A Framework for an Eco-Philosophical Hermeneutics of Cinema

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ABSTRACT

A Framework for an Eco-Philosophical Hermeneutics of Cinema

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Through long-form interpretations of four films all released in the early 2010s—*Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (Werner Herzog, 2011), *Hugo* (Martin Scorsese, 2011), *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2010), and *Melancholia* (Lars von Trier, 2011)—this dissertation takes up the challenge of thinking non-anthropocentrically. Treated as neither theoretical illustrations nor as case studies, I engage with these films as examples of an evolving cinematic medium and use my interpretations to develop a unique framework for both analyzing filmic texts and for understanding mediation itself as an important eco-philosophical and eco-ethical concern.

As expounded by the pioneering eco-philosopher Hans Jonas (1903-1993), a self-aware Anthropocene requires a new "image of the human" suited to the emergence of an "integral monism" that can reconcile what Jonas argues is our unsustainable contemporary dualism. The foundation of this new eco-ethics is a bold philosophical project to extend metaphysics to all living things. While Jonas' diagnosis and proposed treatment for humanity's anti-ecological tendencies is precise, his interest in what he characterizes as the fundamental biological phenomenon of *mediation* reveals the difficult and recursive thinking inherent to this kind of metaphysics. This dissertation contends that film studies is well suited to exactly this kind of self-reflexive ontological analysis and draws inspiration from how thinkers like Siegfried Kracauer and Stanley Cavell understand the cinematic medium as both material and metaphysical.

The ontological and methodological problems of 'exploring' and 'understanding' a medium like cinema are rejuvenated by Jonas' eco-ethical provocation. Using the hermeneutic philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Stanley Cavell's "cinematic circle" as precedents, this study crosses interdisciplinary boundaries to uncover a set of eco-ontological themes that join aesthetic mediation and the phenomenon of life in a mutually illuminating hermeneutic circle.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Synopsis

My subject is our human place within the natural world as imagined by four films, all released in the early 2010s and interpreted by me. My goal for these interpretations is to uncover each work's *structuring metaphysics* and to situate the way these films make and evade meaning within the broader context of the current environmental crisis. I look closely at how each film reveals a network of worldviews concerning, and relying upon, 'images' of reality, nature, purpose, freedom, and, most notably, ideas about the medium of cinema itself. The latter emerged as a major theme of this study and one that proved the most valuable for making a compelling connection between cinematic art and ecological philosophy, for making the claim that hermeneutic analysis can be an eco-philosophical practice and that the development of cinema has contributed to the philosophy of life.

In the subtle and not-so-subtle ways that these works address their own limits of representation they figure the limits of our world's malleability. I have categorized these four films, and the means by which they deploy cinema as both a figure of and an engine for self-knowledge, as examples of an ad-hoc and emerging genre of *ontological films*. My means to understanding this category comes from the realist film theory of André Bazin, Siegfried Kracauer, and Stanley Cavell. My reasoning for working with this so-called 'late-classical' theory in order to analyze contemporary films will be explained in this introduction and has much to do with my choice of philosophical interlocutor.

My guide to thinking about metaphysics in the age of eco-philosophy—to think about metaphysics as inherently speculative, a subject of philosophy forever *in media res*, and, most importantly, as a sub-category of philosophy now compelled to adapt to a scientific revision of our understanding of the world—will be the work of the German-American philosopher Hans Jonas. His 1966 collection of essays, *The Phenomenon of Life: Towards a Biological Philosophy*, provides a flexible, relatively simple, and endlessly rich set of reconsiderations of familiar metaphysical concepts, keys to an ingenious project to reimagine Western metaphysics on its own terms and as a sub-discipline of a renewed philosophy extended to all organic life.

This dissertation project is an inherently interdisciplinary study and, as such, is subject to my own idiosyncrasies as an interpreter, a film scholar, a metaphysician, and someone with his own complex relationship with the 'natural world'. As much as this study represents an encounter with philosophy, the history of philosophy, art history, film history, and film theory it is also a modest example of critical hermeneutics *in practice* and proceeds, ultimately, from a faith that the correlation between the world and art is more than merely convenient: it is the primary access we have to reality and the means by which reality is made malleable. Without such a critical practice, the hard sciences slice reality ever finer, soft sciences expand into abstraction, and ad-hoc partisan politics entrench even more deeply. At the same time, this study is an example of working with an emerging metaphysics self-consciously informed by scientific revelation: no hermeneutics that pretends to address the environmental crisis in art can proceed without taking into account some version of the claim of scientific thought upon reality, nor its proclamations of inevitability.

The ultimate goal for this project, one that extends beyond this dissertation, is to help establish a *framework* for future eco-critical work in cinema. Though the concept of a 'framework' is a bit vague in the Humanities,[1] I use the term here to refer to the establishment of a set of concepts ready-at-hand to orient future eco-critical hermeneutic projects. Some of the concepts borrowed from Jonas are relatively new to film studies, others I adapt from recent eco-critical work, and all are meant to encourage a meta-discursive view of media history (and pre-history).

A framework is not a school of thought, nor is it a manifesto. It does not impose a totalizing narrative or a normative goal. It is first and foremost meant to alleviate some of the discouraging frustrations inherent to developing an undogmatic critical approach that sustains the multivalence and open-endedness of an artwork while at the same time revealing what sets of

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[1] The terms 'critical framework' or 'conceptual framework' are used often in humanities projects, but I've never found an actual definition of what this means, outside of more sweeping philosophical analyses of the frames and limits of disciplinary knowledge—Kuhn's "paradigm" and Foucault's "épistemé" being the most famous. The term is a bit more explicit in computer application development, however, and refers to, as seen in Clements: "an abstraction in which common code providing generic functionality can be selectively overridden or specialized by user code providing specific functionality" (6.4.2). I've worked in computer application development for decades, and to my mind a framework requires the following: 1) a library of code that makes repetitive development tasks simple and easy to deploy (e.g. user authentication); 2) a preferred pattern or best-practice for organizing code and structuring applications; 3) a rich variety of examples of applying the framework. This last item is more essential than might appear, especially to open source communities. A community of users, introduced to the framework first through examples, ensure the future evolution of the framework.

creative questions and solutions determine its form, content, vision, and blind spots. This framework is meant to help in identifying those facets in a cinematic work where meaning becomes excessive and unexpected, to take seriously those moments when a work seems particularly effective, and to become sensitive to the representational choices that might reveal the surprising possibility of a coherent—or, at least, pragmatically effective—metaphysics. As well, the framework makes explicit room for the role of the critic and values the idiosyncrasy and subjectivity an engaged critic brings to the roundelay of meaning-making that an artwork is able to set in motion. This approach is Gadamerian and Benjaminian, and borrows a great deal from Walter Benjamin's adaption of "immanent critique," insofar as interpretation proceeds from the idea that artworks are incomplete until interpreted, that much of a work's meaning is in tension with its medium, and that self-reflexivity about an individual work begins *in* the work itself—it needs to be pursued and teased out.[2] This framework is meant to help make clear why hermeneutics is an eco-philosophical practice and to provide some clarity around what kind of answers we expect it to produce, how we might recognize those answers, and what limits upon thinking are introduced or relaxed in order to make posing those answers possible.

While this introduction establishes the parameters of the framework, the success of the approach must be judged—and can be much better understood—by engaging with the applied examples. They are: a close look at camera style in *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (Herzog, 2011), an exegesis of the complex figure of the automaton in *Hugo* (Martin Scorsese, 2011), the problem of consciousness in *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2010), and a detailed form/content analysis of *Melancholia* (Von Trier, 2011). In my speculative conclusion, I offer a brief analysis of how space is created in a fifth film, *The Tree of Life* (Malick, 2011), in order to tease out a few of the most interesting commonalities revealed by the four films. I then extend the discussion to the broader image culture in order to suggest productive ways that we can think about imaging ecological metaphysics.

Introduction to Thinking About Images and Nature

One historical image of the coming apocalypse is the Cuyahoga River on fire for three days, five-story flames lapping against the Cleveland skyline. Another is a clutch of eggs as soft as wet paper and translucent hairless raptor chicks drying in the sun. Next, a drowned bear floating alone

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[2] John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), 89.

in the arctic water, haloed by sun and white slime. A glossy magazine photo of green kudzu creeping at the rate of two feet a day over the lip of a cracked highway, swallowing an abandoned gas station. A YouTube video of a hayfield in winter, five thousand dead blackbirds scattered to the horizon.

These examples, and many more, make up the thickening zeitgeist of environmental horror—a world disoriented, turning on itself. Highly publicized environmental disasters like the

Fig. 1: The Cuyahoga River fire, 1952

Fig. 2: A farmhouse in South Carolina swallowed by Kudzu, an invasive species

Cuyahoga River Fire of 1969[3] and the mass decline in eagle populations due to the widespread use of the pesticide DDT (expounded upon in the environmentalist touchstone *The Silent Spring*, 1962, by Rachel Carson), ended the 1960s, in the United Sates at least, gripped by a growing sense of unease. While the 70s were marked by even more disasters—insidious ones like the shockingly high rate of miscarriages in Niagara Falls, New York; or unmistakable ones, like the partial nuclear meltdown at the Three Mile Island Power Plant in Pennsylvania—it was also marked by a flurry of environmentalist legislation: The Clean Air Act (1970), The Water Pollution Control Act (1973), and the Endangered Species Act (1973). The 70s, in general, saw the mainstreaming of environmentalism in the West: Earth Day was first celebrated in 1970; Greenpeace was founded in Vancouver, British Columbia in 1971. This relatively new environmental consciousness continued to develop over the following turbulent decades: through cancer scares, toxic waste dumping, the Chernobyl nuclear meltdown, illegal whaling, illegal ivory trade, leaded gasoline banning, depletion of fish stocks, depletion of rainforests, mass extinctions, garbage islands, holes in the ozone layer, skin cancer scares, coral reef disintegration, the melting icecaps, global cooling, global warming, and now, especially since 2005,[4] the mainstreaming of the idea that human industry is directly related to global

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[3] The Cuyahoga river has caught fire several times, but it was the 1969 fire that caught the attention and outrage of *Time* magazine. However, no photos of the 1969 fire are known to exist.

[4] The Hurricane Katrina disaster in 2005 made the question of extreme climate readiness unavoidable while the ratification of the Kyoto Accord that same year marked an important (though ultimately failed) attempt to encourage

climate change. It is through these images that we, collectively, are engaging with and re-visualizing the natural world at the moment that this natural world is becoming more indistinct, less predictable, even unrecognizable.

As I write this at the end of 2017, the dominant discourse seems to have shifted again—an apocalyptic "we are beyond the point of no return" mood has begun to gain more traction. American philosopher Robert Jensen in his book *We Are All Apocalyptic Now*, argues for facing up to some hard truths:

> To think apocalyptically is not to give up on ourselves, but only to give up on the arrogant stories—religious and secular—that we modern humans have been telling about ourselves. Our hope for a decent future—indeed, any hope for even the idea of a future—depends on our ability to tell stories not of how humans have ruled the world, but how we can live in the world. We are all apocalyptic now, whether we like it or not.[5]

One of the largest climate change awareness protests yet seen—held in New York City on September 22nd, 2014—marked another important trend: the crisis becoming represented not through symbols and brands abstracted from a remote natural world (e.g. panda bears and ice caps) but in the faces of human communities most affected, today, by climate change.[6] Climate change is happening at a local level, and its devastation is felt most acutely in economically depressed and marginalized communities. This is quite a shift from the birth of modern Western environmental consciousness in the 1960s, perhaps best emblematized by the public campaign spearheaded by *Whole Earth Catalog* founder Stewart Brand to petition NASA to publically release the first images, from space, of the entire Earth. Brand felt that this image, once finally seen and disseminated, would be a powerful and convincing symbol of the fragility of our world and function as a global call to action.[7] Over the intervening 50 years, environmentalist thought has become more fragmented but also more incisive.

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international cooperation on climate change. In 2006, the release of Al Gore's documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*, along with similarly themed broadcasts on the BBC (*Are We Changing Planet Earth*? directed by Nicholas Brown; hosted by Richard Attenborough) marked the frontline of a massive, international awareness campaign, supported, at times, by global leaders—notably British Prime Minister Tony Blair—publicly announcing that the global climate was changing and that human actions were almost certainly a contributing cause.

[5] Robert Jensen, "Rationally Speaking, We Are All Apocalyptic Now," *Truthout* (2013), http://www.truth-out.org/opinion/item/14322-rationally-speaking-we-are-all-apocalyptic-now.

[6] Lisa W. Foderaro, "Taking a Call for Climate Change to the Streets," *The New York Times* 2014.

[7] Andrew G. Kirk, *Counterculture Green: The Whole Earth Catalog and American Environmentalism*, Cultureamerica (Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 48.

Pegged to increasing globalization, facilitated by the rise of the internet, and imaged through the ubiquity of high quality digital cameras, the *real world*—as a thing unknowable and in peril—is pitched somewhere between our culpability in the world's fate and our total vulnerability to its responses. The films I will be analyzing in this dissertation do not directly image or represent this ecological derangement. But all five, in their own way, find the means to image a world, a cinematic world, arrested in contemplation, resistant to immediate recognition, and, aligned—according to the mediating objects of its attention—with the entry-point of something emergent. Hermeneutic work on these texts has much to teach us about the human imagination, our images of responsibility, and projections of alternatives.

Introduction to Eco-Philosophy

The environmental crisis is fixable in only four generations. Or, at least, it is according to some Deep Ecologists[8] who argue that if a worldwide 'single child' policy were implemented (much like the one China enacted in the 1979)[9] that in only 140 years the human population would decrease from a world-taxing seven billion to a completely sustainable two billion.[10] What forces might make this luxurious low-density future possible for the lucky two billion only-children not yet born? It boggles the mind—it would seem that nothing short of a wholesale reinterpretation of the idea of human responsibility and personal freedom would suffice. And even then, social engineering at such a scale presents ethical challenges that no government would be willing to face.

There are, of course, no easy solutions, and the capacity of environmentalist discourse to broach difficult ethical issues, even ones not nearly so fraught as limiting procreative rights, have barely even been tested.[11] As of yet, there is no theoretical position that adequately sums up an

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[8] 'Deep Ecology' is one of the most recognizable contemporary environmental philosophies in the West. Population control is one of its founding principles, though not necessarily in the form of a global single-child policy. See Arne Naess, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long‐Range Ecology Movement. A Summary," *Inquiry* 16, no. 1-4 (1973).

[9] Only about 36% of the Chinese population was subject to the one-child policy. It is estimated that between 250 and 300 million births were averted. The most glaring problem of a single-child policy is that, over the relative short-term, the aging population will outnumber the working-age population who can support them.

[10] Gretchen C. Daily, Anne H. Ehrlich, and Paul R. Ehrlich, "Optimum Human Population Size," *Population and Environment* 15, no. 6 (1994): 470.

[11] The authors of a widely circulated study published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* called debates about population control "the elephant in the room." Corey J. A. Bradshaw and Barry W. Brook, "Human Population Reduction Is Not a Quick Fix for Environmental Problems," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 111 (2014).

'environmentalist' world-view: 'environmentalism' does not yet have a tradition of texts or a conceptual toolbox similar to feminism and Marxism: two worldviews based in political activism that have developed their own hermeneutic tradition. Environmentalism is still, first and foremost, a category of political activism, not a cohesive philosophical position or set of critical practices to investigate cultural artefacts and to reshape culture itself. And while the politics and activism of environmentalism are vitally important—and a documentary like *An Inconvenient Truth* (Guggenheim, 2006) can package and present these facts for political effect—a moral imperative is an inert historical curiosity compared to a 'living' and comprehensive philosophy. 'Ecologism' does not yet exist. Eco-culturalism? Neo-ontological speculative-realism? Vitalism, ecoglobalism, ecosophy, naturalism—none of these nouns quite connect with 'philosophy', 'culture studies', and 'art history' the way, for example, 'post-modernism' does. The point of view of eco-philosophy is barely occupied.

This open field has served to invite a variety of responses to the generally shared sense that a relation between humans and the environment must be newly theorized—not only to imagine a prophylactic response, but out of recognition that the world has changed in a way that cuts across all disciplines of thought. As diverse as the approaches might be, they all share a general imperative: to address the problem of *anthropocentric* (human-centered) thought that makes possible the logic of non-human exploitation. Deep ecology, Gaia theories, One World movements, and appeals to Buddhism—among many others—have all attempted to offer more salutary, eco-conscious ways of seeing the world and our place within it.

Though Benedict de Spinoza is seen by many eco-critics as a kind of spiritual forebear in Western thought of a sustainable non-anthropocentric philosophy,[12] the even more radical philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead has proven to have the most far-reaching influence. The Chinese government, in an effort to become leaders in environmental thought, has recently created no fewer than 18 university-based centers[13] for the study of Whitehead's philosophy. This sudden interest marks a spectacular reversal to the general indifference the 1929 publication of

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[12] c.f. Hasana Sharp, *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011). Spinoza's pantheistic argument for a divinity immanent to material reality makes his thought powerfully applicable to modern attempts to reinterpret our relationship to the world.

[13] Much of this was spearheaded by Japanese/American philosopher, and Whitehead acolyte, John B. Cobb Jr. who founded the Institute for Postmodern Development of China (IPDC) in 2005.

Process and Reality received.[14] The contemporary appeal of Whitehead stems from his profound anti-Cartesian approach and to the seriousness with which he takes the task of understanding—and sharing—reality. Rather than thinking about reality as a collection of distinct and indifferent clusters of matter, Whitehead argues for the primacy of the *event*. Reality, as a collection of interrelated events, becomes suffused with meaning because *reality* and *meaning* both share qualities of process and relation. Whitehead's metaphysics takes its unusual character from an innovative way to overcome mind/body dualism, a way-of-being hypothesized to be more congenial to a kinder and gentler world. He writes: "there is urgency in coming to see the world as a web of interrelated processes of which we are integral parts, so that all of our choices and actions have consequences for the world around us."[15]

Whitehead's philosophy may have been overlooked in its time due to a prevailing lack of interest in metaphysics and the 'popular' falling out of favour of life-oriented philosophies like vitalism (a topic I will return to later in this introduction). But the rise in ecological consciousness has not only made philosophies like Whitehead's relevant, but has prompted a new 'metaphysical turn'. Non-dogmatic metaphysics like Speculative Realism attempt to base a philosophy in a world without humans[16], Object Oriented Ontology (OOO) rejects the privileging of human existence over the existence of non-human objects[17], while Actor-Network Theory

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[14] Henry Nelson Wieman wrote a famous, prophetic review of *Process and Reality* in 1930: "Not many people will read Whitehead's recent book this generation; not many will read it in any generation. But its influence will radiate through concentric circles of popularization until the common man will think and work in the light of it, not knowing whence the light came. After a few decades of discussion and analysis one will be able to understand it more readily than can be done now." Henry Nelson Wieman, "A Philosophy of Religions," *The Journal of Religion* 10 (1930): 137.

[15] Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality, an Essay in Cosmology*, Harper Torchbooks Academy Library (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1929), x.

