknowledge forms of marginalization beyond gender, views like Sandberg's ultimately blame women for not taking initiative instead of questioning the larger structures of power that limit them.

In critiquing the glorified, white-feminist vision of self-election in the workplace, Wong concurrently critiques the aestheticization of the "zany," which Ngai describes as a "mix of desperation and playfulness" that is "aesthetically appealing" because its "hypercharismatic" presentation "is really an aesthetic about work" and "precariousness" (188). Simply put, the zany refers to a strenuous—certainly, laborious—relation to playing. For Sandberg and like-minded feminists, more work for women equates to empowerment, which is to imply that such work is enjoyable to the extent that it increases one's esteem. According to Ngai,

"Zaniness, if not a feminist or even feminine aesthetic per se, [is] a particularly meaningful aesthetic *for* feminist practice in our present, captur-

ing both what Donna Haraway describes as the 'paradoxical intensification and erosion of gender' under conditions of post-Fordism and the compulsion to be fun that has long haunted feminist discourse in the characterological form of the feminist 'killjoy' or 'heavy.'" (222)

When applied to the notion that women should seek out and embrace increased workplace labour, the zany aesthetic reveals an underlying reassertion of a tired, sexist perspective: women must always be pleased, pleasant, and pleasing. More specifically, in the face of societal structures always working to marginalize them, women should be pleased to toil, pleasant in how they do it, and pleasing after the fact. On "female zaniness," Ngai notes that an "awareness that the deterritorialization of affective/immaterial labor across the reproductive/productive divide has not made affective/immaterial work in the household any less strenuous for women" (216). The stereotype of the doting Asian wife intertwines the zany with the cute in her keen servility. Wong's refusal to lean into that objectified role thus destabilizes the aesthetic experience written onto the tiny, Asian, and female body.

By simply stepping on stage, Wong asserts her position as a pregnant Asian-American woman comedian, a stance that has never before existed in the North American mainstream and is subversive in its own right. Accordingly, in *Pretty/Funny: Women Comedians and Body Politics*, feminist critic Linda Mizejewski pronounces that "the posture of standing up assumes status and power as well as qualities of aggression and authority, also considered innately masculine" (15). On a stage primarily reserved for white American men, Wong thus demands to be seen as their equal. She begins her segment with an allusion to "one of feminism's most basic cultural critiques," that is, "women are rewarded for what they look like and not for what they say . . . Because of this bias, 'pretty' versus 'funny' is a rough but fairly accurate way to sum up the history of women in comedy" (Mizejewski 14). Cognizant of that binary, Wong immediately points out her new status as a thirty-three-year-old woman and the fact that few—"Thank you, five people," she quips upon hearing her audience's underwhelming applause—find women's aging to be a cause for celebration. Moreover, she equates being thirty-three with being past a woman's physical prime and, in essence, unpretty, as she jokes about being "jealous" of eighteen-year-old girls who "could just eat like shit... take a shit and have a six-pack," girls who have "that beauti-

ful inner thigh clearance... with the light of potential just radiating through." By juxtaposing women's discernible youth with their potential, Wong emphasizes the societal standard that determines women's value not through merit (how funny they are) but, rather, physical beauty (how pretty they are). As her platform and audience make evident, Wong's potential has not plummeted because she has surpassed the age of eighteen. Her attention to Western culture's obsession with women's youth, coupled with her success, therefore invites viewers to re-evaluate social terms of desirability.

Wong denies the position of sexually desired object typically assigned to Asian women and instead stakes her claim to desire. Physically, she is petite and can easily be placed into the aesthetic category of "cute"; she does not, however, allow her viewers to associate her with "the diminutive, the weak, and the subordinate" (Ngai 53). To challenge the dominant narrative, Wong first elucidates the fetishization of bodies like hers: if she were to go "on Craigslist and [post] 'Tiny Asian female seeking anal,'" she contends, "the Internet would crash." The implications here are predictable: the hyperfemininity of Asian female bodies makes them all the more desirable to onlookers, and the assumed modesty of Asian women does not coincide with an initiated request for sex. To wit, the Asian woman is rarely imagined as desiring, yet is frequently sexually desired. Instead of seeing her as a person, the men in this scenario write a series of Western perceptions onto Wong's body and view her as a fantasy object. Since "violence [is] always implicit in our relation to the cute object," the yearning for "cute" Asian women's bodies already marked by fantasies of conquest becomes all the more unsettling (Ngai 85). The commonplace tendency to view Asian female bodies as assets to be possessed is a contemporary sort of dehumanization. In order to reclaim her humanity, Wong emphasizes her position as a desiring subject: by explicating her personal gratification from anal sex, she challenges the fantasy narrative ascribed to her physically small and conventionally feminine frame. Wong's occupation of the stage issues a brashness that thwarts the notion of the discernibly "cute" as powerless, and it effectively takes on the politics of aesthetics both visually and verbally.

Throughout her segment, Wong gestures to her body in ways reminiscent of the carnivalesque, first theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin as a heterogeneous materiality that contains conventions and styles of high culture from a position of debasement. In *The Female Grotesque*, Mary J. Russo applies the carnivalesque to

feminism, articulating the grotesque female body as a necessary counter to cultural hegemony and a site for imagining new pleasures in female performance and spectatorship. The carnivalesque in Wong's body arises from its incongruity with contemporary stereotypes of Asian women. She reveals, for example, that "a lot of people are shocked" by the fact that her "husband is Asian . . . because, usually, Asian-American women who...wear these kinda glasses"—she gestures to her bright red, oversized, cat-eye frames—"and have a lot of opinions . . . like to date white dudes." Wong articulates that the boldness in her attitude and attire—she wears a heavily patterned, tight-fitting dress with red flats to match her glasses—evokes a connection to whiteness and masculinity. Plainly, Western constructions of race and gender do not make room for Asian women to be loud or even expressive. Those who are free to express themselves are white men; as follows, she who dares to draw attention to herself must have the security of relation to the white masculine embodiment of power. By juxtaposing her boldness with the image of her Asian husband, Wong urges her audience to reconsider the unnecessarily rigid dictates that Western culture imposes upon Asians.