[16] Ray Brassier and Quentin Meillassoux are two of the better-known philosophers of speculative realism. Though not associated with speculative realism, Eugene Thacker has addressed the "horror of philosophy" discernible at the limits of thought—including thoughts of extinction. *In The Dust Of This Planet* (2011), Thacker calls the horror of philosophy "the isolation of those moments in which philosophy reveals its own limitations and constraints, moments in which thinking enigmatically confronts the horizon of its own possibility" (2). Thacker distinguishes three kinds of "worlds" useful for delineating ways of understanding knowledge production: the "world-for-us" (the human-centric view of the world), and the "world-in-itself" (the world understood via the sciences), and the "world-without-us" (6). In an earlier work, *After Life* (2010), Thacker deconstructs the very notion of "life" concluding that "Life is not only a problem *of* philosophy, but a problem *for* philosophy" (x). Eugene Thacker, *After Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); *In the Dust of This Planet*, Horror of Philosophy (Winchester, UK ; Washington, USA: Zero Books, 2011).

[17] Graham Harman is the movement's founder. Timothy Morton, the eco-critic, is also a contributor to this ongoing project.

entertains the idea that even non-human objects are equal actors in social theory.[18] Finally—though by no means definitively—the work of Gilles Deleuze (and his sometime collaborator Félix Guattari) looms large in this field. Like Whitehead, Deleuze and Guattarri were heavily influenced by Henri Bergson and Spinoza and posit a theory of values (in works like *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*) based on a metaphysics that rejects the notion of the individual in the classical liberal sense and is dynamically open to flux and difference—in other words, Deleuze and Guattari, in their own way, present a vision of the human being no longer estranged or metaphysically isolated from the world.

Introduction to Ecocriticism

The public-facing version of eco-philosophy is perhaps best described as a vague wish to *feel* close to Nature (even stronger than the desire to *take care*). Eco-critic Timothy Morton is rightly suspicious of such a philosophic move, advocating for the deconstruction of any discourse or ideology that attempts to efface the distance between a subject and the world in order to evade an uncomfortable sense of estrangement. Morton's critique targets the well-intentioned naturalist who describes their thoughts on Nature always in the context of *where* they are thinking about nature: on the edge of a volcano, or a mountain range, or the ocean—this is the kind of writing almost always betrayed by the opening words "As I write this …" It does not impress Morton, and he argues that this kind of writing seeks,

> To undo habitual distinctions between nature and ourselves. It is supposed not just to describe, but also to provide a working model for dissolving the difference between subject and object, a dualism seen as the fundamental philosophical reason for human being's destruction of the environment. If we could not merely figure out but actually *experience* the fact that we are embedded in our world, then we would be less likely to destroy it. (63-64)

Morton calls this neo-Romanticism "ambient poetics." It is an ideological fantasy of jumpstarting ecological feeling by dissolving the subject as we know it into the world as we would *like* to know it. For Morton, it is politically retrograde—how can there be eco-activism without a subject who *acts*? Instead, Morton advocates for a "queering of environmental thought," a true

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[18] Bruno Latour, one of the key theorists of Actor-Network Theory, deconstructs the object/subject and nature/culture binary in Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

deconstructionist ethics that aspires to overcome contradictory and limiting notions of nature—hence the title of his most well-known book: *Environmentalism Without Nature*. "Nature", according to Morton, is a pernicious, even dangerous concept that has outlived its usefulness and generates more mystification than moral insight.

Morton's meta-critique is exemplary of contemporary eco-criticism, a critical practice with at least a forty-year history, but one still searching for its guiding methodology and shared disciplinary objects. Until the 1990s, and arguably not until the 1996 publication of the *Ecocriticism Reader,*[19] the practice of eco-criticism was too diverse to be considered a sub-discipline at all. While a number of eco-minded theorists inspired by the incipient environmentalism of the 60s and early 70s started to take questions of nature seriously, these early attempts were not theorized, and individual theorists did not read each other's work. However, according to Cheryll Glotfelty, editor of the *Ecocriticsm Reader*, we can undeniably see the contours, even in the early days, of an emerging project that attempts to take seriously the multitude of ways that human beings think about (and don't think about) the natural world and to recognize how dangerous those assumptions can be if left un-theorized.[20]

The City and The Country by Raymond Williams, published in 1973, is an exceptional example of a one-off, rogue work of eco-criticism before the fact. In this book, Williams plunges into a few hundred years of English literature to suss out the extent of the idealized and mystified representation of "The Country" and identifies in this representation the pernicious functioning of ideology. Williams' approach is exemplary of cultural criticism as a whole: he identifies a seemingly uncontested binary in a group of cultural products and then extrapolates how the assumptions that made that uncontested mode of thinking possible play out at multiple levels of social organization—often in service of social oppression. In this act of deconstruction comes the possibility of real change: "the contrast of the country and city is one of the major forms in which

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[19] Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996).

[20] In his book *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, Lawrence Buell historicizes a "first-wave" eco-criticism concerned mostly with nature praising and an incredibly diverse "second-wave" that, he argues, is mostly concerned with problematizing the concept of nature itself. It is unclear if a "third-wave" is emerging—or if it is necessary—but it is worth noting that Buell uses "Environmental Criticism" in lieu of "ecocriticism" in both the title and preface to the book, claiming his usage as a "strategic ambiguity" which distances his work from a "cartoon image" of the field "no longer applicable today, if indeed it ever really was." In short, even in 2005 he felt the need to distance "environmental criticism" from 'hippie' and 'new-age' stereotypes. Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*, Blackwell Manifestos (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2005), viii. And c.f. Greg Garrard, *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, Oxford Handbooks (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014).

we become conscious of a central part of our experience and of the crises of our society."[21] In Williams' method, once a lacuna in thought is identified (to borrow a bit from the related practice of Derridean deconstruction) an interpreter is not without recourse to real knowledge: an artwork can, in spite of itself, contain fragments of historical, lived experience. He describes these fragments as making up an era's "structure of feeling"; for Williams, discovering these fragments is *the* work of the cultural critic.

Unsurprisingly, eco-critical cinema studies is just as diverse as the sub-discipline out of which it emerges. It includes works on the analysis of eco-representational politics, material histories, thematic analyses, as well as cultural critique in the Williams mode. The first wave of film studies scholarship on the topic catalogues the presence of ecological themes in a variety of cinematic works. Jhan Hochman's *Green Cultural Studies: Nature in Film, Novel, and Theory* (1988), David Ingram's *Green Screen: Environmentalism and Hollywood Cinema* (2000), and Murray/Heumann's *Ecology and Popular Film: Cinema on the Edge* (2009) fit admirably in this category.[22] Parallel to these works is a group of more deliberately polemical analyses attempting to engage with films in terms of the progressive or regressive ecological politics they demonstrate. Sean Cubitt's *Eco Media* (2005), Pat Brereton's *Hollywood Utopia: Ecology in Contemporary American Cinema* (2005), and Deborah Carmichael's *The Landscape of Hollywood Westerns: Ecocriticism in an American Film Genre* (2006) both fall in this category as both exemplars and meta-histories.[23]

An intriguing outlier to both of these groups is the edited collection *Moving Image Theory: Ecological Considerations* (2005), a collection of essays advocating for a scientific "ecological approach" to film theory.[24] In short, the editors argues that film studies has exaggerated the complexities of interpretation (or, at least, the kind of interpretation that begins with the belief that everything is filtered through ideology) at the expense of developing an

[21] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 289.

[22] Jhan Hochman, *Green Cultural Studies: Nature in Film, Novel, and Theory*, ed. Anonymous (Moscow, ID: University of Idaho Press, 1998); David Ingram, *Green Screen: Environmentalism and Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Anonymous, Representing American Culture (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000); Robin L. Murray and Joseph K. Heumann, *Ecology and Popular Film: Cinema on the Edge*, ed. Anonymous, Horizons of Cinema (Albany: State University of New York Press, Projected Date: 0901, 2009).

[23] Pat Brereton, *Hollywood Utopia: Ecology in Contemporary American Cinema*, ed. Anonymous (Bristol, UK ; Portland, Or., USA: Intellect Books, 2005); Deborah A. Carmichael, *The Landscape of Hollywood Westerns: Ecocriticism in an American Film Genre*, ed. Anonymous (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2006); Sean Cubitt, *Eco Media*, ed. Anonymous, Contemporary Cinema,; 1 (Amsterdam ; New York: Rodopi, 2005).

[24] Joseph Anderson and Barbara Fisher Anderson, *Moving Image Theory: Ecological Considerations* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005).

understanding of how human perception in an environment works, and thus, how that knowledge can help us understand how we perceive films (as a phenomenon of space, volume, shape, motion, etc). This work, like much of the analyses in this short bibliography, uses the category of the 'ecological' for raising questions about critical thinking in general, using the emergence of ecological thinking to re-consider dominant metaphysical, historical, and disciplinary assumptions, including the entire notion of 'critical distance'. Can't we argue that 'deconstruction', for example, as a method, is inherently anti-ecological?[25] Likewise, isn't stalwart defense of popular culture (and mammoth industries like Hollywood) just as suspect? And, from an ecological perspective, should we be wary of anything that smacks of scientific positivism—a Bordwellian influenced 'ecological perception theory' perhaps, just as we should be suspicious of any tendency in the humanities that shirks its responsibility to keep up on scientific advances? The 'ecological' in the late 90s and early 2000s it seems, had something of a moment, and it was deployed widely: used to argue for/against the salutary possibility of popular culture, for example, just as easily as it was used to argue for/against the trans-cognitive possibilities of art cinema. For those interested in the concept, it could be seen as setting a new standard against which the humanities might take its measure.

This opportunity for renewing the humanities inspires the work of, to my mind, the most dedicated contemporary eco-cinema theorist: Adrian Ivakhiv from the University of Vermont. Ivakhiv's approach is a mesmerizing amalgam of Deleuze, Whitehead, Bergson, Kant, and Peirce. Ivakhiv wants to create a more theoretically stable framework for connecting cinema to ecology and transcend the relatively superficial engagement of eco-critics who deploy films as mere illustrations of already circulating ecological ideas. Ivakhiv, though he has suggested numerous paths for arriving at such a framework, has tended to favour a kind of shared *aesthetics* of eco-philosophy and eco-cinema.

Ivakhiv's *Ecologies of the Moving Image* (2014) is an important book and marks, to my mind, the most fully-fledged attempt to make sense of potential points of contact between eco-philosophy and cinema studies. The reason that bringing these two categories into contact can be so daunting—besides the fact that both 'objects' are exceedingly multifarious—is that the connection between them is both obvious (movies are made out of fragments of nature) and also

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[25] c.f. Gary Steiner, *Animals and the Limits of Postmodernism*, Critical Perspectives on Animals: Theory, Culture, Science, and Law (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

ontologically speculative (our idea of nature is subtly and irrevocably changed by the mediation of movies, and the way we understand nature also changes the way we understand movies).

Settling on a methodology to address these linked objects is even more complex. The eco-critic, like the Feminist or Marxist critic, often finds themselves struggling to strike a balance between the highly specialized expansion of knowledge necessary for the discipline in which they perform their critical work, and a substantive contribution to a very vague public discourse that is, ideally, ultimately engaged in creating new eco-friendly legislation and policies. If the eco-critic is working within a discipline like literature or film studies, the goal of expanding knowledge about the critical object itself—beyond the object's incidental use-value as a vessel for critique—becomes an important related goal, one that might be at odds with the more public-facing critical goal of identifying bias and hypocrisy in cultural discourse. In short: how can the cultural-critic do justice to the practice of cultural critique while expanding public discourse *and* deepening specialized understanding of their disciplinary objects, all at the same time?

Ivakhiv admirably addresses many of these epistemological and methodological issues by advocating for a particular philosophic position that he believes is both salutary for environmentalist ends and well suited for understanding progressive cinema art: the process-relational philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead. It is an important critical move, because it opens the possibility of a mutually evolving interdisciplinary project: i.e. general work done on ecology that furthers our understanding of process philosophy will help us understand art cinema better; the more we understand art cinema, the more we will learn about process philosophy; and the more we discover about process-philosophy the more we will learn about both cinema and environmentalism. Ivakhiv isn't quite so explicit about his approach in *Ecologies of the Moving Image*, often finding it necessary to deflect potential criticism that his project is too "representationalist" or too "mystical." His goal is to do both "good" film studies and "good" philosophy. He writes:

> My argument will fall somewhere partway between the idea that cinema has
> reshaped the world, altering our experience of territory (or geomorphy), sociality
> (anthropomorphy), and livingness (biomorphy), and the more specific idea that
> while a few great films have done this, most simply follow along or reproduce
> things without change. Cinema reshapes the world in many directions, and I wish

to focus on films, or film capacities, that move things in the direction of a more fluid, more animate, more process-relational understanding of the world.[26]

Ultimately, for Ivakhiv, the goal of eco-critical film studies is to deconstruct ecological false consciousness and to promote a form of ecological thinking that overcomes the dangerous anthropocentric binaries that make it possible to devalue and exploit the non-human world. If cinema, as a *popular* art form, can indeed promote something akin to Whiteheadean process-relational thinking, even in non-specialists, then encouraging an eco-critical cinema based on a process-relational philosophy would be a great benefit. Technologies like cinema might offer truly progressive ways of thinking that produce a kind of *understanding*—a philosophical understanding—that is more sociologically salutary than mere polemical critiques. Ivakhiv writes:

> The process-relational model I develop in this book takes its inspiration from a broad range of thinkers, but most especially from Alfred North Whitehead, Charles Sanders Peirce, and Gilles Deleuze. The intent of this book is not primarily to develop a philosophy of the cinema, but to apply it in ways that reveal film's potentials for articulating interesting and innovative socio-ecological meanings and capacities. Films, I will argue, can *move* us toward a perception of the world in which sociality (or the anthropomorphic), materiality (or the geomorphic), and the interperceptual realm from which the two emerge are richer, in our perception, than when we started. This goes against the claims of those who have argued that technological mediation is more a part of the world's ecological problem than of its solution.[27]

Ivakhiv presents two different kinds of approaches to two different kinds of cinematic texts. Firstly, an effective eco-critic of cinema brings general awareness to the ways that cinematic objects perpetuate dangerous and politically problematic anti-environmentalist messages, either in their text or in their production practices. Likewise, the eco-critic can also help bring increased attention to politically salutary films that encourage ecological consciousness. And, secondly, an effective eco-critic of cinema identifies certain films (usually so-called 'art films') as potentially communicating a process-relational message in their form, content, and affective modalities. The

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[26] Adrian J. Ivakhiv, *Ecologies of the Moving Image: Cinema, Affect, Nature* (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013), 30.
[27] Ibid., 18.

eco-critic, armed with a sensitivity to process-relational issues, helps explicate these themes and nurtures these lines of thoughts by connecting them to other texts and philosophies.

Ivakhiv never marginalizes the desire for a truly activist ecocriticism concerned with sussing out salutary cultural *effect*, and finds himself making the case for the "popular art film" (like *The Tree of Life*) that—while not a blockbuster—reaches what might be considered an important critical mass with a mind-altering, non-anthropocentric message. While Ivakhiv's framework might be turned toward a very obscure art film if that film produces significant critical insights into the possibility of a process-relational cinema, it seems clear that his approach is better applied to divining process-relational themes in very popular eco-themed films (like James Cameron's *Avatar*, 2009). Such an analysis may not reveal much about the cinematic medium, but at least it can be assured of the relevance of its subject to public discourse.

A New Contribution to the Eco-Philosophy of Cinema

The identification of a philosophic position that is able to explicate, with equal richness, *both* a cultural/artistic phenomenon (like cinema) *and* a form of salutary ecological thinking is a highly desirable goal. Through the medium of a philosophic system (non-anthropocentrism and process philosophy are good examples), both the cultural phenomenon and ecological thinking itself are entered into a kind of critical circuit. As one is interpreted or explicated, so too is the other. At the risk of sounding glib, I'd argue that the relative impenetrability of the mediating philosophy is only going to be a benefit to the project. Process-relational philosophy, as a philosophy that intends nothing less than challenging the most fundamental concepts we use to understand reality, depends for its explication, communication, and development on a form of hermeneutic thinking peculiar to difficult and self-reflexive philosophies (I think most if not all major philosophies fit in this category: Nietzschean, Heideggerian, and Wittgensteinian philosophy might be considered exemplary). Difficult art-cinema, especially self-aware art cinema—in the mode, of, say *Melancholia* or Hollis Frampton's *Zorns Lemma* (1970)—requires a similar skepticism about *explication*. This link between philosophic experience and cinematic experience is multi-valent, but perhaps the most obvious connection is that cinema and philosophy both attempt to express something beyond language *through* the reality that is at hand (and cleaved from 'pure being' by language itself). And yet, though it is in hand, the fragment of reality is still held at a skeptical distance.

I think it is very likely that in the work of Whitehead eco-criticism has found its defining philosophical interlocutor. It is an exciting time in the sub-discipline. And I think that cinema studies, especially taking into account the obvious resonance of the idea of the "event" with cinematic experience (and the popularity of Whitehead-influenced Deleuzian thought in the discipline), will find Whitehead's thought more and more applicable (especially if process-relational philosophy indeed takes hold of eco-criticism). But that said, Ivakhiv's project also demonstrates the complexity and the difficulty of the effort. *Ecologies of the Moving Image* ranges over a wide terrain of film history and film theory, marking the places where cinema overlaps with the concept, theorization, and experience of nature. But when it comes to applying process-relational philosophy to individual films, especially in an effort to show how these films generate in the viewer a kind of process-relational thinking, Ivakhiv's conclusions are not entirely persuasive (we'll look at his take on *Melancholia* in a later chapter). I think this is partly because the films are very challenging (Ivakhiv doesn't really have the space or rhetorical momentum to fully engage with these works in this book at least), and partly because the eco-philosophical goal of creating a non-anthropocentric 'way of seeing the world' intends such a thorough deconstruction of the metaphysical foundations. In his conclusion to his analysis of *Melancholia*, Ivakhiv quotes Slavoj Žižek—another thinker who thoroughly rejects the nature/culture boundary—who argues that we ought to "accept that, at the level of possibilities, our future is doomed, the catastrophe will take place, it is our destiny—and, then, on the background of this acceptance, we should mobilize ourselves to perform the act that will change destiny by inserting a new possibility into the past."[28] By this, I take Ivakhiv and Žižek to mean that our future is tied to our interpretation of the past, and that a progressive critique can only commence when we accept that we are indeed doomed if we continue to act (and interpret) as we have in the past. I take the banality of this idea to be indicative of the urgency with which a new kind of imaginatively engaged critique—one that defines our present by questioning both the future *and* the past—must commence.

My contribution to this contemporary eco-critical project is, I hope, two-fold. Firstly, this dissertation includes thorough, long-form analyses of films (including two works, coincidentally, considered by Ivakhiv to be eco-philosophically important). The goal of my interpretations are not foremost to expand a particular eco-critical concept; they are meant as case studies that test

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[28] Slavoj Žižek, "Nature and Its Discontents," *SubStance* 37, no. 3 (2008): 68. (Quoted in Ivakhiv 304)

interpretation itself as an eco-critical tool. Secondly, I make an argument for the important relevance of the metaphysical thought of the German/American philosopher Hans Jonas to eco-criticism. Jonas' take on the ecological crisis, and the metaphysics he develops to help understand it (an unusual version of non-anthropocentrism), offers four key concepts that I will argue are highly useful for thinking about both the human/nature relationship and the film/medium relationship. I see Jonas' work as offering an important supplement to Whitehead's philosophy and that these concepts are in themselves seminal questions for the sub-discipline—no matter the mediating philosophy mobilized in an eco-critique.[29]

To quickly summarize the Jonasian ideas I will be developing throughout this dissertation:

1. Jonas argues for the necessity of a *metaphysical* response to the environmental crisis.

2. Jonas sees metaphysics, by its nature, as historically contingent; *reality* and the *history of ideas* overlap for Jonas in subtle but mutually expanding ways.

3. Jonas argues for a new metaphysics that overcomes the "metaphysical isolation" of human beings and reinterprets organic evolution as representing a biological history of metaphysics.

4. Jonas includes a general theory of the image in his metaphysical history. This theory of the image plays an important role in his exploration of non-anthropocentrism.

5. Jonas marshals the following contested (and related) binaries as essential to critique and eco-philosophy—but he argues for the need to fully understand

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[29] I have not been able to determine when Jonas read Whitehead, but clearly some of the essays in *The Phenomenon of Life* were written without knowledge of, or a clear sense, of process-relational philosophy. Whitehead is mentioned several times throughout the book, but always in parentheses or in footnotes. Jonas's analysis of Whitehead's philosophy is limited to a two-page appendix to the third essay in the collection. But Jonas' admiration of Whitehead is more than evident. In one footnote he chides "A study of Whitehead is urgently recommended to Heideggerians. *Inter alia,* it may inject a modicum of qualification into the unquestioningly accepted thesis of the 'end of metaphysics.' On the other hand, they would find there, in the rigor of the concept, much of what they welcome in Heidegger's innovations." Jonas goes on to itemize what Whitehead brings to a post-Heidegger metaphysics, culminating in Jonas' unequivocal realization that "No philosophy of nature can issue from Heidegger's thought" (252n.16)

the problems these binaries address, not only to deconstruct them. Jonas does not believe in the power of deconstruction to obviate or overcome binaries— only to explicate their workings and to help reveal what metaphysical problems the binaries were mobilized to 'solve' in the first place. The key binaries for Jonas are:

a. The organic/inorganic

b. Materialism/idealism

c. Immediacy/mediacy

d. Familiar/alien

Out of these binaries, Jonas theorizes the individual in terms of their capacity for self-reflexivity, and self-reflexivity in terms of a metaphysical/eco-critical task dedicated to redefining the "human" in a way responsive to a reality in flux. Jonas explains the scopes of this task in the very opening line of the *The Phenomenon of Life:* "A philosophy of life comprises the philosophy of the organism *and* the philosophy of mind."[30]

Picking up the theme of self-reflexivity in the last point, and before moving on to an exploration of Jonas' thinking, I want to say a few more words about the goal of interpreting *complete films*. I will make this point more fully when I discuss the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Stanley Cavell later on, but my theory is that 'cinematic thinking'—to drop in another untheorized, but I hope, evocative and not entirely unfamiliar term—must occur within or in relation to the concept of *medium* in the same way that philosophy must occur within or in relation to the concept of *reality*. And if there is any 'nature' common to both *medium* and *reality* it is that these two terms (in their respective networks of thought) resist all essentializing and reduction, and it is for this reason that philosophy and cinema are able to address, together, perhaps the most important unessentializable concept of all—*nature*, as a concept used to label a category of reality (the other-than-human) and to refer to a thing's essence. As we will see, for

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[30] Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology* (New York: Dell Pub. Co, 1966), 1. All future references to this text will noted parenthetically in the body of the text.

Stanley Cavell, *medium* is a phenomenon that plays out at the level of *whole* works.[31] And through interpreting the whole film, in tension with the animating concept of *medium*, we discover a cinema that 'thinks'. And this ontology happens in the shadow of environmental crisis and under the sign of a self-reflexivity that thinkers like Jonas argues is continuous with all life.

Each film we'll encounter becomes its own case study, and opens onto its own world, each bounded by its own limits, and each in contestation with the inevitability of its own ending. The attraction of looking at whole films comes from a desire to confront the problem of looking for ways that the whole might aggressively or elegantly reconcile the parts. This is in contrast to a methodology of deconstructing multiple texts by tying loose threads together (usually revealed hanging at the edges of old binaries) and then hooking them up to single critical concepts in order to pull them along all at once. When interpreting complete films, the hope is that in every instance the critic is confronted by their own *outsideness*, and that in the practice of making parts fit with wholes there follows a new *self-reflexivity* about the instinct of looking for coherent, interrelated, and dynamic systems that is very much in line with a mature non-anthropocentric eco-thinking. And it is also a process by which we discover how ecological thinking is *already* imbricated in thought itself and what kinds of social forces have made that tradition difficult to see or have co-opted it all together. Eco-criticism requires recognition that a particular kind of thinking occurs during an interpretation that is both a commentary on philosophy itself and an important supplement.

Hans Jonas Argues for the Necessity of a Metaphysical Response to the Ecological Crisis

In his 1979 book *The Imperative of Responsibility: Towards An Ecological Ethics for a Technological Age*, Hans Jonas clearly outlines the new challenges to human philosophy, enterprise, politics, and metaphysics posed by environmental disaster. Jonas argues that the (painfully slow) realization that human actions are causing irreparable damage to the natural world is one of the most radical notions in human history, and we should not take lightly how devastating the implications will be for many (if not all) inchoate or schematic metaphysics, for

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[31] It is difficult to avoid italicizing or scare-quoting 'whole films' if only because cinema history has demonstrated how malleable the 'whole film' can be. The phenomenon of director's cuts, studio cuts, supplementary material, remakes, lost scenes, prequels, etc. all pose a definite challenge to the interpreter and debunk the notion of a *definitive text*. But I take the notion of a text-in-flux to be energizing to exegesis, not as refutation of the 'whole work' as a critical object in its own right, one demanding its own methodology.

the world-concepts that make possible our societies. Jonas finds an early example of the traditional Western sense of the human relationship to nature in the Chorus from Sophocles' *Antigone*. He quotes the opening stanza:

> Many the wonders but nothing more wondrous than man.
> This thing crosses the sea in the winter's storm,
> Making his path through the roaring waves.
> And she, the greatest of gods, the Earth—
> Deathless she is, and unwearied—he wears her away
> as the ploughs go up and down from year to year
> and his mule turn up the soil.

Jonas remarks on the "subdued and even anxious quality about [this] appraisal of the marvel that is man."[32] The seemingly bragging tone, resonant with the biblical commandment (recorded a few centuries later) to "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth,"[33] is a bold and chorus-worthy proclamation precisely because "man is still small by the measure of the elements."[34] The Chorus concludes with the founding of a city, the enclave from—the fortress against—these overbearing elements and the establishing of a new, very human sort of detente. This balance is predicated on the belief that no matter the extent of human endeavor, humankind is powerless to change the physics of this balance: exposed to nature, we humans might only resist or relinquish. Inside the city, the integrity of this balance, and the immutability of nature, as the opposing force, goes unquestioned. In addition, the historical impermanence of cities—the symbol of the coherent laws of humankind in contrast to the inviolate caprices of nature—makes the conquering of nature more or less unimaginable to human beings.

Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative "act so that you can will that the maxim of your action be made the principle of a universal law"[35] requires, as given, the existence of a human community—not a particular community, per se, but the human world—in which the coherence of those actions go tested in the court of Universal Law. Kant's world-defining imperative is

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[32] Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, ed. Anonymous (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 3.
[33] Genesis 1:28
[34] Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, 3.
[35] Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James W. Ellington, 3rd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 1993), 30 (4:421).

meant to appeal to a *logical* basis for morality, a way to ground ethics beyond, for example, subjective moral revulsion. But as Jonas points out, the limitation of this imperative, and its claim to logic, become apparent in the context of a global threat—a threat in which the actions of humans play a deciding role—which Kant could scarcely have imagined. The potential that humankind would come to an end, or that the happiness of future generations might be bought at the expense of the present, or the happiness of present generations bought at the expense of later ones, presents no self-contradiction to Kant's imperative. Jonas writes:

> The sacrifice of the future for the present is *logically* no more open to attack than the sacrifice of the present for the future. The difference is only that in the one case the series goes on, and in the other it does not (or: its future ending is contemplated). But that it *ought to go on*, regardless of the distribution of happiness or unhappiness, even with a persistent preponderance of unhappiness over happiness, nay, of immorality over morality—this cannot be derived from the rule of self-consistency *within* the series, long or short as it happens to be: it is a commandment of a very different kind, lying outside and 'prior' to the series as a whole, and its ultimate grounding can only be metaphysical.[36]

As a kind of corollary to Leibniz's signal metaphysical question—*why is there something rather than nothing?*—the question *why ought the human species go on?* presents a seemingly intractable problem, one which the history of philosophy provides little coherent answer. And why should it: never before in history has the question needed to be asked. In the potential nihilism of this question, we—as a single humankind, all implicated by the scope of the crisis—are enfolded into a long para-history of eschatological thinking, from death cults, to the ancient Gnostics, to certain modern factions of deep ecology: those who believe, to some degree, that, ultimately, the human race has no good rejoinder to the judgment that it would be better if it had never existed at all. The human capacity to *imagine* the end of the world has always been immense.

In short, in the pursuit of an ethics suited to the radical nature of environmental crisis, logic must cede to metaphysics. In the *Imperative of Responsibility*, Jonas has gone searching for the claim of a new reality upon an old metaphysics, and to discover the ground—even the acknowledgment of the reality of a shifting ground—for a relevant eco-ethics. Jonas' deliberately

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[36] Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, 11.

slim volume—the entire work feels like a meticulous condensation of a lifetime of thought—can be summarized by five connected ideas:

1. A new ethics is emerging. The environmental crisis "raises moral issues for which past ethics, geared to the direct dealings of man with his fellowmen within narrow horizons of space and time has left us unprepared."

2. At the center of this new ethics must be a theory of *responsibility*, "set forth for both the private and the public sphere." Jonas expresses deep concern, but is not particularly surprised, that the concept of *responsibility* has received so little philosophic treatment. This theory must be complemented by a "scientific futurology" that offers a "lengthened foresight."

3. Science may be an essential component of ethical responsibility, but scientism must be limited. Jonas advocates for an "imaginative heuristics of fear" (as opposed to a techno-utopian "projection of hope") central to science that "must tell us what is *possibly* at stake and what we must be aware of."

4. Ultimately, an "image of man" will determine the limits of science. Thus, "metaphysics must underpin ethics."

5. The development of "objective imperatives for man in the scheme of things" will enable us to evaluate the always contested and evolving criteria of *progress*.

Schematized in this way, we can see what appear to be rhetorical limitations, if not conceptual limitations, of Jonas' work. An environmental activist, for example, is unlikely to take much pragmatic comfort in Jonas' model—dependent as it seems to be on the triumph of a generally accepted philosophy. How can an abstract philosophy, a general "image of man," find common purchase when scientifically established facts detailing climate change seem to hold insufficient persuasive power to enact change—even thirty years after Jonas put these ideas down, seventy years since he first started pursuing the question?

As we will see, Jonas' work ultimately resists schematization (and it includes a great deal of healthy skepticism about the persuasive power of scientific facts). His approach is within the

mode of analytic philosophy, though his version self-consciously takes the risk of thinking that which "reigning analytical philosophy" explicitly rejects: the theorizing, through metaphysics, of a moral imperative for humankind. Jonas' struggle to find a place in analytic philosophy for this kind of eco-philosophy is a major concern of his study and ultimately indicates Jonas' larger point: the environmental crisis makes such epistemological reticence no longer tenable and makes tentative judgments a *philosophic* imperative.

The Imperative of Responsibility is an elegant summation of the interconnected concepts that define a new pressure upon philosophy introduced by the environmental crisis. It clearly outlines the limits upon philosophy—and thinking itself—in the self-aware Anthropocene. It is this self-awareness and self-analysis that dominates much of Jonas' sense of a newly contested philosophy—a philosophy at risk of irrelevance—and it is *this* imperative that invites an intriguing hermeneutic method into Jonas' work. To my mind, even on the merits of this philosophic self-reflexivity alone, Jonas deserves a larger profile in the current work being done in eco-philosophy. To better understand the ways that an "image of man" might emerge, and how this exploration might proceed from the bottom up, we need to turn to Jonas' earlier work, a work begun in the 1940s and published in 1966 as *The Phenomenon of Life: Towards a Philosophical Biology*.

The Roots of the Philosophy of Hans Jonas

A break in the fighting for the Jewish Brigade in Northern Italy, 1944, and Hans Jonas is waiting for new reading material to arrive in the mail. His wife, Lore Weiner, has been sending him the works of biologists—Charles Darwin, Thomas Henry Huxley, John Haldane: anything she could get her hands on in war-time Palestine. In exchange, Jonas sends her photographs, love letters, and what he calls "didactic letters." Sixty years later he describes his time on the front as surprisingly productive philosophically:

> Far from books, lacking any materials for scholarly research, I was thrown back
> on the question that should actually preoccupy every philosopher, namely the
> question as to the meaning of our existence and the existence of the world around
> us. So I began to wonder what it implies in ontological terms that there are

organisms, and what significance the nature of organic being holds for life, including the nature of consciousness, of emotion, and of the spirit.[37]

Jonas had set for himself a novel and ambitious task: to craft a metaphysics for all organic life. It was a bold interdisciplinary project, one that had the potential to reform both metaphysics and biological science. It was also a conscious effort to overcome the moral relativism Jonas believed the Second World War had revealed at the heart of Heidegger's ontological philosophy: Heidegger's capitulation to the Nazi regime so shocked Jonas that he swore he'd only return to Germany as part of an invading army.

After a circuitous return to professional philosophy, Jonas completes his two decades of work and publishes—in English—the compact and ingenious series of essays that make up *The Phenomenon of Life: Towards a Philosophical Biology*. The essays range broadly across topics as diverse as idealism, materialism, cybernetics, metabolism, and the nature of truth and freedom. His ultimate goal is a unique approach—though one very much connected to classical philosophy—to the problem of anthropocentrism. But rather than enfranchising the non-human universe, he begins from a sense of the degraded state of the human. His goal in *The Phenomenon of Life* will be to find a way to relieve "the metaphysical isolation of humankind."

David J. Levy, in the only book length study in English of Jonas' work, opines, "If Kant can be considered the preeminent moral philosopher for an individualized bourgeois world, Jonas may just be an equivalent figure of equal significance for an age of technologically conditioned globalization from whom we must learn if right is to continue to be done and the integrity of man and earth preserved for generations yet to come."[38] Levy is a classicist, and he sees in Jonas an exemplary classical thinker working on the most undeniably contemporary topic. Levy's repetitive attempts to position Jonas as a recuperative figure who might appeal to both post-modernists (Jonas insists on the primacy of the body for philosophy) and classical philosophers (Jonas is first and foremost an ethicist) feels a bit forced. But Levy's efforts points to how old-fashioned concepts like nature, ethics, and humanity can seem in the contemporary scholarly

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[37] Hans Jonas and Christian Wiese, *Memoirs*, 1st ed., The Tauber Institute for the Study of European Jewry Series (Waltham, Mass. Hanover, N.H.: Brandeis University Press; Published by University Press of New England, 2008), 128.
[38] David J. Levy, *Hans Jonas: The Integrity of Thinking*, Eric Voegelin Institute Series in Political Philosophy (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 10.

conversation.[39] Jonas' strength, as a thinker, is no willfully stubborn conservatism: rather, it is his intense desire to explain the conditions under which these questions are asked: he is reflexive about the question of being to an extent even beyond his teacher, Martin Heidegger.

Born into a German Jewish family in 1903, Hans Jonas was part of the wildly gifted group of Heidegger's students that included Karl Löwith, Hannah Arendt (a lifelong friend), Herbert Marcuse, Leo Strauss, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Emmanuel Levinas. Jonas' personal and philosophic break with Heidegger came quite early, and by the early months of World War II, Jonas had fled to England and was serving as part of the Jewish Brigade of the British Eighth Army. He saw combat in North Africa and Italy. He went on to emigrate to Palestine where he joined and fought in the war to establish the Israeli state but did not settle in Israel. In 1949 he took up a fellowship at McGill University in Montreal, then Carleton University in Ottawa, before settling at the New School for Social Research in New York in 1955.

To suggest that Jonas' wartime experiences galvanized his commitment to finding a practical ground for Heideggerian phenomenology does not seem like too much of a stretch. Jonas was personally disgusted with Heidegger's complacency during the rise of Nazism and sought to identify in Heideggerian philosophy precisely the logical mistake that made such world-denying possible. These thoughts had been at work in Jonas' work since his PhD thesis (supervised by Heidegger): an intellectual history of the widespread Medieval theology known as Gnosticism. In analyzing Gnosticism, Jonas discovered stunning intellectual parallels with 20th century existentialism and phenomenology. Jonas began to think about the human engagement with the question of being as a historical/social phenomenon in addition to being a philosophical problem. Through Gnosticism, Jonas believed he could identify the thorough-going world-denying tendencies of existentialism and phenomenology, and the logical contradictions that underpinned the most fashionable continental philosophy of his day.

As Levy writes, "terms—like 'situated being,' *Dasein*, or 'resolute decision'—that in Heidegger himself and some of his students can seem abstract, impressionistic, or empty of ethical substance become, in Jonas's work, suffused with content and imbued with a directional sense that is always ordered to understanding the particular conditions in which the specifically human life form can flourish."[40] By his first appointment in Canada, Jonas' scholarship had

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[39] I point again to Harvard professor emeritus Lawrence Buell wringing his hands about the low esteem of "eco-criticism"—in 2005.
[40] Levy, 5

shifted from that of an 'historian of ideas' to a working philosopher animated by an ambitious goal. Jonas writes, in the preface of *The Phenomenon of Life* that "contemporary existentialism, obsessed with man alone, is in the habit of claiming as his unique privilege and predicament much of what is rooted in organic existence as such: in so doing, it withholds from the organic world the insights to be learned from awareness of self" (xxiii) Along these lines, Jonas also notes in the biological sciences a significant blindspot: by ignoring the inwardness of *all* life, biology, necessarily, "submerges the distinction of 'animate' and 'inanimate'"(xxiii). He goes on to explain the significance of reversing this trend of human exceptionalism, and denial of organic inwardness, arguing that *The Phenomenon of Life* seeks,

> [T]o break through the anthropocentric confines of idealist and existentialist philosophy as well as the materialist confines of natural science. In the mystery of the living body both poles are in fact integrated. The great contradictions which man discovers in himself—freedom and necessity, autonomy and dependence, self and world, relation and isolation, creativity and mortality—have their rudimentary traces in even the most primitive forms of life, each precariously balanced between being and not-being, and each already endowed with an internal horizon of 'transcendence'. (xiii)

Jonas pursues this goal by moving rigorously through an ascending hierarchy of biological phenomena: "metabolism, moving and desiring, sensing and perceiving, imagination, art and mind—a progressive scale of freedom and peril, culminating in Man who may understand his uniqueness anew when he no longer sees himself in metaphysical isolation" (xiii). The consequence of this position is no soft 'unity of all things': Jonas is giving expression to the very *being* of mind and discovering in our conception of organic nature the missing conditions for our self-reflexivity. For Jonas, without a sympathetic (but in no way anodyne) 'natural world', there is no self-reflexivity.