Wong takes advantage of her audience's familiarity with categories of privilege to stress their inequity. She illustrates, in particular, her and her husband's class privilege when describing their lifestyle: "[He] and I are both total . . . private school Asians. We both are big hippies, too. . . . We do silent meditation retreats. That's right, we pay eight-hundred dollars to shut up for a weekend." Wong recognizes that her access to private education and expensive vacations enacts a breakdown of the usual divisions: she belongs to a tax bracket predominantly occupied by the white and wealthy. To be sure, she jokes, "Sometimes, all of this hippy-dippy shit we do makes me feel like we are white people doing an impression of Asian people." The dissonance between Wong's racial marginalization and class privilege works in this case to both draw attention to the disparity of wealth among racial groups and disturb limiting assumptions about Asians, as part of an ultimate effort to "resist, exaggerate, and destabilize the distinctions and boundaries that mark and maintain high culture and organized society" (Russo 62). Furthermore, Wong at once illustrates how one's proximity to whiteness creates a semblance of power and enunciates the arbitrariness of racialized power dynamics: "Nothing makes me feel more powerful than when a white dude eats my pussy . . . I just feel like I'm absorbing all of that privilege

and all of that entitlement . . . Also, he's so vulnerable down there. I'm like, 'I could just crush your head at any moment, white man! I could just kill you right now! Crush those brains! Colonize the colonizer!'" By reversing the conventional structure of relationships between men and women as well as East and West, Wong places herself in a position of power and destabilizes the idea that Asian women are inherently submissive. Correspondingly, she outlines and disrupts "the flip side of hypersexualized Asian women," that is, "desexed Asian men" (Kim). She challenges Eurocentric notions of masculinity that posit Asian features as effeminate⁴ by indicating how these features make Asian men "the sexiest": "They got no body hair from the neck down. It's like making love to a dolphin . . . It's so smooth, just like a slip and slide. . . . Asian men, no body odor. None. They just smell like responsibility." In exemplifying a masculinity that deviates from the Western standard, Wong encourages a broader representational spectrum of Asians collectively.

What makes Wong's comedy special so original is, as *The New Yorker's* Ariel Levy puts it, "her discussion of quotidian domesticity... interwoven with commentary on what may be the last taboo of female sexuality: women are animals." Wong's deliberations on sex are subversive because, by voicing her desire for and fulfillment from sexual pleasure, she works against imperialist fantasies of Asian women as sexual conquests to be had. In *Extraordinary Bodies*, disabilities study scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson proposes that "gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and disability are related products of the same social processes and practices that shape bodies according to ideological structures" (136). The suggestion that Garland-Thomson makes is a useful one for thinking about dominant perceptions of all bodies considered abnormal. For example, mainstream portrayals of sex almost always include politics of power, according to which the person who most closely identifies with the cultural standard of normativity (young, white, middle-class male) has the

4. Western culture has a long history of demasculinizing Asian men for their incompatibility with Eurocentric ideals of masculinity. As Said puts it, "the Orient is characterized by the West as feminine because it is "depraved," "lacking control," "degenerate," "weak," "silent," "passive," "submissive," and an object" (6). To the Western male mind, the "non-active" and "non-autonomous" Orientals, like women, never spoke of [themselves], [they] never represented [their] emotions, presence, or history (Said 6). The Asian man is first Oriental [with female attributes] and only second a man (Said 231).

upper hand. Wong decenters the Western male fantasy by describing her own: “to help as many men as possible discover their prostate . . . like a conqueror.” Contrary to the objectified and submissive stereotype of Asian women, Wong expresses her sexual excitement about the fear she is able to instill in men who worry that enjoying her “thumb up there . . . might mean that they’re gay,” at once arguing for Asian women’s right to sexual desire and the fragility of socially-constructed masculinity. In a related anecdote, she details her experience of asking her husband to “abuse” her in bed. Asking him to “choke [her] enough so that [she] can’t talk,” Wong touches on the imperialist idea of her body as land to be conquered before unsettling the simplistic notion: “cause if I can talk, I’m gonna tell you what to do. And I’m tired of being the boss . . . all the time, so in the bedroom, you be the boss. Yes. Because I’m the real boss.” By first performing her “doubly-marginalized position,” as Gilbert would call it, Wong makes a spectacle of Western assumptions about Asian women’s acquiescence in and outside of the bedroom; then, revealing her sexual needs—and demanding gratification—she articulates her position as a desiring subject. The concept of balancing power during sex reveals that how one moves or does not move is both purposeful and powerful, while also showing that what society has come to define as the personification of submissiveness is ultimately arbitrary.

The grotesque body, as occupied by Wong, is perhaps best articulated in her deliberations and enactments of pregnancy. “In the everyday indicative world,” Russo pronounces, “women and their bodies, certain bodies, in certain public framings, in certain public spaces, are always already transgressive—dangerous, and in danger” (60). The danger of the pregnant body is its demonstration of the basic, animal-like reproductive capacity of the woman: it is far removed from the hyperfeminized, subhuman, fantasy figure. Gilbert argues that “material about gynecological examinations is the only chance female comics have to speak about violence and violation of women in this culture,” a fair assessment before the existence of *Baby Cobra* (92). Wong herself points to the “rare and unusual” case of seeing “a female comic perform pregnant because female comics don’t get pregnant . . . Once they do get pregnant, they generally disappear.” Even with the added expectation that women should work, there exists a pressure (and, often, coercion) for women to choose between career and familial pursuits. As she shares her experience trying to get pregnant, Wong does not shy away from uncomfort-

able details or from making her audience understand the circumstances that cause such discomfort. She delineates the process of “[having] to take . . . hormone pills that were suppositories and Push Pop them up [herself] every single night,” only to have them “inevitably dissolve and melt into [her] underwear” while at work. However unfamiliar the chronicles of pregnancy are to her audience, Wong uses her monologue to do “precisely what female comics do when performing gynecological humor—she disarms and relaxes audience members through comic discourse in order to teach them about what it means to be a woman in contemporary culture,” thus “empowering comics and audiences alike” (Gilbert 93). Moreover, Wong challenges the notion of the Asian woman as demure and necessarily ladylike by openly discussing itchiness in her genitals as a side effect of progesterone, “finding ways to discreetly scratch [herself] at work,” and her struggle in resisting “the urge to immediately smell [her] fingers.” Her portrayals of the bodily realities of pregnancy work to break the silence on a topic familiar to many women yet largely kept out of public conversation. Simultaneously, “what such imaginings” like Wong’s “may most usefully reveal is the utter falseness of the presumed complementarity of the male and female bodies; the ludicrousness of the male body undergoing the gynecological drill”—or, in Wong’s case, the process of scratching and sniffing—“shows up more than anything the *asymmetry* of gendered bodies in the same position. It shows up those differences which make the female body a crucial (though presumably not eternal) site of contestation” (Russo 123).