This metaphysical self-reflexivity is central to Jonas' philosophic methodology. As mentioned, Jonas did not start out as a metaphysician: he saw himself, first and foremost, as an historian of ideas. Near the end of *The Phenomenon of Life*, he speaks candidly of how he came to recognize some important limitations in his thinking and methodology. During his research on Gnostic thought, he discovered so many striking similarities with the then-contemporary existential responses to modern nihilism, that he felt assured of the hermeneutic power (and the truth-aptness) of Heideggerian phenomenology—but the sense of vindication Jonas experienced

was short-lived. "It was the case of an adept who believed himself in possession of a key that would unlock every door" (212), he writes. "Only later, after I had outgrown the belief in a universal key, did I begin to wonder *why* this one had in fact worked so well in this case. Had I happened with just the right kind of key upon the right kind of lock?" An alternative thought had struck him: maybe it was not his training in Heideggerian philosophy that made it possible for him to understand the Gnostics better than they understood themselves. Perhaps the Gnostics and the modern Existentialists were both grappling with the same metaphysical uncertainty—that is to say, with the historical appearance of nihilism—and that their respective philosophic responses were, in fact, not so different. Modern Existentialism itself, which promised to explicate the fundamentals of human existence, was in fact the predictable philosophic response to an "historically fated situation of human existence: and an analogous (though in other respects very different) situation had given rise to an analogous response in the past. The object turned object-lesson, demonstrating both contingency and necessity in the nihilistic experience" (212). Jonas realized that a hermeneutic circle was at work: Heideggerianism had inculcated in Jonas an intuitive interest in Gnosticism, but, eventually, Gnosticism had become a key to understanding Heidegger's existentialism. Suddenly 'nihilism' was not a dangerous and unpredictable philosophic development, but an inherent quantity of human experience (and metaphysics), one of many, and more or less active depending on the particular 'metaphysical turns' and assumptions made at a given historical moment.

This being the case, extending metaphysics to all organic life is a hermeneutic process by which the dissonance of metaphysics is re-interpreted in the light of the most pressing concerns—in this case, the imperative of non-anthropocentrism. Again, this is not to historicize the philosophic interpretation out of relevance. As we will see, by taking this self-reflexive turn, Jonas identifies what he calls the "partial monisms" at the heart of our understanding of reality. Our philosophic era is defined by contradiction, and as such it resists both essentializing and the ejection of essentializing thought; it resists ethics and the relativization of ethics. According to Jonas, this thoroughgoing contradiction is the motivating force for both our philosophic adventures and hermeneutic evasions.

Life, Death, and Being in the Philosophy of Hans Jonas

Jonas begins his expansive philosophical biology with a tour de force re-narrativization of the human relationship to the universe that not only establishes the horizon for a philosophy of life but also resonates with film studies—especially the ontologically inflected 'realist' film theory of André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer. Jonas constructs a model of the progress (and regress) of human thought (what he has called a "mental history") that is fundamentally a response to the "fact" and the "problem" of the natural world.

Jonas makes the claim that ontological investigation—what he calls the human desire to "interpret the nature of things"—is irreducible from human experience, and that the first creatures that can be called human possessed the power to perceive *being*. For the earliest humans, *being* was the "same as being alive." For the most part, our human experience of what we now call "inanimate" objects is so intertwined with "the dynamics of life that it seems to share its nature" (7). Early humans existed in a kind if hylozoism or panvitalism—everything in the world seemed alive/was alive.

But if the essence of the known world is life, then death is the alien presence. Death is a confounding riddle. As Jonas argues, in this panvitalistic state, there was not yet wonder in the miracle of life because there was no 'outside' of life—however, there *was* "wonder about death and what it might mean" (8). This was the insoluble dilemma that inspired *Gilgamesh*, the funeral cult, and a "pristine metaphysics in the shape of myth and religion" (9). Jonas' brilliant turn here is to recognize the theoretical challenge of understanding death in the context of life from a panvitalistic viewpoint: for this panvitalistic age to sustain its ontology, death must be assimilated to that model, subsumed under life. Death must make sense as part of life.

Perhaps the guiding ethos of Jonas' history of ideas is best expressed succinctly when he writes "any problem is essentially the collision between a comprehensive view (be it hypothesis or belief) and a particular fact which will not fit into it" (9). In the case of early human comprehensive panvitalism, the ever-recurring, unassimilable fact that didn't fit was the fact of death. "Hence the *problem* of death is probably the first to deserve this name in the history of thought," Jonas explains, and "to seek for [death's] meaning was to acknowledge its strangeness in the world; to understand it was—in this climate of a universal ontology of life—to negate it by making it a transmutation of life itself" (8-9). It was this desire to make death part of life that led to the tomb, to the funeral ritual, to thoughts of death as rebirth—this is where philosophy started.

"As early man's practice is embodied in his tools, so his thought is embodied in his tombs which acknowledge and negate death at the same time" (8). According to Jonas, this solution ate away at the idea of the constancy of life, and this unstable intellectual detente could not last.

Over millennia, and with the rise of the natural sciences, this philosophical situation began to swing the other way. Since the Renaissance, but beginning much earlier, the "comprehensive view" and the "problematic fact" have been reversed. In our time, *death* dominates a panmechanistic worldview, and *life* has become the vexing and inassimilable riddle. Jonas writes of the prevailing philosophic mood of our time: "that there is life at all, and how such a thing is possible in a world of mere matter, is now the problem posed to thought" (10). Just as early humankind subsumed death to life, our contemporary intellectual tendency is to subsume life to death. And this makes possible a simple reconciliation: this mysterious category of things called 'life' becomes simply an extension of the world (the inorganic world), just organized a bit differently. The organism—life—is thus conceptualized as being no different than the physical world, and hence the progressive goal of science is to completely assimilate the organism to the physical laws of the universe. "To approximate the laws of the organic body to this canon, i.e., to efface in *this* sense the boundaries between life and death, is the direction of modern thought on life as a physical fact. Our thinking today is under the ontological dominance of death" (12).

But how exactly did we get from one monism (panvitalism) to this new monism of materialism? The intellectual history of dualism is Jonas' specialty—his comparison of Gnosticism and Existentialism is a classic of the field. For Jonas, "in more ways than one, the rise and long ascendancy of dualism are among the most decisive events in the mental history of the [human] race" (13). This shift is the result of a logical progress that starts in the panvitalism era with wonderment in the corpse, moves to the abstraction of the tomb, and evolves into an idea of a vital essence that transcends death. The "invention of the soul" reconciled death with life (much like science later 'reconciled' life with death) by creating the idea of immortality—something to distract from the visceral denial of life experienced in the face of death and decay. But this 'solution' came at a cost. With the creation of the soul came the demotion of the body to a mere vessel, an idea detectable in the Orphic religious chant *soma-sema*: my body/my tomb. The inanimate body, the body no longer invested with soul, now becomes the 'true' nature of the body. We have arrived at a stage of conflicting ideas of reality.

In addition to sloppily reconciling the problem of death with life, the soul (interpreted as the essence of the human), makes possible the discovery of *inner life*. Jonas argues that it is the elaboration and variation on an entirely non-mundane human inwardness that makes possible the idea of an increasingly inhuman outside world. "The very possibility of the notion of an 'inanimate universe' emerged as the counterpart to the increasingly exclusive stress laid on the *human* soul, on its inner life and its incommensurability with anything in nature" (14). The net result is the increasing spiritualization of the human inner life and the increasing demonization of the "outer world," the physical world. Again, Jonas sees this process as a logical inevitability of first premises. Once the line is drawn, it will only become indelible; these two realms: incommensurable.

In sum, Jonas argues that our human experience—*as* human—breaks upon the opposing shores of life and death. From one shore (the panvitalistic), where early humans stood undifferentiated from the organic multitudes that surrounded them, death was the distant and perplexing 'Other,' the source of anxiety, but also the impetus of philosophy and imagination; from that opposite shore, where we find ourselves shipwrecked now, the Universe is a molecular desert, a vast panmechanistic system of non-life, and the tiny and insignificant island of life in that universe, no matter how relatively meager, is a mysterious contingency, a statistical anomaly, and inevitably explainable mechanistically; in between—the great "detour" Jonas calls it—was the philosophical and spiritual dualism that attempted to reconcile life to death by imagining an 'other' transcendent existence, an existence outside the world but still *alive*. Over the long history of dualism, a philosophy of spirit filled the sails of the world religions that took humankind from the monism of naturalism to the "post-dualistic" monism of materialism. In dualism, "the paradox of life received its most pointed antithetical articulation and, on its expiration, was left behind in its most irreconcilable form" (26)

Though this is a neat and tidy narrative, it only begins to explain the complexity of our contemporary philosophical swim. Our modern, post-dualistic state is actually dominated, paradoxically, by two *partial* monisms that, according to Jonas, inherit the theoretically unsatisfactory metaphysics of dualism but ultimately evade the issue dualism was 'invented' to address. We live in a world in which two contradictory monism*s*—materialism (the belief that the physical world is verifiable and knowable apart from subjectivity) and idealism (the belief that the world is a mental construct)—make equal claims to comprehensive validity, and in these

opposing but sustaining claims displace (or obfuscate) the long-suffering questions of ontology. What is the issue they evade? It's always the same issue: the problem of "the existence of feeling life in an unfeeling world of matter which in death triumphs over it" (17).

If Jonas' mental history is accurate, and if modern thought does indeed happen in the double shadow of these twin philosophies of materialism and idealism, then modern heremenutics is one of its products, too. An eco-hermeneutics alive to this possibility begins not with the intention to discover themes of eco-ethics in cultural products, but with the hypothesis that some cultural products, if sufficiently self-aware, might point to philosophic solutions beyond the proposed (and neutralizing) alternatives that so thoroughly define modern (contradictory) thought. With this metaphysical background we can address the possibility that, perhaps, one thing that ecological thought and cinematic thought share is a *problem with reality*.

The Connection Between Cinema and Jonasian Metaphysics

In the middle of *The Phenomenon of Life* there appears, unexpectedly, a general theory of the image. It is a potentially confusing shift for a work on the ontology of organic life. But though Jonas' book is remarkably clear-eyed and level headed, it is also haunted—like the work of many expatriate German-Jewish philosophers of this era—by the highest of philosophical stakes: a desire for a powerful and transformative connection between thought and reality, inner life and the outer world. As such, I cannot help but see in Jonas' interest in the ontology of the image the search for a way of thinking outside the limits of philosophy. At its most meta-level, this dissertation is about the curious capacity of both philosophic ontology and cinematic art (the mid-century 'realist' theory of which, based on the ontology of the photographic image, overlaps with Jonas' philosophy in surprising ways) to bridge the many boundaries that separate *inside* and *outside*: metaphoric, ideological, philosophic, and literal boundaries that define nothing less than our apprehension, cognition, theorization, and representation of reality.

By extending the defining problems and questions of human ontology to all organic life—from single celled organisms to human beings—Hans Jonas began a process of reimagining the very limits of reality. It is a difficult and subtle philosophy, but one that film theory, for reasons that will become apparent, is unusually suited to grasp, explain, and expand upon. Jonas' concept of "organic reality" reveals the tensions inherent to the kind of cinema that engages with ontological questions—films that ask, directly or indirectly, questions about the meaning of life

and, often, the meaning of cinema—tensions first charted memorably and evocatively by realist film theorists such as André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer.

Photographic images (of which the cinematic image is an unruly variant) are most often made, in some way or another, through a trace of the real. Throughout his organic ontology, Jonas is turning to that which is living but *not* human and acknowledging the trace of the human that clings to it: the trace of philosophy left on all things that human beings attempt to categorize and understand, as well as the fragment of the human that allows us to recognize ourselves in the organic other. In André Bazin's 1945 idea that "photography affects us like a phenomenon in nature, like a flower or a snowflake whose vegetable or earthly origins are an inseparable part of their beauty,"[41] we see not only a claim for the power of the photograph to be expressive on a level usually reserved for nature, but we also see how much of the human-made is imbricated in the 'natural'. True, Bazin claims that "photography's originality…lies in its objective nature", and that "for the first time, the only thing to come between an object and its representation is another object." He adds: "For the first time, between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a nonliving agent…All the arts are based on the presence of man, only photography derives an advantage from his absence."[42] Yet he opens the next paragraph with the following: "This production by automatic means has radically affected our *psychology* of the image" (emphasis mine) to introduce the fact that photography brings about our credence and faith in its image. Here Bazin recognizes that although the *genesis* (his term) of the image lies in the absence of man, the entire process of photography, which includes the viewer, doesn't. Bazin's entire essay is indeed about the psychology of images and image reception, and this necessarily implies a human subject. In other words, even in a medium that would seem to exclude the human, the organic clings to it. As a *medium*, photography, after all, is not a product of nature it is *made* (designed) and *used* by humans (for human sight) even if the production of the image itself seems to void human presence. Through Bazin's understanding of photography, therefore, we find in the medium an exemplary phenomenon of a human-made/made-for-human thing (like a philosophic theory of the world) that both exceeds and carries with it a trace of the human.

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[41] André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh Gray, vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967-71), 13.
[42] Ibid.

The human, the non-human, and the all-too-human act as a kind of bonding—but not binding—etheric medium for the abstract and complex categories of cinema, nature, and ontology. It is a cognitive tangle that I want to unpack in this dissertation by engaging with four contemporary films asking contemporary ontological questions. These films pose complex hermeneutic problems that classical realist film theory offers only hints at helping to answer. A *contemporary* realist film theory—I don't mean to presume to define this; I merely think all theories are forever revitalized, ipso facto, when successfully adapted to new texts—can only be invigorated by a different kind of thinking about reality. It's not that I think that Bazin and Kracauer, in their writings, were wrong about reality—in fact, I think the widely accepted claim that classic realist film theorists are quaint in their thinking about nature and truth mistake the methodology of ontology (a method that describes contingency through moments of clarity, that expresses flux through sudden snatched images) with a naïve belief in a stable and unproblematic reality.[43] Through Jonas' impressively ahead-of-its-time philosophic system we can better appreciate what Bazin and Kracauer were trying to say about the nature of reality, and with this clarity we can open up those handful of contemporary films that are asking ontological questions and doing so in a vernacular we aren't yet fully able to parse.

Jonas' theory of the image is certainly fascinating, but perhaps just as fascinating is the question of why he would be thinking about images at all. Jonas shares with Siegfried Kracauer—another German exile, and the author of the monumental 1960 study *Theory of Film*—a profound intellectual imperative to account for the destructive consequences of what both characterize as *instrumental thinking*: a version of positivistic thought that reduces human nature and action to mechanistic models of cause and effect. It was, paradoxically, in the moving photographic image that Kracauer believed he had located a rebuttal to instrumental or abstract thinking and a window upon—for a lack of a better term—*a different kind of reality*. Jonas is explicitly pursuing the same goal, but uses the merging of metaphysics and organic life, rather than the meeting of moving image art and life, to liberate reality from its most depreciated form:

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[43] On Kracauer see: Dudley Andrew, *The Major Film Theories: An Introduction*, A Galaxy Book Gb450 (London ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1976). And, on Bazin, see Dan North, "Back to Bazin Part 1: The Ontology of the Photographic Image," *Spectacular Attractions* (2008), http://drnorth.wordpress.com/2008/09/23/back-to-bazin-part-1-the-ontology-of-the-photographic-image/. Malcolm Turvey takes this critique to another level by emphasizing the obsession of realist film theorists with the technical ability of the camera to reveal (through slow motion or microscopic photograph) what the eye cannot perceive on its own, as proof of a naïve belief in a stable reality undergirding our imperfect daily experience. See Malcolm Turvey, *Doubting Vision: Film and the Revelationist Tradition* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

in Kracauer's language, this goal is nothing less than the redemption of physical reality.[44] Here we have two media: Kracauer's realist "story-film," and Jonas' metaphysically charged reinterpretation of nature. Two thinkers who crave an alternative to reality, but see the task as one proceeding *through* a false reality and *towards* a true one: a reality that is not simply the product of will-to-power or a capacious imagination, but a craving for the world-as-it-is.

Stanely Cavell—who began actively thinking about cinema in the mid 60s—has developed his own unique approach to the problem. He characterizes modern representation—and, in particular, modernist painting—"as a history of responses to the loss of connection with reality and a consequent history of ways of re-establishing this connection."[45] This version of the problem of what Jonas argues is a symptom of dualism—the alienation of the human from total reality—Cavell connects to a longer philosophic problem, a problem of thinking that he sees as defining. It is an outgrowth of what Kant called the "scandal" of skepticism: "It always remains a scandal to philosophy and universal human reason that existence of things outside us (from which we after all get the whole matter of our cognitions) should have to be assumed merely on faith, and that it occurs to anyone to doubt it, we should be unable to answer him with satisfactory proof."[46]

Enter cinema, as an "unpredictable solution" to this problem. Cavell argues that "photography could not have impressed itself so immediately and pervasively on the European (including American) mind unless that mind had at once recognized in photography a manifestation of something that had already happened to itself."[47] What had happened to the modern mind—and Cavell argues that the history of modern philosophy is its aftermath—was the fall into skepticism. Thus, the price we pay in the presence of moving images was collected long ago—we've always been isolated and distanced…just not so acutely aware of it. Skepticism made the ontology of cinema possible, giving genesis to the desire for a viewing state where our very *perceptions* are put on display. Cavell doesn't want to think about cinema viewing as an extension of our perceptions that provides some comforting but illusory transcendence of

[44] Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 300.

[45] Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, Enl. ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 195.

[46] Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Bxxxix.

[47] Stanley Cavell, "What Photography Calls Thinking," *Raritan* 4, no. Spring (1985): 117.

epistemological doubt. When Cavell argues that cinema "withholds reality before us," he means it both holds us from reality but also holds out reality for us to view. It both projects the world on a screen and *screens* the world from us. Cinema makes visible *skepticism* as a fact of our world—it reveals the reality of skepticism; it reveals skepticism as our reality. This, paradoxically, is the viewing state granted by cinema that we find so satisfying, so mesmerizing.

We are able to view the reality of skepticism through the cinema because the cinema is a viewing machine—it is automatic. It is thus perception without consciousness, without choice, without responsibility. In a bizarre way, when we see skepticism—as a fact—recreated by the apparatus of cinema our skeptical intuition is thus verified. Exhibiting the world by exhibiting a presence that is an absence: this is certainly not all cinema does, but it is the curious fate of the cinematic to be forever judged by its affinity for the real, by its paradoxical 'automatic naturalness'.

Cinema thus participates, on our behalf, in the real world we find so difficult to verify and believe in—it verifies that loss of conviction. Ultimately, film's expression of our separation from the world reinforces the knowledge that there is a world from which we *can* be separated—and in this acknowledgment reveals that perhaps skepticism (like, perhaps, cinema itself) might be in decline. This is cinema's answer to skepticism: it affirms the world while it displaces us. This is a state of acknowledgment and a fine distinction: a state that satisfies our desire to have a connection with the world through, paradoxically, acknowledgement of a *medium*, a thing between us and the world.

The Discovery of the Cinematic Drive

Other than a mention in a short footnote, Jonas does not discuss cinema in *The Phenomenon of Life*, nor does he discuss photographic images (I attempt to adapt his theory of the image to film studies in the context of a discussion of Werner Herzog's *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* in chapter one). His discussion is about cave paintings, a rhetorical move that sets the scope for the relation between the 'discovery of reality' and the 'discovery of images' sufficiently wide.