By offering her unfiltered experience of the female body, Wong engages new possibilities for discussions about women’s issues. “In a comedy club,” Gilbert explains, “the marginal (grotesque, real, sensual) subverts the hegemonic (classical idealized forms), creating a new order from disorder. It is not surprising that comics often discuss sensual, even scatological experience, allowing the audience to participate vicariously” (59). Certainly, Wong articulates the scatological in her imagining of childbirth when she compares a woman’s leg to a “soft serve lever” and declares that the “real miracle of life” is the fact that, after the woman “[shits] on the floor . . . just when [she thinks] that’s enough to make him finally leave . . . a baby comes out, and he gotta stay.” Her visualization of the delivery process interrogates a commonplace male-centric filtering of the female body: the corporeal truths surrounding childbirth are seen as unfeminine and thus are rarely spoken of beyond medical

settings or closed quarters. Wong's candidness about all that pregnancy entails suggests that everything can and, indeed, should be up for discussion. In an interview with journalist Hadley Freeman of *The Guardian*, Wong divulges that, "when [she] had a miscarriage... [talking] to other women and [hearing] that they'd been through it too" became a source of relief. She adds, "I think [that] one of the reasons women don't tell people when they've had a miscarriage [is] they think it's their fault," alluding to the pressure assigned to women via unrealistic cultural norms. Explicitly, although women's reproductive capacity is demarcated as an indication of femininity, pregnancy is contradictorily seen as too animalistic to be feminine. Wong's incorporation of pregnancy, miscarriage, and the scatological into her performance invites audiences to reconsider ordered definitions of who can speak, and about what. As an Asian-American woman telling poop jokes, Wong accosts the cultural script that she has been given, ultimately offering those who look like her an opportunity to do the same.

When initially presented with that idiom *he likes pretty Asian girls*, I was quick to dismiss it for lack of a substantive response. Lately, I have been ruminating on how I might counter the comment the next time it, or one of its formulaic variants, arises: perhaps by returning the sentiment in a reversal of gendered and racialized roles, performing assumptions about my inherent docility, or sharing my lot of opinions to the contrary. Alternatively, I might want to just lie down.

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Simona Schneider

Invocation by Proxy: Ali Cherry's "My Pain is Real"

It is entirely conceivable that life's splendor forever lies in wait about each one of us in all its fullness, but veiled from view, deep down, invisible, far off. It is there, though, not hostile, not reluctant, not deaf. *If you invoke it with the right word, by its right name, it will come. This is the essence of magic, which does not create but invokes.*

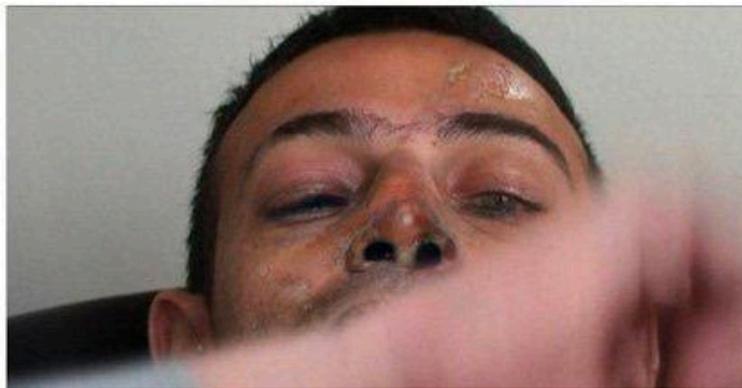
... Ruft man sie mit dem richtigen Wort, beim richtigen Namen, dann kommt sie. Das ist das Wesen der Zauberei, die nicht schafft, sondern ruft.
— Franz Kafka, October 18, 1921¹

One large monitor roughly 60cm x 32cm hangs adjacent to two abutting 9" screens (19cm x 14cm) like the ones used in cars. The displays engage in an oblique crossfire, issuing indirect addresses to the viewer standing at their intersection, who turns towards and away and wears the headphones attached to the small screens. Lebanese artist Ali Cherri first showed his three-channel video installation "My Pain is Real" (2010) at Galerie Iman Farès in 2010 in Paris as part of the inaugural exhibition "Co-incidences" in this configuration. The scale bookends the human. The larger shows a man's face more tightly cropped than a talking head and closer to an intimate interlocutor skyping from a relaxed position, but its size moves the visitor back. Conversely, the two smaller monitors bring the viewer closer and accommodate the interval between the eyes, recalling viewfinders. As his visage progressively becomes bruised, battered, and wounded, he looks both on and out without saying a word and with muted emotions.

Meanwhile, the diptych alternates between identical and slightly overlapping, contiguous images, including idyllic, long takes of a sun-drenched, still room and a more tumultuous sea interspersed with flickering, fast-paced montages of war media footage and everyday scenes. All three videos run on a loop, but the video on the main display runs more than twice as long as that of the two mini consoles and consists of one long take (that form often championed for its veracity) internally cut as a collage through special effects.