By locating a place within evolutionary biology for the phenomenon of the image, Jonas opens up the metaphysics of the organism to a kind of instinct for image-making. The emergence of images in the evolutionary record, in Jonas' system, is not only an unpredictable development, but also emblematizes a long organic history of increasing *degrees of mediacy*. That the organism

demonstrates an *instinct* or a *drive* for images is not a metaphor in Jonas' philosophy. The appetite for image-making is just as fundamental to evolutionary biology—and the progress of metaphysics—as the overcoming of physical distance in the pursuit of food. To assert an unbridgeable chasm between these two kinds of fundamental drives is to slip into anthropocentrism and is to miss an opportunity to reimagine the limits of the human.

In this dissertation, I call the organic instinct for moving images the *cinematic drive*. What psychological, biological, and metaphysical confluence made the desire for the capture of motion in images, for the recreation of the world in miniature, for the harnessing of the sublime an imperative? While we may not be able to adequately describe what constitutes the cinematic, it is undoubtedly not a technology that was merely thrust upon humanity *ex nihilo*. 'Cinema' evolved out of a set of human needs—or, to take the scope that Jonas does, out of a set of *organic* needs. The most recent version of the cinematic drive—in the form of the cinema camera, the projector, the narrative fiction film, the movie house, the television, the home theatre, the iPhone—is just one manifestation. And this manifestation, as identified by realist film theorists— crafting theories in response to a wide variety of films—includes, as one of its signal qualities, a skepticism about reality, a tension inherent to two ways of thinking about cinema: a cinema of idealism (cinema exists in the mind) and materialism (cinema exists in the world).

In a sense, the relevance I am proposing for Jonas in the contemporary eco-critical conversation allows us to rehabilitate a concept that was already active in the (roughly) contemporaneous realist film theory during the period that Jonas wrote *The Phenomenon of Life*. I've already mentioned Stanely Cavell's idea that it took the philosophic appearance of skepticism to create conditions necessary to urge on the technological breakthroughs that made cinema possible. André Bazin in his essay "The Myth of Total Cinema" follows a similar argument. Bazin, in response to a technological history of cinema by Georges Sadoul, glosses the haphazard and varied history of proto-cinemas and arrives at the argument that the necessary historical coincidence of technology "can apparently in no way be explained on the grounds of scientific, economic, or industrial evolution. The photographic cinema could just as well have grafted itself onto a phenakistosocope foreseen as long ago as the sixteenth century."[48] Turning to the commentaries and writings of these early dabblers and inventors, the "early prophets" of cinema, Bazin notes the palpable influence of a shared desire, a shared vision of what they

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[48] Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, 1, 19.

wanted to achieve: "in their imaginations they saw the cinema as a total and complete representation of reality; they saw in a trice the reconstruction of a perfect illusion of the outside world in sound, color, and relief."[49] Bazin characterized the cinematic drive he was analyzing as a quest for an integral and complete *realism*. This myth is so powerful, even beyond its technological and historically contingent manifestations, that Bazin is prompted to make one of his most famous claims: "The real primitives of the cinema, existing only in the imaginations of a few men of the nineteenth century, are in complete imitation of nature. Every new development added to the cinema must, paradoxically, take it nearer and nearer to its origins. In short, cinema has not yet been invented!"[50] With this critical move, Bazin opens up film analysis to a humanist relevance far beyond the immediate effects of contemporary cinematic texts of his day. That Bazin couched this relevance, in his interpretations, in terms of themes of revelation (both spiritual and psychoanalytic) seems perfectly consistent with the "structure of feeling" of his times.[51]

Be it the progress of philosophic skepticism, or the technology available to partially satisfy and give expression to the drive, many thinkers saw in cinema a medium that seemed, by its nature, to be *about* medium and mediacy. Jonas, for his part, anticipated such a self-reflexive state as essential to addressing anthropocentrism. And it is this self-reflexivity about cinema, and thus the cinematic drive, that opens a window on the structuring metaphysics of our era: upon questions of reality, the nature of being, and responsibility.

What does the existence of this drive tell us about the desires inherent to the human animal? Is it a version of a desire to take complete possession of the world? It is a desire to be completely immersed in it? The creation of an intact virtual world into which we can escape? The freezing of a memory to be repeated? Or, perhaps the cinematic drive is meant to reveal what has always been there: the isomorphism between an experience of a moment and its dislocation. And if it is all of these things at once, does this poly-ontology betoken a more fundamental human

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[49] Ibid., 20.
[50] Ibid., 21.
[51] Bazin's "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" is another text explicating the cinematic drive, developed through a discussion of the metaphysical history of the photograph beginning with Egyptian mummification practices—the theme, again, is that the photographic drive is directed towards the preservation and recreation of reality. It's notable, though, that Bazin opens this discussion imagining the "plastic arts" on the psychoanalyst's couch. Bazin's art history and philosophy was imagined in terms of uncovering the repressed unconscious of a medium. What this means in terms of Bazin's ability to imagine how the identity of the medium might *change* is hard to say and might depend on how he thought about psychoanalysis.

disappointment in reality, a fundamental disenfranchisement, a fundamental dissatisfaction? Is cinema one more technology of the city (this fortress against nature), is it part of the enclave against the elements, one more answer to an anxiety about nature, a rebuke? Was cinema invented to enable us to forget nature?

Jonasian metaphysics sets a profound challenge to all such putative qualities of human experience, the cinematic drive included. It asks the film theorist to go looking for insight into something as distinctly human as the cinematic drive by delving into its continuity with our alien and uncanny experience of the natural world. The term 'cinematic drive' aptly describes a consistent thread in the films under discussion: an allegorical, self-reflexive treatment of cinema that extends beyond the boundaries of art and representation and both circumscribes nature and identifies a locus for reality beyond the contested place of its storytelling.

A Brief History of the Ontology of Cinema

The history of modern cinema, even moreso than the other Fine Arts, seems intensely wrapped up with questions of being, essence, and ontology. Canonical films like Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (1957) and Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1967) certainly ask big and explicit questions about life and death—and the *way* a film is able to ask ontological questions will be a major topic of this dissertation—but the connection between film and ontology begins much more intimately with the question of the being of cinema itself. This is the province of the classic film theories: Münsterberg, Arnheim, Eisenstein, Bazin, et al. It is such an impressive question to early and mid-century film theorists that, arguably, the 'nature of cinema' is *the* question of classic film theory.

This question is more than just an aesthetic or epistemological puzzle of categorization. I consider the question of the being of cinema fundamental, if not always insistently present, to the experience of cinema itself. Cinema is an art form built around wonder in itself—around the wonder of technology, spectacle, and the mystery of the photographic transformation of reality—and film theory has been brilliant at expounding upon the nuances of this attraction and the consequences of such a tendency. Realist film theory, in particular, has shown us how cinema is also organized around our collective wonder in that which is created *without us*, and organized in response to the capability of the photographic image to imply human presence while asserting its own autonomy. It is this quality that allows thinkers like Bazin to connect cinema to nature.

The story of cinema begins at a mythic crossroads: in one direction, the pure recording of reality represented by the actualities of the Lumière brothers; in the other direction, the blatantly artificial fantasias of Georges Méliès. Cinema, in a very cinematic move, splits at this moment, and travels both roads simultaneously. This divided traveler is dreaming of unification through one of two options: on the one hand, a cinema that discovers its essence in editing; and on the other, a cinema that discovers its essence in the long-take. In other words, we have a regime that emphasizes discontinuity and the image itself, and another that privileges continuity and reality.

The question of essence will haunt cinema at every juncture: from the silent era to the sound era, from the Saturday matinee to the television age, from the classical Hollywood studio system to new Hollywood, and from modernism to post-modernism. And it still haunts us, as cinema moves from the analog to the digital. Because cinema has had the potential to radically change our understanding of the being of art, its own immanent becoming bloomed as an important intellectual question. And many intellectuals rose to the occasion.

The question of the being/nature/essence/ontology of cinema has inspired a diverse number of beautiful (Jean Epstein), mystical (Germaine Dulac), rigorous (Noel Burch), scientific (Gilbert Cohen-Séat), and mystifying (Gilles Deleuze) responses. But these responses demonstrate, so often, a curious attraction beyond what cinema has been, passed even what cinema could be, and to the heart of something like *what cinema wants to be*. Certainly, the status of cinema as the youngest of the fine arts,[52] still canvassing for admission into the *Beaux Arts* pantheon, and certainly the emblematic role cinema has played in the history of modernity, accounts in some part for the legacy of philosophic experimentation and self-regard the medium has accrued over the last 100 years. The story is different in the other arts, however, where reflections on the nature of paint or bronze or sound, for example, are far less pronounced. In literary studies, it fell to formalists like Roman Jakobson to pursue, with limited success,

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[52] With the establishment of the concept of Fine Arts in the late 18th century, the conditions for understanding aesthetic experience are solidified: ever since we've been trying to make unified sense of those conditions. See Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and the Arts: Collected Essays* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980). What *do* painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and poetry have in common? They potentially share nothing more than the vagaries of historical forces that brought them together into a hierarchy that excluded more utilitarian crafts from serious study (like gardening and cooking). But even today no one has seriously been able to dislodge the cultural worth of this seemingly arbitrary pantheon, nor invalidate the promise of gaining a glimpse of the essence that unites them. Adding cinema to the list of fine arts is no small event.

theoretical phantoms like the nature of "literariness."[53] But in film theory it seems hardly anyone can resist—and maybe this is part of cinema's historical (even ontological) charm—proclaiming the true nature of the cinematic, discoursing on the form they think most appropriate for cinema to take, and identifying those moments when cinema is 'most itself'. If the ontological question is not deep in cinema, it is most certainly broad-based.

Cinema theorists have experimented with many accounts of the nature of cinema, often at the same time. These include, but are not limited to: cinema as recording, cinema as montage, cinema as motion/technique, cinema as advanced storytelling, cinema as mind, cinema as expanded consciousness, cinema as reality, and cinema as philosophy. By staying true to these essences, a theorist might argue, cinema will achieve its true nature, its true purpose, and earn the best chance at becoming art.

Of course, these categories overlap: Münsterberg's ideas of cinema-as-mind, for example, relies a great deal on both editing and storytelling. But each category puts forward a kind of cinematic event (a perfectly-timed edit, a glorious long-take, an unidentified quality, etc.) that seems most *emblematic* of cinema itself. Of course, no single category is entirely persuasive, but to embrace all categories at once risks forsaking the nuances of each. The intellectual and experiential pleasure, for audiences and critics, that comes from 'knowing' what cinema is, and then encountering an example that allows the discovery of something new about that essence, cannot be underestimated in the historical progress of the cinematic medium. I'd argue that 'the experience of medium'—as both an intellectual and aesthetic experience—is more important in the history of the cinema than actual, definitive clarity about what the medium of cinema is (or should be). Nonetheless, that experience of medium requires some shared sense of what that medium *is*—some sense of the *Being* of the medium.

The idea of 'medium' itself—as it becomes increasingly elaborated upon throughout film history—begins to include more and more of these theoretical essences at the same time. Cinema can be about reality *and* storytelling: it can be experimental *and* narrative, documentary *and* highly constructed. To understand or know cinema, then, is a process of coming to understand the aesthetic and cultural logic of an emerging ontology that synthesizes (sometimes very crudely) many diverse criteria and historical realties. Jonas, as an ontological philosopher, would very

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[53] Jakobson famously claimed in 1921 that "the object of literary science is not literature but literariness, i.e. what makes a given work a literary work." Quoted in P. Steiner, *Russian Formalism: A Metapoetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 201.

likely recognize in the diverse categories of cinema's essences—and in the amalgamation of the many approaches that resulted—a rehearsal of the larger historical ontological problem: the often unacknowledged contest between idealism (cinema as mind, for example) and materialism (cinema as recording). Bringing some clarity to what is philosophically implied by the simultaneous sustaining of multiple essences within an aggregated ontology of cinema—and how this multiplicity plays out at a formal level in contemporary filmmaking—will be a major preoccupation of this dissertation.

One important point of clarification before moving on: my focus in this dissertation will be on photographic-based motion pictures and not on experimental, computer-generated, or hand-drawn animated films. Despite the obvious importance that the latter have played in the development of the cinematic, animated films comprise their own unique relation to the organic body, to freedom, and to the idea of motion—as such, for our purposes, they are best considered as comprising their own distinct medial experience and deserve an analysis beyond the scope of this iteration of the framework. That said, every film in this study acknowledges, in their own way, the existence of animated moving images. By doing so they draw an intermedial boundary between concepts of contingency and perfectibility, between reality and imagination, and thus also mark the split between monisms. Every film in this study grapples with the need to account for some unidentified quantity or quality that seems beyond language and measurable reality. Because photographic-based films can embrace contingency and semiotic excess in a way that purely drawn or painted images cannot, they signal a unique relation to reality. Animated sequences in these films are used to mark that contrast between images beholden to the world and images of pure imagination. As the line between these two modes of image-making has become increasingly blurred by the advent of photorealistic computer-generated images, the need to—and difficulty of—exploring this split has become more acute. This blurring is a major topic in the chapters on *Hugo* and *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*.

Ancillary to this distinction is a group of film studies concepts that attempt to identify a nearly metaphysical power inherent to photography, one that transcends materiality and mere perception. Jean Epstein's idea of *photogénie* in the 1920s gave expression to the privileged kind of truth glimpsed—always only *glimpsed*—in a photograph.[54] Roland Barthes' notion of the

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[54] See Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz, *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 279.

punctum in the 1980s gave a name to the unexpected quality of a photograph to prick us with emotion and to incite a visceral flight into memory and materiality.[55] The cardinal film studies concept of *photographic indexicality* makes the case for an intimate link between photographs and their subjects that goes beyond likeness and resolution, that is meta-tangibly, psycho-physically connected to the fleeting co-presence in time of the imaging device and subject. The naïve version of this theory makes the case for the utopian power of cinema to 'show the truth', to be 'realist'. But in the age of the easily manipulated digital image, indexicality has increasingly emerged as a historical category of experience that has less to do with what we traditionally think of as 'reality' and instead with something much more philosophical, tied to, as Mary Ann Doane put it, "the promise of the materialization of time." [56] David Rodowick phrases it a bit differently, making the case for indexical photography—or, rather, the existence of photographs we believe to be indexical—to incite a powerful hermeneutic process that recognizes how photographs do not show beings-in-space, but *being-in-time*. He writes:

> Neither physical reality nor profilmic space accounts for the referentiality of photographs, but rather *space past*. Space is inescapably and complexly temporal in photography in a way that painting is not. Photographs do not just picture the already-happened; in making existential claims on our acts of viewing, they picture *history*. And in doing so, they encourage us to reflect on our own ontological situatedness in space-time.[57]

The desire to believe that an image, especially a photographic image, shows us the truth—or, in other words, that an image we are attracted and attached to is *real* and therefore our *feelings* must be too—is central to the cinematic drive. Stanley Cavell argues that, "A photograph does not present us with 'likenesses' of things; it presents us, we want to say, with the things themselves." And yet doing so comes at a cost and Cavell concludes that "wanting to say that may well make us *ontologically restless*."[58] All the films in this study, in their own way, reflect on that very Jonasian historical phenomenon of "ontological restlessness." The existence of both animated

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[55] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard, 1st American ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 55.

[56] Mary Ann Doane, "The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity," *differences: a journal of feminist cultural studies* 19, no. 1 (2007): 129.

[57] David Norman Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 65.

[58] Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, 17.

and photographic films can expose such a restlessness by posing ontological questions to each other through the medium of the cinematic.

What is Ontological Cinema?

By *ontological films*, I mean both those films that are about the 'meaning of life' and those films that are about their own 'being as films'—the fact that these two thematic pursuits are often linked, and often exist in the same film (exemplified in Fellini's *8 ½*, 1963; or in *Hugo*, 2011) is a key inspiration of this dissertation. Some films like *The Seventh Seal* or *The Tree of Life* are constructed (as much as we can detect or interpret these intentions) to be 'about' the nature of life, or the meaning of life, without directly and explicitly reflecting on their own being as films. Other films, like *Solaris* (Tarkovksy, 1972), which ask very explicit philosophical questions about life and death, cannot seem to resist some exploration of image-making itself. This relationship between self-understanding and understanding-the-world—and in the case of film, what cinematic self-reflexivity tends to express *beyond* itself—needs to be better understood. Cinema, I argue, is uniquely suited to this pursuit of the self/world relation and is particularly philosophically rich when it intersects—and challenges—our ideas about the ontology of art: at least, throughout the 20th century, cinema's challenge to art has been a perennial theme of cinema itself. This is another way of saying that in this thesis I will be separating cinema-art (and all the cultural and hermeneutic baggage that it carries) from *cinema* (the technical apparatuses that film theorists like Rudolf Arnheim disassembled to find cinema's unique claim to art and artfulness). I am interested in what happens to cinema when it pursues art: I'm implying that cinema need not pursue art, but when it does, my theory is that the consequence is intensely ontological (though, of course, not exclusively so). In other words, the intersection of cinema and art tends to create an interpretative field that emphasizes ontological questions and an indeterminate, emerging medium.

Moving laterally from 'films about the meaning of life', we arrive at those films that are structured out of a certain kind of self-awareness. A film can demonstrate self-reflexivity in multiple ways:

1. By explicitly exploring film and/or filmmaking itself (e.g. *Hugo*, 2011; *8 ½,* 1963; *Persona,* Antonioni, 1966; *Blow-Out*, De Palma, 1981; *After Life*, Kore-ada, 1998; *Adaptation,* Jonze, 2002).

2. By exploring other artforms related to cinema like theatre, painting, and, most notably, photography (*Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, 2011; *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, 2011; Blow-*Up,* Antonioni, 1966; *Memento*, Nolan, 2000).

3. By explicitly exploring art or the nature of creativity itself (*Melancholia*, 2011; *Le carrosse d'or*, Renoir, 1952; *French Cancan*, Renoir, 1954; *Juliet of the Spirits*, Fellini, 1965).

4. By exploring metaphors for cinematic experience (*Melancholia*, 2011; *The Tree of Life,* 2011; *The Invisible Man*, Whale, 1933; *Rear Window*, Hitchcock, 1954; *La jetée*, Marker, 1962; *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, Resnais, 1959).

5. By radically expanding the grammar of cinema. Thus, films like *Birth of a Nation* (Griffith, 1915), *The Tree of Life* (2011), or *Dog Star Man* (Brakhage, 1962-64) can be considered 'about cinema' because they directly contribute to the redefining of the ontology of cinema.

Of course, many of these films cross categories. *La jetée*, for example, is explicitly about memory and identity (classic ontological themes), but it is also, as a film made up of mostly still photographs, a meditation on photography, art, and cinema itself. As I've already indicated, these kinds of themes are often intimately braided together in cinematic works that endeavor to pursue art, seriousness, and the 'big questions'—in other words, engage in the philosophic work of ontology.

The last two loose categories I've listed above—(4) Metaphors for cinema, and (5) Films that redefine cinema—require a bit more explanation. I'll start with the latter by raising the issue of the *cinematic*. Cinematicness, like literariness, cannot be pointed to and yet the concept has outlasted grand theory and post-war modernism's obsession with uncovering the purist expression of an artistic medium, cinema included.[59] The ambiguity we can detect in the use of

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[59] For example, in a recent American culture podcast, journalist Julia Turner (not a film critic) commented about the film *Drive* (Refn, 2011): "I was pretty seduced. It was a delightful movie to see. It was gripping and arresting and you fall into a pool of moody emotion while you watch. But I'm not sure it offers more than cinematicness—it's just incredibly, beautifully cinematic. It makes you feel, wow, movies are a great medium because they can look and feel like this." She is so effortless with her use of the word "cinematic" and so sure we will understand what she means.

'cinematic' is even more problematic as we turn to the idea I've put forward that some films are 'about' cinema *metaphorically*. For example, the 1933 version of *The Invisible Man*, directed by James Whale, though it makes no mention of cinema directly, compels a rich self-reflexive interpretation: in particular, the fundamental cinematic desire to see while remaining unseen.[60] I consider Hitchcock's *Vertigo* an almost peerless film in this category of films without explicit links to cinema (*Rear Window* would be another) but still very much *about* the medium: the feeling of vertigo itself is a rich metaphor for the experience of watching a film, Scotty's (James Stewart) obsessive scopophilia can be seen as a deranged version of cinephilia, Scotty's paranoid detective work a nod to film interpretation, Midge's (Barbara Bel Geddes) literal repainting of Scotty's obsession (she paints a portrait of the object of Scotty's desire, replacing Kim Novak's face with her own) is a pointed feminist critique of the masculine gaze in art, Judy's turn as Madeleine a thrillingly creepy version of film acting, and Scotty's remaking of Judy back into Madeleine a brilliant metaphor for the power and limitations of the filmmaker.[61] But while thrilling, the hermeneutic promiscuity of *Vertigo* is a reminder that, really, if we're clever enough, *any* film can be interpreted as 'about cinema', just as even a bad film might teach us something profound about the cinematic and thus qualify, itself, as cinematic.

And I do—I feel like I know exactly what she means. But what *exactly* is she talking about? *Slate Culture Gabfest*, September 11th, 2011, podcast.

[60] The Invisible Man (Claude Rains) achieves the power to terrorize by convincing the world of his ubiquity, his ability to be everywhere and anywhere: in this, he has the transcendent freedom of a cinema camera. The Invisible Man, a fundamentally anti-cinematic subject, is only 'visible' in the empty frames he may or may not occupy, his effect on his environment, and through the reactions of those individuals who think they may be being watched (as if they are being filmed). He most often controls space by his disembodied voice, a wink to the terror of a sound film amputated from synchronization (film without lips). By pursuing this cinematizing of the invisible, the Invisible Man denies himself another side of the cinematic fantasy of seeing while being unseen, and the most powerful expression of being invisible: convincing the world that he doesn't exist, thus maximizing his power to move unseen. But a film about an invisible man visiting every place that is generally inaccessible and unseen (the various beauties of the world cordoned off from the public, secret institutions, boudoirs) for the mere purposes of *seeing* would make the camera nothing more than the tool of a voyeur. If we want to imagine a film of an invisible man who wishes only to see without being seen—who wants to live and die without leaving a corpse—we could do worse than Samuel Beckett's *Film* (1965) starring Buster Keaton. This film—a kind of treatise on offscreen space and the trajectory of cinematic gazes—offers the possibility of a film that is made up of establishing shots only, of the shots between action shots—backgrounds with no subjects. Or, rather, it offers the possibility of a cinema animated by the *truly* invisible man, the man who wants to be close-up to the great beauties but still unseen: a film in which all subjects become background.

[61] *Vertigo*'s afterlife as a favourite intertext for filmmakers ranging from Chris Marker (obsessively), to Martin Scorsese, to Spike Lee, to Pedro Almodovar, to David Lynch, to (confusingly) Michel Hazanavicius (*The Artist*, 2011), is a testament to, if not the universal value of the film, the historical fact that *Vertigo* occupies a place in our collective knowledge about cinema. I should also note that in the *Sight & Sound* 2012 poll of the "Greatest Films of All Time" *Vertigo* was chosen as #1.

Rather than treat this category of self-reflexivity as an outlying case, I'm drawn to it most of all—and, notably, not just because metaphors and allegories for cinema (both implicit and explicit) are so prominent in the films about the 'meaning of life' that I've selected for this thesis. It is precisely the way films like *Vertigo* or *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* summon an ontology of both cinema and life, without directly addressing either, that make them so fascinating. In other words, they demonstrate an affinity for interpretation—and in interpretation itself, or at least, the kind of interpretation film indirectly insists upon, there is a seed of the ontological. Film is ontological when it is interpreted. Film is most itself when it is interpreted.

Hermeneutics and Ontology: The Cinematic Circle

So far, we've opened up an ambitious and unavoidably ambiguous discussion about the *nature of reality* and the *nature of cinema* and the *nature of nature*. All in service, I hope, of understanding how dramatically the environmental crisis has shifted the study of ontology. As I've suggested, Jonas understands the demanded response to this crisis to be, at an important level, interpretative. And so, before moving on, a few words about *interpretation* and the potent volume of skepticism it injects into any philosophical study.

Data-driven analysis, and its promise of resolute impartiality and political neutrality, is certainly impressive. The attraction to vast amounts of organized data about our world convenes in the promise of a reliable method for determining cause and effect. Hasn't science made it clear that it is through laws and predictability that knowledge of the world should be sought out, categorized, and trusted to guide our actions? Isn't it through predictability that we feel as if we know the world and its laws? But, we also know, or would like to know, that there are phenomena (like human beings, symphonies, and photographic images) that resist this model, and resist this model so impertinently that the concept of reality begins to appear abstract. To know another human being is not to know a biochemical system of stimulus and response, nor a plus/minus deviation from a standard mean calculated in accordance to socioeconomic class and culture—no matter how granular the dataset that describes her. For these unpredictable phenomena, fortunately, we have the term *ontology*: a philosophic tradition that attempts to describe Being rather than the mechanics of the material world.

The best way I know how to explain this difference between being and reality is to emphasize (and paraphrase Stanley Cavell) that to acknowledge another human being—rather than to know merely their influence upon reality—is to open one's *self* to change through connection with that other self. Ontology is perhaps best understood as a form of self-discovery ostensibly directed towards an *other*; the object of ontology, in one sense, is always the thinker. This may be why the photograph—when the photographic opens up to show us the much maligned *nature of reality* (or, at least, it gives us the *sensation* of reality)—can eventually lead us to ontology: the photograph does not predict or explain, like the dataset; it questions and remembers. And unlike the majority of representations that "emphasize identity … the photograph emphasizes the existence of a subject."[62] The photograph insistently presents a trace of a cause and its effect (the real event and the impression on film), but becomes a thing-in-itself disconnected from both cause and effect. In fact, as Bazin noted, it's a kind of living thing. The photograph is an intact thing, a solid thing, one with an ambiguous ontology. This state of suspended knowing is a crude but powerful way to get at this *other kind of knowledge*, this version of reality on the other side of instrumental thinking. And, indeed, the ontological shift perpetuated by the environmental crisis is of this type; the philosophic imperative to move beyond anthropocentrism faces an ontological task of this kind.

Along these lines, I consider interpretation to be an analogy for what we do when we attempt to understand our own lives. Though, like 'ontology', 'hermeneutics' is a technical philosophical term, it describes a very familiar mental activity: the process whereby we come to a satisfying understanding of an event or a phenomenon. We may achieve this through storytelling, through synthesis, binary oppositions, narrativization, and theorization, to name just a few tactics. And each of these approaches have their strengths, their limitations, their consequences, and their patterns of thought and emotional logic. Film hermeneutics is a uniquely rich analogy for how we make sense of our own lives. A work of art is a smaller world, a sensible world, and a very different world through which we can experiment with the skills we use to process the 'real' world. Film, because of its multifarious nature, because of the awkwardness with which it approaches categories of aesthetics, because of its boundary-crossing relation to reality, and most importantly because of its affinity with ontology, compels a unique and powerfully resonant hermeneutics. Like a work of art, and especially like film, an interpretation—a hermeneutic

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[62] Cavell, "What Photography Calls Thinking," 17.

'event'—is never stable, never entirely repeatable, never entirely complete. In this, it seems well-suited to address Jonas' call for a "total image".

The most eloquent advocate for the connection between hermeneutics and ontology is undoubtedly Hans-Georg Gadamer. His 1961 tome *Truth and Method* is a study of the philosophy behind interpretation that can be summed up quite pithily: when it comes to hermeneutics, there is truth but no method. Gadamer's elaborate ontology of hermeneutics connects the process to a diverse array of aesthetic-esque experiences, including "play," "presentation," and "self-forgetfulness," to name a few. His goal in *Truth and Method*—after a lengthy analysis of the contradictions inherent in traditional, dogmatic aesthetics—is to weave the experience of art into the experience of life, and vice versa. Gadamer beautifully describes the moment of insight when we feel the satisfaction of a good interpretation that achieves this intermingling of art and life, when we bring a distant and mysterious object close: "The joy of recognition is rather the joy of knowing *more* than is already familiar. In recognition what we know emerges, as if illuminated, from all contingent and variable circumstances that condition it; it is grasped in its essence. It is known as something."[63]

When Gadamer speaks of "knowing something" he is carefully articulating a separation between knowledge and truth. An artwork's primary function is not to communicate some specific truth, but rather the kind of knowledge—better called *understanding*—that we identified earlier as so important to thinkers like Kracauer and Jonas who found themselves struggling against instrumental thinking. For Gadamer, though art provides many different kinds of pleasures and attractions, it is ultimately neither technique nor content that determines the being of art. He writes, "one does not admire the skill with which something is done, as in the case of a highwire artist. That has only a secondary interest, as Aristotle explicitly says. Rather, what we experience in a work of art and what invites our attention is how *true* it is—i.e., to what extent one knows and recognizes something and oneself."[64] (emphasis mine) With this move, Gadamer links the object and the thinker in a mutually illuminating hermeneutic circle, positing the hermeneutics of the object as a hermeneutics of the self, and vice versa.

In *The World Viewed*, Stanley Cavell crafts a model of cinematic experience necessitated on an ever-evolving relationship between a cinema artist, a cinema interpreter, a cinematic text (a

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[63] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd, rev. ed., Continuum Impacts (London ; New York: Continuum, 2004), 113.
[64] Ibid.

whole film), a group of films (a genre, a set, etc.), and the medium of cinema itself. He calls this relationship the "cinematic circle"[65] and through it he is able to posit an argument for the unusual kind of knowledge an interpretation of cinema creates: knowledge that is beyond the 'expectations' or parameters of the medium, and proceeds in parallel to the intentions of both the artist *and* the critic. Explicating this *kind* of understanding generated by cinematic hermeneutics, and how it aligns with a Jonasian organic ontology founded on the progress of *mediacy*, will be explored over the first two chapters of this dissertation. In brief, Cavell's approach makes pragmatic a hermeneutic intervention into the problem of skepticism. The intervention of the development of the cinematic medium, for Cavell, is similar to what Gadamer claims for the value of poetry: "a medium where I and world meet, or, rather, manifest their original belonging together."[66]

In the company of scholars like Cavell, Bazin, and Jonas who see in the ontology of the image an expression of reality that is both more than and less than real—that exerts both a claim upon reality and a threat to reality—we also find Susan Sontag. She writes:

> Images are more real than anyone could have supposed. And just because they are an unlimited resource, one that cannot be exhausted by consumerist waste, there is all the more reason to apply the conservationist remedy. If there can be a better way for the real world to include the one of images, it will require an ecology not only of real things but of images as well.[67]

I want to emphasize here the hermeneutic surplus Sontag is describing, generated by putting images and 'real things' side by side and recognizing their difference and their shared attraction, and that both reality and the photograph will need to change to include the other. In other words, photography and the real world are also in a hermeneutic circle: at stake is the ontology of each.

To attend to the ethics of the ecological crisis, and to the fact of it, is to attend to a problem of a belief in reality. This lack of belief extends from a failure to accept the science that communicates the fact, dimensions, and causes of the crisis, to a more general difficulty with imagining a radically different relationship to nature sourced in a radically different understanding of our human place within environments and a radically different understanding of the influence of environment on humanness. For other interpreters, for believers in God for

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[65] Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, xiv.
[66] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 474.
[67] Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, 1st Anchor Books ed. (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 180.

example, the crisis might represent an entrenchment of faith, a test, and an intensification of the need to be sensitive to God's will. Eco-criticism is truly a critical perspective demanding a special sensitivity to the conditions under which a belief in reality is sustained. This dissertation makes the case that there are some kinds of cinema that makes such belief its theme—and the *problem* of such belief an engine of affect.

From Theory to Practice: Five Ontological Films

Selecting a corpus of films to analyze proved to be one of the most difficult tasks of this project. In retrospect, the list of *possible* textual objects and the list of *possible* frameworks to adapt were engaged in their own hermeneutic circle. After several iterations, and several lists, these are the five I settled upon:

The Tree of Life (Terrence Malick, U.S.)

Melancholia (Lars Von Trier, Denmark/Sweden/France/Germany)

Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives (Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Thailand/U.K./France/Germany)

Hugo (Martin Scorsese, U.S.)

Cave of Forgotten Dreams (Werner Hezog, U.S.)

Why these films? I knew early on in this project that I wanted to work on recent films; I wanted to find a way to talk about emerging shifts in cinematic technique and representation in the context of an emerging ecological aesthetics. At one point I had a list of over ten films I intended to work on, all taken from the 2000s. But during the summer of 2011 when I was to select my corpus, I was reading a lot of Hans Jonas and going to a lot of movies. And the five films I chose were simply the ones that I thought about the most as I was trying to make sense of Jonas' philosophic system, when I was trying to imagine how to 'see' non-anthropocentrically in the idiosyncratic way that he does. While other films from that year easily could have fit in this

project,[68] these five were the ones that got me excited enough to start working. I also should note that in the intervening years, many critics have felt compelled to talk about these films, often in combination, as if they do form some kind of ad hoc corpus.[69]

Of course, the fact that *The Tree of Life* and *Melancholia* both included gorgeous, balletic space imagery and both ended with some kind of apocalypse made the two of them obvious choices; and the fact that Scorsese's *Hugo*, with its Méliès intertext, also seemed to be shooting for the stars (there is a planet almost crashing into the camera in *Le voyage dans la lune*, too) was enticing; meanwhile, *Uncle Boonmee* and *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* took an opposite route: from nature and back *into* the cave looking for answers to both the meaning of life and the problem of cinema. And then there are the more obscure, personal connections that I remember striking me that summer: like the shot in *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* of Fred Astaire dancing with his shadow suddenly taking on a potent significance when it reminded me of the shot of the eldest brother in *The Tree of Life* doing the same while his father rages. Cross-film pleasures like these are the ones that convince film fans that some kind of shared cultural consciousness exists (and convinces film scholars that there must be a more banal, material explanation to be proffered). In a small way during my experience of the 'event' that is a group of films released at a particular moment, all seemingly in conversation, the structuring metaphysics we use to determine what we admit into our categories of reality are put into relief.[70]

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[68] Other possible subjects for this study released, around the same time, include *Drive* (Nicholas Winding Refn), *The Artist* (Michel Hazanavicius), *The Descendants* (Alexander Payne), *A Dangerous Method* (David Cronenberg), *A Separation* (Asghar Faradi), *Meeks Cutoff* (Kelly Reichardt), *Certified Copy* (Abbas Kiarostami), *Take Shelter* (Jeff Nichols), *Moneyball* (Benton Miller), *Shame* (Steve McQueen), *Poetry* (Lee Chang-dong), *Margaret* (Kenneth Lonergan), *Martha Marcy May Marlene* (Sean Durkin), *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (Lynne Ramsey), *Weekend* (Andrew Haigh), *The Interrupters* (Steve James)*,* and *The Skin I Live In* (Pedro Almodovar).

[69] These critics include Adrian Ivakhiv, Steven Shaviro, and Richard Grusin, all discussed later in this dissertation.

[70] Of course, it should be noted that these five films are also five of the most acclaimed of that year. The website Metacritic.com aggregates critic's 'best of lists' (well over 200 from all over the English-speaking world). *Tree of Life* is easily the most critically acclaimed film of the year, *Melancholia* is at number 3, *Hugo* at number 6, *Uncle Boonmee* at 16 (it was released in 2011 in most North American markets, even though it is technically a 2010 film), and only *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* doesn't make the aggregated list (though it appears often in individual top ten lists). For comparison, *Film Comment*'s best of the year list surveys 300 critics, scholars, and filmmakers and ranks *Tree of Life*, *Uncle Boonmee*, and *Melancholia* at #1, #2, and #3 respectively, *Hugo* at #9, and *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* at #23. While these kinds of lists have historically carried little weight in film studies, and rightfully so, I'd argue that because of the aggregating power of the internet, the 'top ten list' has more influence upon the public formation of what constitutes art than at any previous time. To ignore the ad hoc canon of films that is produced every year by this aggregation is to miss a major emergent force upon contemporary cinephilia and art-consciousness. Of course, it is equally risky to overstate its significance. For our purposes, though, it simply poses a pertinent question: if we look at five of these films together, films arbitrarily linked by their 'acclaim', shouldn't they demonstrate some kind of meaningful coherence? If not, why not? We can let that float along the surface of our analysis—it provides one more hook, however tenuous, between art, analysis, and the real world: the kind of world

But, in the end, it wasn't really the thematic coincidences that determined my choice of these five films: it was my attraction to the five single ideas I had about each. These were my 'first viewing' thoughts, the thoughts that proved to me that I had started a relationship with each of these films, that the films were *about* more than me. I had the sense that *The Tree of Life*, like all Malick films, was about loneliness and the potential of a cinematic world to be constructed, simultaneously, out of two or more consciousnesses (in this case, the mother and the son); *Melancholia* was about criticism, both external and internal; *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* was about a cinema without faces, about travelling into a landscape; *Uncle Boonmee* was about the time it takes to die; and *Hugo* was about the reason why Hugo, though he really wants to be otherwise, is in fact a real boy. Not surprisingly, these early ideas don't exactly survive the hermeneutic process—but they do exert an influence, and they are the places where I started.

The other rewarding part of this project was learning more and more about the philosophy of Hans Jonas as I worked my way through the analyses of the films. Struggling with the difficulties presented by the films, and the difficulties presented by Jonas' text, revealed four key themes I don't think I would've discovered in quite the same way had I not been working on this particular hermeneutic circle. Throughout the analyses to come, I make the argument—in theory and in practice—for the following eco-critical notions, all taken from *The Phenomenon of Life*. They are

1. Recognizing in discourse, philosophy, and art the conflation of the organic and the inorganic. This is a major topic in my discussion of *Melancholia*.

2. Recognizing how thought (and cinema) creates space and theorizing these spaces in terms of mediacy, immediacy, and desire. This topic is discussed throughout all the interpretations, most thoroughly in *Hugo*, and culminates in a discussion on embodied landscapes in my conclusion (in which I much too briefly discuss *The Tree of Life*).

3. Recognizing the presence of the alien-other, the animal, and what this means to both ecological thought and how the alien-other is constructed in cinema. I

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that seems to be telling us, statistically, through the medium of popular journalism, that these are the films that matter.

discuss this concept, and its relation to the post-human, in the chapters on
Uncle Boonmee and *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*.

4. Recognizing, and theorizing, self-reflexivity in terms of increasing degrees of mediacy. This is an attempt to understand self-reflexivity in terms of a philosophy of life (a philosophy, for Jonas, that is equivalent to a philosophy of mind). My discussion of *Melancholia* is an opportunity to explore this new "degree of mediacy" as Jonas puts it.