When I first saw the piece, Cherri, who was present, projected this channel—his own countenance—on a cinema screen, and his gigantic, imposing face stared down towards the spectators into a middle distance.² In its original installation, two people watching the adjacent screens must occupy nearly the same position in intimate proximity. Otherwise, it is possible to revisit the piece through Cherri's website (alicherri.com) on a personal computer. The mouse inter-

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1. Translation modified and italics added. Kafka, Franz. *The Diaries of Franz Kafka: 1914-1923*. Translated by Martin Greenberg, vol. 2, Schocken Books, 1948, 195; Kafka, Franz. *Tagebücher*. Edited by Hans-Gerd Koch, Michael Müller, and Malcolm Pasley. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2002, 866.
 2. This first viewing occurred on the occasion of the 2013 *Unfixed Itineraries: Film and Visual Culture from Arab Worlds* conference at UCSC Digital Arts Research Center organized by Peter Limbrick.



"My Pain is Real," 2010. Four stills from the large screen of the three-screen video installation. Courtesy of the artist.

mingles with and rebels against the mouse onscreen, stopping the piece to discover its details, refusing to go forward since one soon very well knows how the loop ends: with the artist's death. The big brother, "interactive," and intimate versions of the installation each amplify its inherent ethical stakes: how to experience and "host" digital and internet images, especially violent ones, with care while imagining and creating a space for an encounter with an equal and lively other.

"My Pain is Real," among other contemporary digital work, propels this elaboration of haptics and embodied spectatorship to account for the way "proxy poetics" imply touch and other senses to obviate their absence. This move invokes the viewer as an active and potentially limitless sensor. It summons through the imaginative capacity for hosting experience and for being hosted, coextensive with the material and existential limits of that which is called upon to witness and participate both. Framing himself as an onlooker who visually witnesses the progressive mutilation of his own face, Cherrí evidences a lack of accompanying physical sensation in the act of viewing. As an actor, he performs his own defacing through facial expressions of shock and surrender rather than pain. On

the one hand, he strikes the pose of a Christian martyr or practices the imagination of death during life that 11th-12th century Sufi philosopher Al-Ghazhālī recommends for an ethical life in *On the Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife*. On the other, he represents an intimate, incredulous, and numb relationship to mediated violence. As witness and artist, his implicit collaboration with the events onscreen unsettles any number of dichotomies, not least active-passive spectating and hosting.³ The performance suggests an ethics of hospitality for hosting traumatic memory and remediating the (un)dead.

Describing "Poetics of Proxy"

Phenomenological accounts of the cinema tell how the spectator's body cannot resist the

3. For a dismantling of partition of capacities implied in the passive/active binary and a compelling argument for moving beyond it, see Jacques Rancière's *The Emancipated Spectator*. 2008. Translated by Gregory Elliott, Verso, 2011.

cinema's haptic properties. Notable in some recent video works, especially those that mediate archival footage, however, is how the artist, often on screen and in voiceover, distinctly offers their body, affect, and senses to counter the *absence* of a physically proximate relationship to images circulated in digital media. These interventions communicate the embodied experience of an individual to one who is unavailable, whether emotionally driven to mental distraction or physically removed, through what I will call "poetics of proxy." This proxy mode often hosts difficult or disturbing images in an immanent presence with counterbalancing care and attention. Rather than an avatar, which renders and represents an entity understood as a constant "self" in a different realm or medium such as in video games, a proxy only temporarily hosts another subject, making the activity of hosting primary and the relationship to the subject fluid. It can intimately host aspects such as desires, associations, or fears without corresponding consistently with any one person in an identificatory relation.

Like haptics, proxy poetics of digital media embrace the ability of cinema to convey intimacy through sound and texture as tangible, experiential phenomena. However, in their case, visibility remains among the senses, less synesthetically and more as tactility as it touches opacity. Haptic and feminist scholars celebrate attention to these cinematic elements as a less-alienating alternative to a fetishistic, gaze-oriented attitude.⁴ The proxy mode's place resides in privileged intimacy with the filmmaker and the viewer. Nevertheless, in foregrounding the remoteness of the visual, the video attests to the precarity and ephemerality of that promised intimacy and to the opacity and the solidity of images that resist abstraction. Martiniquan poet-philosopher Édouard Glissant develops the concept of opacity as that "irreducible singularity" of each individual that undoes the binary of self and Other. His image of each citizen coexisting as a thread in a weave of fabrics is particularly evocative for the digital layering technique that will be described here (Glissant 190). Opacity remains of utmost importance as a

visible trait. For, unlike accounts of cinema as ghostly, here opacity accounts for an overlapping solidity and an intertwining of digital pixels that is opposed to the imaginary of paranormal haunting as translucence.

In its military connotations, the proxy is an occupation and haunting that is an infiltration. Of the Lebanese context, Chad Elias writes that a general belief that ongoing wars are proxy wars has given rise to the colloquial expression "the others' wars on our land" (*hurūb al-akharīn 'alā ardinā* حروب الآخرين على أرضنا) (Elias 6, FN. 7). This mindset has also provided a constant alibi for local sectarian conflict and political corruption. The August 4th, 2020, ammonium nitrate explosion at the Port of Beirut, which killed over 200 and wounded more than 6,500, is another tragic example. Proxy poetics as counter-strategy surface in epistolary-cinematic forms and collaborative projects in which participants create a relay where direct participation is impossible. Digitization promises the globe at one's fingertips precisely as it becomes no longer accessible with countless closed borders and manners of exclusion. These artistic interventions accrue increasing relevance in light of mandates to evolve technological innovations that privilege detached communication and remote warfare.⁵

Proxy aesthetics connote the possibility of hosting, care, and hospitality, connotations that get lost in the term's use in the context of warfare. In reflecting and distorting regional public servants', political actors', and the mass media's rhetoric of irresponsibility for the body, artists working in this mode reveal its poverty and raise the question of these supposedly neutral and objective "servers'" complicity. In examples of this mode, an artist or actor appears "in the image," whether bodily or vocally. They bear witness, host, and are temporally and spatially hosted by the images "before" them in an attitude of care. By foregrounding the medium's proxy aspect and casting themselves as the first spectator, artists have sought to overcome the abstract forms of experience and implication involved in digital and networked spectatorship, especially during periods of crisis.

Cherri can be considered a younger member of a cohort of Beirut artists and filmmakers whose work takes up questions of authenticity in photographic evidence and historical artifacts. By creating archives, evidence, and alternative narratives, they presciently brought attention to the ways facts are manipulated to

4. Jennifer Barker concludes, "Exploring cinema's tactility thus opens up the possibility of cinema as an *intimate* experience and of our relationship with cinema as a close connection, rather than as a distant experience of observation, which the notion of cinema as a purely visual medium presumes" (Barker 2) [original italics]. For a recent media archaeological approach, see Wanda Strauven's *Touchscreen Archaeology* (2021).

5. On the history of unmanned weapons' role in proxy wars, see Katherine Chandler's *Unmanning: How Humans, Machines and Media Perform Drone Warfare* (2020).

serve certain interests.⁶ His work can be said to extend these themes but to seek solid ground, even if it can still become a rumble, vibration, or a quantum wave, amidst post-modern objects. His more recent moving image work, including *Pipe Dreams* (2011), *The Digger* (2015), *The Disquiet* (2013), and *Somniculus* (2017), continues his media/archaeological concerns with outer space, post-apocalyptic scenes, museum installation, artifacts, and natural history. This article will limit itself to a hypothesis about how Cherri's "My Pain is Real" creates its distinct proxy mode to host the past and the other in the present. An interview with Cherri allows interrogation of how the artist's use of Adobe After Effects® makes a difference in interpreting its gestures.

Digging, Layering, and Tectonic Glitching in After-Effects

Reflecting on the 2006 Lebanon War, Cherri looked into the archives of the *Al-Safir* newspaper.⁷ A photograph of a woman's wounded face stood out to him. The shot is an intimate close-up, as if in a relaxed video meeting with a loved one, but distinctly looking down from a high-angle shot. Leaning back on a couch in a quasi-psychotherapeutic posture, Cherri gets into a pose that allows his face to correspond to that of the woman whose photo haunts him. Although he seems to be uncovering the images, counterintuitively, he layered the photo onto his face, reversing the order of the "original," or reference, and its derivative in After Effects®. Instead of uncovering, revealing, or digging up history, it is an added layer.

Instead of making the top layer translucent or transparent, the method upholds the opacity of both parties. Cuts and bruises arrange a death mask or shroud to preserve the face's contours, but Cherri has already struck this position as a living mask. Though the scars appear upon his face, he hosts them and brings them momentarily back to life. By contrast to

the small-screen videos, on the larger monitor, Cherri does not speak and does not impart his sensual experience except through widening eyes that look toward but not into the camera. The representation suggests its transparency and implies figurative wounded interiority. However, the literal, external injuries of others and the eye's flickering agency speak to opacity. The process Cherri uses to make the abrasions appear further reinforces the condition of the subject's density.

The face, usually given a more privileged role in recognition and surveillance than the body, is cropped higher than a bust, closer to a beheading. It undergoes a mute poetic blazon that carefully addresses each feature while dismantling the whole into fragments. Upon its first exhibition, Kaelen Wilson-Goldie wrote, "It is unclear whether the hand tool represents a gentle lover or a brutal attacker."⁸ The icon of the familiar gloved hand evokes the uncanny innocence of Mickey Mouse and the sleight-of-hand of a magician. Though no physical touch occurs, it alludes to the viewer in the same position as that of the unknown hand moving the mouse. Cherri's gaze changes from looking at its face as the cursor visits it to recognizing the viewer and the artificiality of the scene with a wave of his magician-like hand at the end—but this switch is never decisive as the video recommences.

Participation of the spectator under these conditions occurs through their interpellation.⁹ However, here an invocatory address figures through the mouse and its deixis. In other words, its indication beyond the frame from the reference point of it coaxes phantasmic absence into presence, the attitude, affect, and emotion of which are voluntary. As Mary Ann Doane writes of indexicality in post-digital media, "The index is reduced to its own singularity; it appears as a brute and opaque fact, wedded to contingency—pure indication, pure assurance of existence" (135). Invocation here means defining the indicator and indicated through the relationship between the largely unknown agential individuals it invokes. In this case, the suggestion of touch does not guarantee a reality defined by physical phenomena knowable through the senses.

Even as the title of the piece insists on the reality of

6. These preoccupations can be found in the work of Lebanese artists Akram Zaatari, Rabih Mroué, Lamia Joreige, Walid Raad, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige and resonate with the work of Palestinian artist Larissa Sansour, among others.

7. During this war, the Israeli Defense Forces disproportionately bombed Lebanon after Hezbollah attacked soldiers on the border, leaving a trail of destruction to military and civic buildings such as schools, out of which Hezbollah agents were said to be operating.

8. Wilson-Goldie, Kaelen. "Beirut Art Center's 'Exposure' Grows up and Gets Real." *The Daily Star*, December 3, 2011.

9. Answering the interpellation by an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) turns one into a proxy agent for this ideology. As James Martel has shown, drawing directly from Louis Althusser, only nine out of ten interpellative addresses reach their mark (Martel).



"I keep in my head scenes, images, sounds that have no great interest and that I shouldn't have been remembering." "My Pain is Real," 2010. Courtesy of the artist.

a privatized, proprietary and subjective pain, it is self-aware of the notorious unknowability and immeasurability of sensation and of pain in particular.¹⁰ The title's insistence paradoxically seems to "really" mean the film's indexical qualities (the documentary photographs), while the animated hand seems to summarily represent an abstract and unaccountable agent. Hollywood has trained viewers to watch violence on every platform indiscriminately as fiction and make-up. Cherri's particular lesions are both documentary evidence just as much as they are "special effects." Not only the meaning but also the sound of the title points away towards an association, a kind of Freudian slip. Cherri has also noted that other people revealed a double-entendre in the title to him that he had not initially noticed: "is real" sounds like "Israel," perhaps the "real" (if reality is the subconscious) referent of the pointing and source of the pain. "Israel" in this sense functions as a symbolic placeholder that structures experience (always with at least the potential to host) in an otherwise disrupted relation to home. What might otherwise read as gestures of touching "the real" function instead as deixis, pointing to a displaced agent.