The most important and unexpected discovery made while working on these five films was the way that the films signal not just metaphysical themes like life and death, but the way cinema *itself* is allegorized. In all five films, I discover a singular figure—often of indeterminate ontology—who/that actively stands in for cinema (or some aspect of the cinematic drive). The confrontation between the camera and these avatars engages the experience of the 'alien' that Jonas sees as so important to the blurring of the philosophy of life and the philosophy of mind; as well, these allegories, as allegories, draw our attention to the organic/inorganic conflation that I argue should be a major theme of eco-analysis.

Summary: Aesthetics and the Dead

Early in this project, before exploring a Jonasian approach to a non-dogmatic metaphysics responsive to (and inclusive of) historical contingency, I struggled to find a way to talk about the slightly absurd idea of 'the nature of nature'—an irresistible topic if I was going to take seriously the existence of the *idea* of 'the nature of cinema' as a useful structuring influence upon critique. A bit frustrated with what struck me as the tendency of my thinking about 'film' and 'ecology' to make both unrecognizable, I wondered if the link between cinema and nature needed an intermediary: maybe the link could be made through aesthetics. After all, as Bazin so beautifully articulated, one of the great paradoxes of film art concerns the strange affinity that a thoroughly technological medium, like cinema, seems to have with the natural world. Perhaps, I thought, if we overlap what happens when we watch a film and what happens when we observe nature, we might discover some essence common to both. As a way of slightly reframing and summarizing this framework, I'd like to follow this line of thinking to the point where Jonas becomes a relevant interlocutor.

An increasingly popular sub-discipline of philosophy, Environmental Aesthetics, has been quietly exploring the relation between modern aesthetic experience and the modern experience of nature since the 1966 publication of Ronald Hepburn's groundbreaking article, "Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty" (published, tantalizingly, the same year as *The Phenomenon of Life*). Hepburn's insight is deceptively simple: in the western philosophic tradition, dating back at least as far as the 17th century, the study of aesthetics has primarily been focused on the study of nature and natural beauty. The Ancient Greek word *aisthanesthai*, from which we get the German *ästhestisch* and the French *esthétique*, means, after all, 'to sense'—the term was in no way limited to perceiving or sensing only art. But by the late 19th century (mostly due to the work of G.W.F. Hegel) philosophy stopped thinking about the beauty of nature and started thinking almost exclusively about the beauty of art—thus, in a sense, affirming *concepts* over *perceptions*. In Hepburn's words:

> Open an eighteenth-century work on aesthetics, and the odds are that it will contain a substantial treatment of the beautiful, the sublime, the picturesque in nature…In our own day, however, writings on aesthetics attend almost exclusively to the arts and very rarely indeed to natural beauty, or only in the most perfunctory manner.[71]

He goes on to summarize a few major then-contemporary anthologies of aesthetics and comes up empty handed: all of them are talking about art; not a single one engages in the study of natural beauty. For Hepburn, aesthetic philosophy was no longer concerned with the beauty of the world; it was concerned with the beauty of *representations* of the world. Environmental Aesthetics, since Hepburn, has endeavoured to redress that oversight.

Though Environmental Aesthetics has opened many provocative lines of investigation, it is very much engaged in the analytic tradition of aesthetics, and much of the promise of the sub-discipline is that it might open up the discussion of aesthetics by shifting the criteria that a comprehensive aesthetics must address from culturally relative art to more 'objective' nature (though, of course, beauty in nature is still highly subjective). Ultimately, Environmental Aesthetics strikes me as occupying, or attempting to occupy, the same disruptive force in the history of modern art that film did in the 20s and 30s. One of the most visible Environmental

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[71] Ronald W. Hepburn, "Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty," in *British Analytical Philosophy*, ed. Bernard Arthur Owen Williams and Alan Montefiore (New York: Humanities Press, 1966), 285.

aestheticians, Allen Carlson, is quite radical in his position, more or less obviating the place of art all together and turning the experience of beauty into a kind of 'reward' for properly "elegant" scientific understanding.[72] A strong positivist thread runs through environmental aesthetics as it attempts to clarify the experience of aesthetics by evading the problem inherent to art criticism (authorship, intentions, context, genre, etc.) This is an intriguing avenue of investigation but at odds with the ontological uncertainty that seems inseparable from the discussion of cinema.

Like Hepburn, Inga Pollmann looks at ways that discourses of nature have been obfuscated in the 20th century and how that obfuscation has determined our ideas about art. In her superb 2011 dissertation, Pollman examines the influence of *vitalism*, a widespread 19th century philosophy on 20th century philosophy and film theory.[73] Pollmann argues that we have been too quick to align cinema with the "mechanistic and technology-emphatic"[74] philosophy of cinematic modernity. She suggests that cinema—certainly the way cinema developed through the influence of many early theorists and practitioners—might more accurately be understood as a bastion of vitalist life-philosophies smuggled into modern materialist ontologies.

Vitalism—or vitalism-like theories—are associated with philosophers like Bergson, Whitehead, and Dilthey. Also called *philosophies of life*, these theories are linked by an attempt to focus on the unique 'life force' that distinguishes living organisms from non-living matter. This emphasis is important, because the rise of science at the turn of the last century had increasingly forefronted a mechanistic model that, more or less, equivocated between organic life and non-organic matter. In other words, the clean mathematical predictability of physics became the model of the ideal scientific method, and the desire was to extend that mathematical precision to all the sciences. After all, organic matter is still just matter—carbon atoms, nitrogen atoms, water atoms, etcetera. Mechanical biologists and pyscho-physicists like Helmholtz, Wundt, and Etienne-Jules Marey (the famed pioneer of photography and chronophotography) argued that living matter followed precisely the same laws as non-organic matter, and the phenomenon of life could be explained as such. Conversely, inspired by vitalists like Georg Wilhelm Stahl, Johann Christian Reil, Johannes Müller and Karl Ernst von Baer, prominent neo-vitalists like the German biologist Hans Driesch argued for the existence of a distinguishing "life-force" that binds living

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[72] Allen Carlson, "Nature and Positive Aesthetics," *Environmental Ethics* 6 (1984): 5-34.
[73] Inga Pollmann, "Cinematic Vitalism: Theories of Life and the Moving Image" (PhD Dissertation, University of Chicago, 2011).
[74] Ibid., 243.

matter together. Dreisch's knockdown example, he thought, was the sea urchin: a creature that when a limb is amputated, is able to grow a new one. "How," Driesch asked, "could a machine *be divided innumerable times and yet remain what it was?*"[75] Even if this "life-force" is not scientifically verifiable, it is clear that the still infant mechanistic ideas offered a limited set of metaphors for thinking about biological life, and for biological research to proceed, it needed to free itself from the limitations of this mechanistic model. This pursuit of a new model for understanding organic life, epitomized by the neo-vitalists, strikes Pollmann as an important philosophical shift, and opens ways of thinking that strikingly anticipate the cinematic. For example, "whereas mechanist explanatory models provided tools for observing linear and continuous changes over time, vitalist biologists, by contrast, focused on qualitative leaps which occurred within time, and which led to quite different conceptions of temporality."[76]

For Pollmann, embracing vitalism reveals a particular aesthetic, a particular way of relating to the world, that in many ways seems more cinema-like than the mechanistic philosophy with which vitalism was directly competing. By exploring the legacy of this philosophy, and its translation into cinema via theory, Pollmann discovers a way of productively linking the nature of cinema to the nature of life—at the very least, she discovers how both cinema and life are asking similar questions of being. This approach, to my mind, is far more persuasive then the content-oriented approaches that have dominated film and ecology research so far. Insofar as Pollmann believes that looking for vitalist themes in films, and vitalist theory in film theory, offers a tacit theory of spectatorship, her work intersects with Ivakhiv's ideas about an ecological viewing position. If the medium of cinema itself can 'latently' or 'unconsciously' show an affinity for nature-centered, life-philosophical ontologies, we can then explore how self-reflexive films, when exploring their own ontology, are doing life-philosophical work.

While Pollmann begins her thesis emphasizing how vitalist philosophy necessarily marks a distinction between organic life and non-living matter, her account of cinema theory shows an ambiguous effacement of such a division:

> On the one hand, I am making a *historical* claim about the important (and to date generally neglected) influence of vitalism and life-philosophy on film theory and practice. On the other hand, though, I am also arguing that once a certain aesthetic was generated through this influence of vitalism and life-philosophy, this aesthetic

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[75] Ibid., 7.
[76] Ibid., 6.

drifted free of its original milieu and could be taken up by film theorists and filmmakers who had at best tenuous relationships—and in some cases, no relationship at all—to vitalism and life-philosophy. Thus, while the historical aspect of my argument alters the classical tale of film history and its protagonists by shining a different light on classical filmmakers, film-theoretical texts, and the connections between them, this historical connection between vitalist discourses on life and the cinema also bears larger aesthetic consequences for a much wider range of films and texts about film, since the cinematic vitalist aesthetic provides us with a lens with which we can look at the cinema more generally as a medium and a technology concerned with life, no matter what the historical-theoretical background of a certain filmmaker or film theorist.[77]

The "drifting free of its original milieu" takes the form, most often, in mobile metaphors—the 'livingness' of life lends itself to talking about many phenomena, cinema included. This exchange of metaphors equally allows Bazin, for example, to draw a connection between the nature of an axolotl (a bizarre Mexican salamander popular with European scientists in the 1940s and 50s), a river, and cinema itself. It's this very mobile, very modern, even post-modern idea of 'life' that help Bazin and Kracauer craft their realist film theories—in other words, by blurring the difference between organic and non-living, the 'livingness' of cinema becomes literal. I will expand on this idea more, but this effacement is accomplished by the intermingling of phenomenology and existentialism at a level that seems very vitalism-like, and creates a hybrid philosophy that posits a radical interface between the organism and its environment, anticipating 21st century biology (and Deleuze and Guattari's problematic extension of the word 'life' to include the non-organic).[78] Pollmann stops short of analyzing the consequences of such an effacement,[79] only noting that "developed in the midst of the debates between mechanism vs. vitalism, cinematic vitalism formulates, from the outset, an aesthetic solution by dissolving these

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[77] Ibid., 241.

[78] "This streaming, spiralling, zigzagging, snaking, feverish line of variation liberates a power of life that human beings had rectified and organisms had confined, and which matter now expresses as the trait, flow or impulse traversing it. If everything is alive, it is not because everything is organic or organized, but, on the contrary, because the organism is a diversion of life. In short the life in question is inorganic, germinal, and intensive, a powerful life without organs, a body that is all the more alive for having no organs." Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Athlone Press, 1988), 499.

[79] Further to this point, Pollmann finds herself grappling with filmmakers like Dziga Vertov who openly proclaim their allegiance to the power of technology, but do so by using organic metaphors, and strive to show "life itself." While thinking about vitalism in the case of Vertov better allows us to recognize the fluidity he adopts between organic and inorganic matter, it risks diluting the meaning of cinematic vitalism. Ultimately, the burden is upon the cinematic-vitalist interpreter of Vertov to demonstrate an "against the grain reading" that shows how films identify a *unique* life force that distinguishes between the organic and inorganic.

oppositions."[80] But this division between organic life and non-organic reality is philosophically important, and thus if such a way of seeing the world is the source of an aesthetic, it is an aesthetic hooked by a potentially upending tension.

That philosophy, even eco-philosophy, has shied away from addressing non-human organisms on their own terms can be seen in a tendency of environmental aesthetics to discuss *nature* as a series of picturesque views in which the presence of the living organism is more or less arbitrary. Hepburn, in all of the examples of an aesthetic nature in his 1966 essay, does not once mention the singularity of the organism in his analysis (in fact, his favourite example of aesthetic nature is a dead tree). Film theorist and philosopher, Noël Carroll, in an intriguing essay arguing against Allen Carlson's positivistic turn of environmental aesthetics, uses a waterfall as his primary example—a very cinematic example, I'd say, but also clearly an inorganic phenomenon.[81] The tendency of environmental aesthetics to forego discussing the beauty of the organism, and in particular, organisms more complex than plants and regarded as anything more than garnish to a *view*, speaks to a little remarked upon limit of aesthetics: the tyranny of beauty upon the impertinently *living*. The rules of aesthetic engagement change once we add a living organism—not to mention an animal—to an environmental aesthetics that is still trying to shake off the legacy of the Hudson River School of naturalism.[82] In short, when parsing the contemporary conception of reality, we must be careful to distinguish between *nature* and the *organic*: the former might be best thought of as a space defined as other to human space; the latter describes the mediacy to their environment all organisms, to some degree, share.

Cinema is an inanimate apparatus that animates. It creates the illusion of life. And, most astonishingly, it transforms the living into vibrating beams of light, into pure atomized materiality, thus abstracting the figure, the individual, the being, out of life and preserving it mechanically. *Cinema makes life mechanistic, and yet it remains life*. To think through cinema, is to engage in a tendency to extend the concept of life beyond the organism. This dissertation is sensitive to this tendency and how it circumscribes and subtly influences the kind of philosophic questions we can ask, and have been historically asked, through cinema and cinema theory.

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[80] Pollmann, "Cinematic Vitalism: Theories of Life and the Moving Image," 254.
[81] Noel Carroll, "On Being Moved by Nature: Between Religion and Natural History," in *Landscape, Natural Beauty and the Arts*, ed. S. Kemal and I. Gaskell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 244-66.
[82] The Hudson River School is a mid-19th century American painting movement of American pastorals scenes, notable for their mythic sense, brilliant technical mastery of light effects, and for being almost entirely devoid of animal life.

For scholars of film art, Jonas' work offers a recalibration of pre-modern and modernist categories in relation to much more macro evolutionary trends, a foundational (on the organic body) ethical system that bridges categories of inner-life and 'outer' objective world, and an idiosyncratic and clearly expressed worldview. Most importantly, Jonasian ontology is unusual enough—especially in the context of the escalating environmental crisis—to lay bare many of the assumptions we make, as film scholars, when speaking about the 'ontology of film', when looking for life-philosophical themes in artworks, when thinking about cinematic modernity, and, most importantly, parsing the relation between film/reality, film/nature, nature/organic, and nature/reality.

The working theory this dissertation sets out to demonstrate is that thinking about the relation between ontology and cinema—and, again, thinking *through* hermeneutics after recognizing that hermeneutics is inseparable from the being of cinema—produces an ontology we can recognize as of the 'philosophy of life' variety. To this end, I propose a project that places two intellectual enterprises on parallel tracks: 1) film hermeneutics in the form of close form/content film analysis of contemporary films, and 2) mobilizing the philosophy of Hans Jonas, in conversation with realist film theory, to increase our sensitivity to the ways that contemporary films parse the relation between the organic and inorganic (and all that is implied in such designations), and demonstrate that the nuanced understanding of such a relation is essential to both the ontology of cinema and to the progress of any credible ecological philosophy.

Before turning, finally, to the films, I want to mention one more important interlocutor for this project, a very early practitioner of culture studies and an astute observer of systems of things. In his ultra-close analysis of Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, Walter Benjamin produces one of the truly great interpretations and cultural critiques, a transdisciplinary work that successfully injects history into the philosophy of art and philosophy into art history. He also discovers the occasion to question his own interpretive practice, crafting out of his own analysis of the structuring metaphysics of Goethe's Romanticism an argument for *critique* as opposed to *commentary*. Early in the essay, Benjamin writes:

> If, to use a simile, one views the growing work as a burning funeral pyre, then the commentator stands before it like a chemist, the critic like an alchemist. Whereas, for the former, wood and ash remain the sole objects of his analysis, for the latter only the flame itself preserves an enigma: that of what is alive. Thus, the critic

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inquires into the truth, whose living flame continues to burn over the heavy logs of what is past and the light ashes of what has been experienced.[83]

With a knowing and profound invocation of the living/dead binary, by bringing attention to the trace of the living in wood that animates the *seemingly* living flame, Benjamin reveals his own stakes in the world-concept that conflates the organic and the inorganic. Benjamin tasks his alchemist, sensitive to the conditions of life, with grasping the "metaphysical structure" of a work. Resonant (anachronistically) with the deconstruction of Derrida, the cultural critique of Raymond Williams, or a Freudian/Jungian cultural analysis of unconscious forces influencing the actions of the present, Benjamin's methodology is familiar but also unique. Contrary to an analysis set on revealing an unconscious desire (founded in some past trauma) that surreptitiously determines the present, Benjamin's method identifies the ongoing historical process of human self-reflection (and human art) and the continuity this process opens with the past. It is an approach that challenges the popular notion of thinking of a work of art as representing the 'unconscious' of our culture. Unlike the Freudian Repressed that loses its power once it is identified, the crisis of reality revealed by eco-criticism—or by Benjamin's alchemist—*increases* its influence upon our waking lives the more we notice it and the closer we look.

Over the course of this lengthy essay, Benjamin argues that "criticism is less a matter of consummating a living work of art, than of destructing a dying one."[84] Because I am working with contemporary films—films released within the last half-decade—I lack the historical distance Benjamin considered necessary when he sought the metaphysical structure of works such as Goethe's *Elective Affinities*. In other words, I am working on films still very much *alive*; from the perspective of Cavell's cinematic circle, I'm working on films *in media res*. Like much eco-criticism, my project is grappling with the need to augment historical research with lucid and timely responses to all the means and media by which we represent ourselves and the limits of our responsibility.

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[83] Walter Benjamin, "Goethe's 'Elective Affinities'o," in *Selected Writings: Volume 1, 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Paul Bullock and Michael William Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2002), 298.
[84] See Ulrika Björk, "The Monument Inside: Freud, Benjamin, and Interminable Grief", 112

CHAPTER 1:
CAVE OF FORGOTTEN DREAMS AND THE
SPACES BEFORE IMAGES

Introduction: Mirrors

The *Pont d'arche de Chauvet*, a tall and beautiful vault of scalloped limestone in the southeast of France, shades from the spring sun a gentle bend where the Ardèche River slows. At the shore of the river, a rakish scientist named Jean-Michel Geneste squats, faces away from the arch, and addresses the camera. The exuberance of landscape over his shoulder seems more appropriately world-historical than the actual subject of the documentary being filmed: the modest crack in the limestone cliff-face a few hundred feet away and the dank cave system it opens upon. Offscreen, the filmmaker Werner Herzog asks, "Do you think the paintings in Chauvet cave are somehow the beginning of the modern human soul? What constitutes humanness?" Geneste barely hesitates before calmly unspooling a string of thoughts:

> Humanness is a very good adaptation in the world. Man's society needs to adapt to the landscape, to other beings, to other animals, to other human groups. And to communicate something and to inscribe the memory onto very specific and hard things … this is the invention of the Cro-Magnon. … With the invention of figuration … it is a means of communication between humans and with the future. To evocate the past. To transmit information [in a way that is] better than language, better than oral communication. This invention is still the same as it is in our world today. With this camera, for example.