As if to underscore the non-self-identity between speaker and persona, a glitch momentarily interrupts the illusion of correspondence between death mask

and proxy. While the cursor is on the left side, the layer jumps and comes back into place on the right. The unruly pixels reveal the mechanism and provide an opening to interrupt the automation. Cherri says that he noticed the jump and intentionally left it. In this automated and seemingly inevitable unfolding, one thinks, too, of the mechanism of interpellation and the automation of subjectivization by the state. It is proof of a failure and of a narrow opening and 'play' between what otherwise would be two superimposed but parallel layers. On the larger screen, the mouse points visually in two directions and two temporalities at once.

Positioning the Viewer, Invoking the Viewer's Position

At the same time, invocation on the smaller two occurs primarily through sound and the way it beckons across and into the visual interval between the two screens, highlighted by other kinds of glitch-like compositions. Cherri names sense-memories in a voiceover soliloquy, filling the screen bodily through the voice and its qualities, language, and descriptive content. First, ambient room noises grow slowly to include street echoes from the open balcony, allowing distinctive registers to describe a space. A layer of intermingling voices on a radio cover and homogenize the rest from outside it. In contrast, Cherri's

10. The "reality" of other people's pain has been taken up substantially in philosophy and anthropology, notably by Stanley Cavell, Veena Das, and Ludwig Wittgenstein.

disembodied voice appears very near. The smaller screens question the practice of remembering historical events merely through indexical media evidence of the event itself. Cherri states in voiceover, “With every major event taking place/is associated an incident of my daily life. It was a disturbingly quiet day.”¹¹ His smaller memories overwhelm the world events such that he no longer remembers which sense memory corresponds to which political incident.

Into this liminal space of reaching towards and across, where sense memory bridges, the inability to touch compels Cherri’s intervention into digital post-production. An arhythmic mechanical disturbance cuts the audiotrack as when two signals cross and touch. The intimate voice regains control over the soundscape as it interweaves with the onscreen sound of waves breaking. Cherri summons his memory through a rolling image of the sea.¹² The sea offers a resistant, mobile bridge in its redundant edges, a glitch, even as it is interrupted, like that of memory in the face of the intermittent assaults from media imagery spectacle.

This double image recalls the stereoscope, the proto-cinematic, photographic viewing device that creates the impression of three dimensions. Each eye sees two shots from slightly different angles separately and stitches them together to form a space. The apparatus reminds the viewer of the relativity of perspectives on any one event. Sense memories relayed in voiceover, such as the smell of matches in the teacher’s room, stand in for the affective realm and its withdrawal from the image catalogs that make up historical records. This phrase, translated in the subtitles as “matches in the teacher’s room” without “the smell of” limits their sensory qualities for a non-Arabic speaker and reveals only their situatedness. These memories create another kind of three-dimensional effect. Meanwhile, an interpellating voice makes an injunction about things that Cherri “shouldn’t have been remembering.”

11. This text comes from the video’s subtitles. In Arabic, Cherri uses word مَشْهَدٌ. Translated as “incident,” the same word can mean “scene,” “sight,” and “spectacle” and comes from the root شَهِدَ, which forms the basis for the nouns “witness” (شاهد) and “martyr” (شهيد).

12. The invocation of the sea seems to function here as the one in Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Solaris* (1968), as a way of summoning memory.

The Undead, the Phantasm, and the Proxy: The Problem of Haptics as Authenticity

In presenting a proxy for the “use” of the spectator, these poetics probes empathy’s bodily limits. It invokes shared sensory phenomena precisely to signal their absence, deficiency, and unavailability. As such, it offers a defamiliarization technique that asks the viewer to consider their physical involvement and affective investment, or lack thereof, without fetishizing presence, inviting into participation but only through the recognition of absence.¹³ Suggesting that contemporary filmmakers from Beirut operate within a “poetics of phantasm,” Mark Westmoreland writes of “disembodied news footage” that it comes to replace the exilic subject’s relationship to home. In particular, Westmoreland argues, contemporary Lebanese filmmakers accentuate sense memory in their films and videos. He postulates that while these poetics reveal “the gap between the sign and the signified as disembodied conflict, memory serves to negotiate a visual expression of loss” (Westmoreland 37).¹⁴ Laura Marks has also found fertile ground in the same bodies of work,¹⁵ through them suggesting that haptics “is a viscosity that functions like the sense of touch” (Marks, *The Skin of the Film* 22) by evoking a multi-sensory experience and memory to “represent the experiences of people living in diaspora” (xi). Sense memories and other memories summoned in the poetics of phantasm, like a phantom limb, make the immanence of loss explicit and palpable.

Hosting the other in a community enables the redistribution and reappropriation of unmoored signs through sharing and shared embodied memories. This attitude toward the other differs significantly from the accounts of subjectivization whereby recognition creates the subject. The affect of that recognition or shout, “hey you!” could be care or blame. How-

13. This defamiliarization technique notably relies more upon techniques and markers of intimacy than Brechtian epic theater would. Unlike Antonin Artaud’s “theater of cruelty,” for instance, it does not presume the viewer’s capacity for total participation.

14. Westmoreland draws on Rachel O. Moore’s investigations into primitive impulses and the play of cinema upon the psyche, it’s “ability to touch without hands, to elate or shock the body” (34).

15. Marks’ most recent contribution, *Hanan Al-Cinema: Affections for the Moving Image*. The MIT Press, 2015, is entirely dedicated to work from the Middle East.

ever, singular contact offers an opportunity to notice internal fissures, glitches, and non-identity. In the case of “My Pain is Real,” the proxy is the artist, with whom one cannot identify and must remain in an ambivalent position vis-à-vis one’s complicity in watching. Furthermore, one tends to judge the experience (here of pain) based on its performance. Laura McMahon writes that Jean-Luc Nancy’s conception of touch as singularity “demands that one think this mode of contact deconstructively, that is, without collapsing back into a faith in the referentiality and authenticity of the artwork.” Instead, “differing, deferral and spacing” disrupt “(re)investment in self-presence and immediacy” (McMahon 6-7). Obviating the impulse to judge authenticity by drawing attention to the act, Cherri substitutes deixis that indicates but does not touch (however cartoonishly it may try) for the thing itself.

Authenticity or the “reality” of the titular pain does not reside in its presence but in his gestures towards its notable absence and inability to communicate it. Jean-François Lyotard writes, “the deictic is not merely a value within the system, but an element that from the inside refers to the outside: the deictic is not conceivable *in* the system but *through* it. This difference is of the greatest importance and does not imply any return to a ‘metaphysics of presence,’ as Derrida fears” (Lyotard 420).¹⁶ Indeed, the contours of Cherri’s face as the interface highlighted by the wounding and the temporality of the long take afford the spectator receptivity. The viewer’s position outside of a representational framework or sensorial experience comes to consciousness through gradual and successive pointing and smoothing, rather than impatient clicking similar to pulling a trigger or detonating a bomb. At its limit, it summons us, the embodied viewer who is just off-screen.

Jalal Toufic has authored several theoretical tracts that have influenced many Lebanese filmmakers using the undead framework. These thoughts appear in *Vampires: An Uneasy Essay on the Undead in Film* (1993), his first book of essays, in which he considers the undead in film and film itself as an undead medium.¹⁷ In this text, he writes from a “post-cinematic” perspec-

tive that the body of the film produced by the Hollywood studio system, with its para-colonial, narcissistic tendencies, is undone and done again, such that it is now “undead,” unresponsive but haunting. A short section entitled “Breathless” describes the encounter with a vampire that could also apply to the individual experience of watching a computer screen. No longer a reason to communally gather in a crowd, as the cinema was, this media platform would seem to suck the breath out of the viewer without returning it to a larger body. He writes that the undead has no mirror image, for “[i]f they don’t wipe the mirror, living people cannot see their image in it in winter since their breath, visible then, hides the surface of the mirror. But, with the vampire, one encounters an in-existent mirror image hidden by in-existent breath” (Toufic 39). Revisiting the installation through the breathless and undead post-media experience Toufic describes, Cherri’s image appears whole and in a condition of visibility (onscreen), yet the images of the undead fog it, taking the place of the otherwise missing collective breath in the digital.

Instead, the wounds reveal the surface of his face-as-screen, functioning as an opaque surface upon which those bodies become visible. Cherri wipes the screen in a magician-like gesture at the end of the video before the video repeats, making the entirely disfigured face disappear and reappear shortly after, alive and unblemished. The motion suspends the action, inviting the viewer to both catch their breath and notice themselves in the act of viewing. Without this interruption and without the slow processual time of the wounding, the miraculous recovery would mimic the magical thinking of “before and after” photos of plastic surgery, weight loss, or acne advertisements. Wiping the mirror allows the breath to “show up.”¹⁸ Cherri’s (s)wiping of the image at the end of the loop can be read as cleaning the mirror rather than clearing the deck—a reference to almost imperceptible breath and the out-of-frame¹⁹ that is not simply a homogenous continuation of vampiric code.

16. Here I allow the quote to point outside the limits of this text, to Derrida, in honor of the thought.

17. Cherri co-designed the Post-Apollo Press’s 2003 re-release. Kamran Rastegar writes of the theme of vampires and “cinematic tropes of the undead” in post-war Lebanese film and video “as a critical reflection on unresolved calls for justice” (157).

18. In another earlier video, “Slippage,” (2007) the camera records impassively while Cherri, staring into it, attempts to hold his breath for as long as possible. No one intervenes but Cherri cannot hold back and periodically gasps and pants.

19. Deleuze 16.

Conclusion

I wish to emphasize how much proxy poetics invoke the spectator and their relation to the “server.” If I am to argue this convincingly, I must offer my particular experience of the piece and, in doing so, admit my coordinates, my positions, my memories, and my experience. I had no direct contact with the 2006 bombings in Beirut. I was studying in Manhattan when the September 11 attacks occurred but experienced the event predominantly through the media. With its performance of watching a hyper-media event, Cherri’s piece invoked me through my own sense memories of absent-presence and present-absence. Cherri’s inclusion of the 9/11 attacks with the 2006 war, announced at a distance through the radio and the open window, synchronizes his video with a global time of impending, vampiric crises.

Though located only 7.5 miles north, I heard of the strike from a chorus of news reports. These blasted from the cathode-tube televisions in the common spaces located at opposite corners of the donut-shaped building and were joined by private TVs and radios intermingling in the building’s shaft. My sense memory reveals that the import of the event was not as immediately cognizable or disturbing as the synchronization and affective consensus of confused and uncertain voices over the same few images on loop. The texture of voices resonated in contrast to the dampened, muted sounds of carpeted chambers and passages of an otherwise quiet, still morning. I seem to remember a window with a languorous curtain very much like that in the video bringing breezes from elsewhere. The synchronized media time established then seems to have held both globally and as a moment of history in which time does not move forward. Endeavors to strike hopeful peace deals in the Middle East have sorely stalled if not been completely abandoned. The living ones remain so only with a revolutionary consciousness of the dead; life feels like the gift given into the care of proxies tasked with hospitality and care in the present.

In this essay, I argue that documentary proxy poetics evoke neither empathy nor identification, those common values attributed to fiction, as primary concerns. Cherri’s video performs exactly how identification and presence have limits. Instead, coordinates and correspondences that evidence the positionality of the viewer allow for a differentiated and complex understanding of one’s relation and complicity, bringing a panoply of viewing positions together without

compromising the multi-faceted and multi-valent social and geographic positions made local through the senses. The viewer’s invocation into an in many ways old-fashioned hall of mirrors on the contrary suggests an urgent ethical imperative of accountability and care for the other.



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VIFF

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2020 Reviews

Black Bear



In Lawrence Michael Levine's dark indie drama, *Black Bear*, everyone's playing a role, if not two or three. Set in a remote cabin, the story follows a young filmmaker, Allison (Aubrey Plaza), as she takes a creative retreat in a lakeshore B&B owned by Blair (Sarah Gadon) and Gabe (Christopher Abbott). This isolated trio quickly becomes a potential love triangle, with an early flirtation between Allison and Gabe inevitably raising tensions (sexual and otherwise). Then, halfway through, things change. It's hard to describe this narrative shift without revealing too much, but it alters each character's role, while replaying the same tensions from the first half. With this move, the film makes a familiar narrative gamble, hoping that showing more of the same will reveal something more within the same. However, this is where the film struggles the most. While Levin certainly paces his scenes precisely, building an ominous mood throughout, his foregrounded manipulation of form slips into affectation more than revelation. Yet, the film's form also manages to showcase each performance with intimacy and care, and this is where the film shines the most. Aubrey Plaza's morose and aloof performance style transfers delightfully well into this dramatic setting, and Sarah Gadon lets her quiet rage build to full force here. Christopher Abbott moves smoothly between these two registers, providing both comedic relief and dramatic intensity. While the film doesn't quite live up to its ambitions, it still has ambitions, and that's always worth watching for.

Review by Michael Stringer

Call Me Human



"Je cherche l'horizon" (*I seek the horizon*) are the first words in the first poem read by Josephine Bacon in *Call Me Human*. Bacon, the subject of O'Bomsawin's attentive and collaborative documentary, is an Innu poet, filmmaker, translator, researcher, and teacher, and in the film she regularly returns to the horizon. It's in her words, when she talks of the elders she worked with who always faced the horizon, and it's in her gaze when she sees her grandfather or poetry in its line. Bacon reads many poems, in voiceover and in dialogue, in French and in Innu. But O'Bomsawin also includes other work, such as clips from one of Bacon's documentaries and recordings she took as a researcher. Across these different forms is Bacon's concern for the Innu language. She maintains its use. Throughout *Call Me Human*, she asks (her friend's mother) for the Innu word of an action or explains (to Innu-Quebecois poet Marie-Andrée Gill) the meaning of another, exchanging language. The film follows Bacon from the snowy streets of Montreal to the lichen-covered tundra as she meets friends, attends readings and prize ceremonies, and reminisces. The camera often stays close but for a few instances when it situates Bacon in the landscape of a place, as when she stands between the gas station pumps that have replaced the bathroom where she slept with a friend when she first came to Montreal. Bacon laughs often and warmly, with her childhood friend, her publisher, her family. Early in the film, a radio host asks Bacon if she hesitated before accepting to make the documentary. She says, Yes, a bit, "but the film is not only about me, it also includes the people I love."

Review by Harrison Wade

My Rembrandt



"When I'm standing next to it, it's palpable history. When I move out of the picture, it's just a painting." This quote from Jan Six van Hillegom exemplifies what Oeke Hoogendijk's documentary, *My Rembrandt*, seeks to reveal about Rembrandt van Rijn's legacy. While it is undeniable that Rembrandt's artistic prowess plays a substantial role in the continued relevancy of his work, it is the people dedicated to the legacy of a man born over 400 years ago who have solidified his position as one of the greatest painters to ever live. But who are these people and why are they so devoted to Rembrandt? What are their stories? *My Rembrandt* considers this question by offering an exclusive look into the world of high-stakes art collecting—a world that is defined by relentlessness and affection in equal measure. Due to the use of the possessive adjective "my" in the title, it is easy to assume that the relationship between the subjects of this documentary and Rembrandt's work is one built solely on the desire to possess. However, Hoogendijk instead expertly highlights the gentle longing that exists alongside the obsessive tendencies of these art connoisseurs. Perhaps most compelling of all the subjects is art scholar and dealer Jan Six. A direct descendant of the Jan Six who was painted by Rembrandt in 1654, much of the film revolves around Six's struggle to authenticate a piece he is convinced was painted by Rembrandt. As other experts in the field begin to express their skepticism, Six's pleasant yet reserved demeanor becomes more harried and the validity of his procurement of the piece comes into question. The root of this fixation—and in turn the essence of the film—is revealed when Jan Six proclaims with barely concealed mania that due to his family name, "Little Jan worked five times harder, and was [finally] proven right." The force with which these words snap Six's motivations into place is staggering. The ambition, the obsession, is all a product of yearning—the yearning to be considered worthy of the family name. With this film, Hoogendijk affirms the humanity that imbues Rembrandt's work. The history of these paintings is written alongside the stories of families, cities, and nations. And *My Rembrandt* does well to remind us that art is inextricable from each of our lives.

Review by Kate Wise

Possessor



Possessor follows Tasya Vos (Andrea Riseborough), an assassin who uses brain-implant technology to "possess" the bodies of the unwitting victims who provide her access to her targets. The film raises questions about not only the body and identity but also gender, performance, and the violation of privacy. Vos—an effective and brutal killer—finds her mission and her life threatened when in the body of Colin (Christopher Abbott), who manages to resist her influence, leaving Vos trapped while the two battle for control. Vos' ability to enter and manipulate others' bodies, a terrifying process in how it undoes one's bodily autonomy, problematizes the relationship between the body and the self. Riseborough essentially disappearing from the film when Vos first possesses Colin (around 30 minutes in) even challenges the relationship between actor and character. For a significant portion of *Possessor*, Riseborough only appears in short bursts—a specter haunting Colin. Abbott, then, simultaneously performs as both Colin and Vos wrestling for control of his body, making it extremely difficult at times for a viewer to discern which character they are watching. Notions of privacy (and the violation of it) extend beyond the possessions themselves: Vos' violent memories invade her family life via trauma-inspired hallucinations. Similarly, Colin works in data-mining and spends his days surveilling strangers in private moments and settings. Most notably, however, Vos' handler crafts narratives to explain Vos' "possessee's" motivations for murder. Like an actor playing a character, Vos then performs these narratives through the individuals' bodies, stealing not only their autonomy, but their legacy.

Review by Alec Christensen



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A photograph of a film set with silhouettes of people, overlaid with a semi-transparent pink rectangle. The scene includes a camera on the left, a monitor, and several people in the background.

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