Geneste points at Herzog's camera, a major topic of interest in *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, the 2011 documentary about the oldest cave paintings ever found.[85] He also, of course, points at *us*, though, as I will argue, *we* are ultimately of much less interest in Herzog's film than the camera. The scientist's answer is a good one to a very complicated question, an answer that makes clear

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[85] Not surprisingly, not only is the age of the Chauvet paintings constantly being debated, but new cave-sites are still being found that challenge Chauvet's pre-eminence. With every new discovery, it seems, our timeline of the prehistoric art dramatically changes. Since the film was made in 2011, a hand stencil discovered in a cave in the Sulawesi forest of Indonesia has been dated to nearly 40,000 years old. It is generally believed that modern humans left Africa around 70,000 years ago, and it is becoming increasingly likely that pictorial know-how was already established at that point, both explaining how such similar forms and techniques could be found both in Europe and Asia and making it very likely that even older images are still waiting to be found.

the contrast between the sloppy self-reflexivity of Herzog's cinematic journey and the wholly perfect, utterly autonomous, and entirely inscrutable cave images. But the film, at the point of this interview, is nearly over and it's clear that the answer is not entirely satisfying. How could it be? Herzog seems impatient with his own question. The filmmaker is not asking the scientist to discourse on humanness, really, nor explain what constitutes a paradigmatic break in consciousness, nor demonstrate how these paintings, for example, comprise a kind of ontological crime-scene, the place where the grasp of the human animal slipped from the nurturing hand of pure being (all

Fig. 3: An eight-legged bison. Many of the cave drawings are astonishing for their mastery of form and proportion, others for their degree of expressive impressionism. One explanation for this anomalous eight-legged bison is that the extra legs are an attempt to represent motion. Herzog calls it "almost a form of proto-cinema."

notions entertained in this film). Herzog's question is about what experience the paintings create in *him*; it's about how the terms of that experience are world-historical, that the biggest of feelings incited by these images require nothing less than philosophizing about the nature of humanity. This, I think we can admit, is not merely Romantic grandiosity (though it is that, too). 32,000 years ago, a human animal left a view on a cave wall that, miraculously, we can share exactly. Across both time and subjectivity—all that we think of as unbridgeable—*somethin*g unexpected manifests. These ancient humans left us what they saw as a way of marking a spot where we can stand. Words like 'profound' become puns in this space.

Western aesthetics serves up a few dozen concepts—from the *sublime*, to the *beautiful*, from *catharsis* to *duende—*to help explain phenomena like these cave paintings, but none of them are sufficient. Roger Ebert cites the "poignancy" of the images, "signs that humans were here."[86] Kenneth Turan calls them "hypnotically, startlingly beautiful … they make your head spin, things so unimaginably ancient and fragile."[87] Ben Walter in *Time Out*: "The beauty of the cave paintings at Chauvet in the south of France is more or less impossible to get your head around. Painted over a 10,000-year period starting 35,000 years ago, they are older than some

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[86] Roger Ebert, review of *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, by Werner Herzog, *rogerebert.com*, April 27, 2011. http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/cave-of-forgotten-dreams-2011.
[87] Kenneth Turan, review of *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, by Werner Herzog, *Los Angeles Times*, April 29, 2011. http://articles.latimes.com/2011/apr/29/entertainment/la-et-cave-of-forgotten-dreams-20110429.

geological formations around them, yet possess an immediacy and sophistication that feels fresh and vivid. In many ways, the minds that made them must be like our own, yet we cannot hope to access the world they represent."[88] Manohla Dargis sees in the images ways of "communing with the dead, summoning up the eternally lost."[89] Dana Stevens offers the idea of the *uncanny* to the aid of describing the sensation, and goes even further still: "*Cave of Forgotten Dreams* is itself a work of art—one that partakes, across imponderable millennia of remove, in some of the uncanny beauty and mystery of these caves. If you're interested in the history of the human race—if you're a *member* of the human race—you owe it to yourself to see this movie."[90]

More people will visit outer space than some of these prehistoric cave painting sites.[91] It took Herzog two years of negotiation with the French Government to get permission to shoot his film at Chauvet (he promised that all the footage would be donated to the French school system), and even still, he was limited to a crew of three, granted only six visits, over six days, four hours each. It's not so surprising, then, that Herzog arrived with 3-D cameras—much to the approval of The History Channel, his financial backer—as his task was not simply to represent an experience, but to *re-create it*: for posterity, for the rest of the world who *should* see these images but cannot, and also, perhaps, because by committing the images to 3-D cinema something would be revealed about the paintings that we would not be able to see otherwise. By bringing this new media into contact with the old, perhaps a bridge might connect the present to the past in a way that exceeds our time-bound imagination, perhaps the paintings would prove to be *photogenic*. The film then—the act of making the film—is itself, on a small scale, a kind of historical event.

3-D images of 2-D paintings? This is no perverse Herzogian gimmick. The drawings are, in fact the perfect subjects for 3-D video, painted as they are to take advantage of the

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[88] Ben Walter, review of *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, by Werner Herzog, *Time Out: London*, March 22, 2011. http://www.timeout.com/london/film/cave-of-forgotten-dreams.

[89] Manohla Dargis, "Herzog Finds His Inner Cave Man", review of *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, by Werner Herzog, *The New York Times*, April 28, 2011. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/29/movies/werner-herzogs-cave-of-forgotten-dreams-review.html.

[90] Dana Stevens, review of *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, by Werner Herzog, *Slate*, April 28, 2011. http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/movies/2011/04/cave_of_forgotten_dreams.html.

[91] The stewards of the Chauvet cave, including the French government, have learned hard lessons about the fragility of these cave-sites. The artwork of the famous Lascaux cave, discovered in 1940 by four teenagers, was almost destroyed by the carbon dioxide exhaled by the 1200 or so tourists who visited the cave each year. The cave was closed to the public in 1963 and, currently, access is limited to a single individual, once a week, for 20 minutes. It is very likely that after waiting 15,000 years, the Lascaux cave paintings won't survive this century.

uneven and undulating relief of the limestone walls. These Paleolithic artists[92] demonstrate impressive mastery of form and proportion—to a degree unique amongst other cave-painting sites so-far discovered—at times ingeniously taking advantage of the shape of walls to give dimension to their drawings. Especially in flickering light sources, these charcoal, ochre, and etched images seem to shift shape and proportion—even, at times, to move. Indeed, it is plausible that they were *meant* to be experienced as moving phenomena: we find them so deep in the cave system that they only could've been made by the flicker of torchlight. Some remains in the cave indicate that standalone fires were also lit on the floor, opening the possibility that Paleolithic humans may have seen their own shadows projected on the wall. Jean-Marie Chauvet, the spelunker who discovered the cave, cried out spontaneously upon first sighting the paintings: "They were here!" And, indeed, that is exactly what the paintings communicate first and foremost—not *identity*, but *existence* (to paraphrase Cavell's ontology of the photograph). And it is that sensation—one of both place and representation—that reveal in paintings like those uncovered in Chauvet cave, both a surprising kinship with the photographic and a vantage for us to survey media history. Is the photographic experience, that medium of the split second, also manifested, unpredictably, when timespans become unimaginably vast? This is just one aspect of the wildly indeterminate ontology of these paintings that pose such a challenge for Herzog's probing camera and wry curiosity.

Cave of Forgotten Dreams unfolds like a first-person adventure. Herzog both appears on camera and speaks in voiceover as if he is standing beside us and commenting about what we see. The camera is often handheld and moving. The first half of the film recounts the filmmakers' first trip into the cave (though, in reality, the sequence was constructed out of multiple descents). Over the course of this journey, Herzog establishes the physical limitations imposed upon the film crew, the physical dimensions of the cave, and travels to the furthest part of the cave, the famous Lions' Room, where the point is made repeatedly that the film crew may venture no further on risk of disturbing the cave at its most fragile point (as we will see over the course of this dissertation, these kinds of physical limits reappear film after film as the

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[92] Throughout this chapter I will be referring to the creators of the images as 'artists', though I do not wish to give the impression that these early humans were 'being creative' in our modern sense of the term, a designation, I think, often associated with ideas like 'self-expression' or 'exploring a medium'. We have no idea what motivated the creation of these paintings, though there are aspects of these paintings (and the cave itself) that are, of course, very recognizable to our modern experience of artistic image creation and consumption.

boundaries of a kind of metaphysical stage). Interspersed throughout this journey, we see a few talking-head interviews with scientists whom Herzog is intent on both humanizing (i.e. granting them particularity) and also burdening with standing in for all humanity. By juxtaposing the wonder of the cave with the curiously banal work of the scientists (and, yes, the filmmaker's work too), Herzog is able to string out—most often through a voiceover—a few key themes: the nature of humanness, the birth of consciousness, the hardening of reality, and most notably a sense of hopeless, powerless wonder at bridging the "abyss of time" that separates our reality from the reality of the prehistoric artists.

One could imagine the film coming to a satisfying conclusion at the 45-minute mark, but Herzog presses on to fill out a 90-minute running time, as if to demonstrate in the structure of the film itself a kind of compulsive attraction inherent to the paintings. Once fully confronted by the physical limits of the cave, Herzog rallies to find, symbolically, another way in. We follow Herzog to museum galleries, and other countries, and to the desks of more specialists, and to Germany to meet an experimental archaeologist who dresses in his own best approximation of the clothing of a prehistoric man in an attempt to gain insight into the life (and mind) of Paleolithic Homo sapiens. In a simply astonishing moment, the scientist guilelessly admits that as he was playing with a replica of a flute he made from the radial of a vulture—pleasingly and surprisingly pentatonic, he notes—he noodled out "The Star-Spangled Banner" which he proceeds to play for us. Time comes rushing in at that moment, and our little corner of history seems smaller. But we have come quite far from the paintings.

Returning to the Chauvet Cave, Herzog is now accompanied by a master perfumer, a scent specialist whom he hopes will experience the cave much differently than we have so far. The perfumer doesn't offer much help, unfortunately—though Herzog is impressed by his "childlike wonder"—and the sequence ends with Herzog glumly reporting on the plans to open an artificial Chauvet cave to the public in 2014. He wonders if they will try and recreate the smell as well (described by the perfumer as faint and stale). The hopelessness of this effort of re-creating the cave—contributing to a sense that Herzog's own attempt at capturing the experience of the cave is similarly misguided—is reiterated when one of our scientists gamely attempts to use a prehistoric weapon while Herzog openly mocks him. The experience of watching a man of science awkwardly toss a Paleolithic javelin at an imaginary woolly mammoth has the opposite effect than what was intended by these experimental paleontologists:

not a feeling of "history coming to life" but a sense of our history cut off from a life that is elsewhere. Are we moderns even *capable* of imagining what life was like 32,000 years ago? Herzog, for his part, seems to find these obsessed oddballs giving it their all, both affecting and mystifying, though he also ends the film with a dedication that might be read as a subtle dis: a title card lauding the *discoverers* of the cave and *not* to the scientists who have spent significant portions of their lives cataloguing all its details.

Finally, Herzog returns to the cave for an extended, nearly 20-minute sequence (interrupted briefly by appropriate one-off shots of scientists making their most interesting philosophic points) of slow pans and tilts across paintings we have seen earlier in the documentary. His lengthy and languorous return to these images seems to come from a sense of both deep respect and also bewilderment: a sense that, if this is the last time they are to be filmed, they must be filmed with no expectation of what we might see in them—there is an archival impulse at work rather than an interpretative one. Herzog might be endeavouring to remove the filmmaker a bit; in the process he reveals a more intense confrontation between the apparatus of cinema and the images themselves. There is a sensation of looking very hard for *something* by means of capturing *everything*.

But this stripped-down, almost pious meditation on the paintings—a cinematic *being in the presence*—is not enough it seems. Nor are the stories of the scientists, nor their theories about humanness. Herzog goes a bit further and appends an odd "Postscript" before the credits. Manohla Dargis sums up the bafflement many critics felt about the postscript, which she breezily dismisses in her *New York Times* review:

> It takes a big subject to upstage Mr. Herzog, an often brilliant filmmaker of fiction and nonfiction who has mellowed into a borderline self-parodying figure, disarming (and famous) enough for a guest turn on *The Simpsons*. The cave largely keeps his more indulgently shticky side in check, save for a needlessly obfuscating coda set in a freaky research center where albino crocodiles swim in the runoff from nuclear reactor plants.[93]

There must be more to this post-script than an impious Herzog revisiting his particular brand of post-humanism. There is indeed a poignancy to this postscript that should not be missed—not just in the scene itself, but in the *existence* of this scene as the culmination of a subtly mounting

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[93] Dargis, review of *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*.

frustration. In this chapter, we will attempt to follow Herzog all the way to his encounter with the absence that disrupts the intensity of the felt-presence he discovers underground—a kind of presence we moderns, thanks to cinema, are uniquely suited to appreciate. We'll start with a close study of Hans Jonas' image theory, looking there not only to understand the relation between the philosophy of life and image-making, but also for a means to better understand the metaphysics that might over-determine our experience of these cave paintings. We can then come back to Herzog's film, reconsider the conceptual frames available for making sense of the paintings, and try to account for some of Herzog's more unusual representational and technical choices. And, of course, we will return to the albino crocodile. Figures like the albino crocodile, or the presence of the master perfumer attempting a synaesthetic experience of the cave, summon perhaps the most compelling tool we have for linking the two epochs estranged in this documentary: not the two dispositifs represented by the cave and the movie theatre, but the pseudo-anthropological/metaphysical concept of the *cinematic drive*, a fundamental organic experience that seems to begin in these drawings, slashes through Plato's cave, and Freud's unconscious, and is named finally by the invention of the cinema. In every new instantiation and expression it continues to gather up the concepts, expectations, binaries, categories, and notions that remain 'in excess' to the transhistorical progress of organic metaphysics. In our images—like these earliest examples found on delicately scarred cave walls—we confront what does not fit our reality.

The Image Theory of Hans Jonas

Fig. 4: The horse's head panorama discovered in Chauvet Cave

Following the counter-clockwise twist of the cave wall, the artist has discovered room for the heads of four horses, arranged as if they comprised a single sequence of motion (fig. 4). In the background, an auroch and a wooly rhino, scattered by the horses perhaps, charge the edge of the cave wall. I can imagine the artist by torchlight discovering something dynamic, some great potency in the contours of the cave wall; the fact that, at certain times of the year, a small stream gurgled from a crack at the base of this outcropping completes the sensation of a world discovered in miniature. It is a perfect place to invoke a tenacious memory. Did the prehistoric artist have a memory of a particular horse in mind when they stood here, or was it instead something more fleeting, just a glimpse of an animal they had startled into a run and which, in turn, had moved them to venture into this cave? In Figure 4, I see an image that is simultaneously a stampede of horses and a meditation on one horse exploding into motion. In the graceful degrees that separates one horse head from the next, in the way the last horse (moving right to left) suddenly strains forward, I see a paean to the beauty of one horse breaking into motion to join the rush. The image is at least two things at once: a general rush of bodies and a singular body that joins in. In being-more-than-itself, the image joins much of what we

consider prehistoric—the great potency of the future coiled in a being who acts without knowing.

This is what I saw; this is what I still see, though I imagine little of it sounds very credible nor will science ever corroborate my interpretation. Though scientists seem certain that all the horses were drawn by the same artist, perhaps this image is, in fact, four attempts at drawing the same horse; or, perhaps, it is based on four different horses, each one referencing a real horse. Or, perhaps, the artist just enjoyed drawing the shapes of horses, and the images have no direct reference to an actual horse. The scientists who work these caves sifting for plausibilities discover ever-increasing amounts of *evidence* of intention, but no intentions will ever be forthcoming. Did the artists create from memory, or in a kind of trance state? Did they express *themselves*, or, as some tribes of Australian aboriginals do to this day, did they experience the act of drawing as something automatic, as the channeling of the will of a Spirit— did these artists even conceive of themselves in terms of *self*? I take the "Forgotten Dreams" of Herzog's title to refer not only to the imagination of the Paleolithic humans so vividly imprinted on these walls, but also to the atavistic dreams of us moderns who *migh*t find connection with our ancestors in our shared dreamspaces—and in our capacity to dream—but do not. These images don't just seem like a glimpse into another mind's lost memories; they conjure a sensation of half-remembered dreams, dreams that we might half-wonder were real (as dreams and as things to be dreamed about). And this, perhaps, is why these images can seem both so achingly familiar and so inscrutably private. And even, so alien.

One thing we do know by studying the cave wall is that many of these images, after they were drawn, were etched into the stone (and scientists believe they have shown conclusively that the etching was done after the images were drawn). If they were etched by the artist or by some anxious pre-historic archivist, we don't know. But, indeed, someone beheld these images, and seized with a desire for fixity or for dimensionality—or maybe even just to *touch* the images again—created depth for these creations and a degree of permanence that they doubtlessly could never have imagined.[94] While the reference to the real—real horses or real

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[94] On the other hand, perhaps 30,000 years *is* plausibly imaginable for a prehistoric human who thinks in terms of predictable seasonal cycles. From our end of the timeline, I doubt I could find anyone who seriously believes the human race will last for another 30,000 years.

dreams of horses—is now long lost in these images, the reference to the reality of *images* is much closer at hand. So let's start there.

For Hans Jonas, a world that includes images is a world that has revealed its incompleteness. When Jonas speaks of the "ontological incompleteness of the image" he is, most basically, referring to how drawn lines can evoke more than they show, can be designed to take advantage of a synechdochic psychological facility to 'fill in' what's missing, to make complete what is incomplete. I heard a riddle as a boy that left a strong impression on me about an artist who was challenged to draw a soldier and his dog and use only four lines. The answer (fig. 5.) still amazes me (the fourth line, at the tip of the gun, is my favourite). This "economy and idealization … puts the image character as such beyond doubt: we shall hardly mistake the real object for an image of itself, for in its abundance of the accidental it lacks the symbolic concentration on the essential" (161). What artistic economy of line is able to leave out, what's 'missing' in Jonas' explanation of the "image-event"—his term for the complex means by which an image manifests in consciousness and the world—is more than merely 'the rest of the image'. On the other side of the image is the pressure of the real. With the invention/discovery of images comes the possibility of being mistaken, and thus the possibility of dissimulation, and thus, a new relation to the world through its counterfactuals. Through the image, reality becomes a *concept* and pushes into the world. And, according to Herzog, it pushed first into Chauvet cave.

Fig. 5: A soldier and his dog walking behind a wall. Drawing by the author.

In the hallucinogenic pre-history of antediluvian climate change, amongst the Neanderthals roaming the ice-free corridors, at the feet of massive mammals migrating slowly to the equator, early humans were surely and routinely betrayed by their senses: from the reflection of the moon in the pond at the base of the *pont d'arche de Chauvet*, to trees that look solid and alive but are rotten to the core, to the sight of their own shadows against the cliff faces. The introduction of the human-made images into this world, in Jonas' estimation, is remarkable for representing a class of things that are "avowedly superficial" (160). A wax apple, for example, is not an image of an apple according to Jonas—

it's a *fake*, a different category. The wax apple "pretends" to be of the same *material* as the original object; the image makes no such pretense. In the "image-event", the material basis of the image itself—the substratum upon which the image is created and which imparts its own influence upon the creation of the image—is ultimately and necessarily effaced. The "image-event", in a nutshell, is the *simultaneous* sensation in the image-beholder of "the vicarious presence of the physically absent at once with the self-effacement of the physically present" (167).[95] For our prehistoric artists, there is something of a paradox at work here (and a great thrill as well): the images they summoned from their natural world arrived at the expense of the cave wall in front of them. The world becomes a three-dimensional canvas; a membrane between a beholder and imagination itself.

Despite its insubstantiality, but because it is still physically embodied, the image, according to Jonas, is able to "move" while remaining still, "represent the dangerous without endangering … the desirable without satiating," etcetera (163). He argues that the image can conjure these transient qualities into a "static presence" because "the represented" and "the vehicle of representation (the imaging thing, or physical carrier of the image) are different strata in the ontological constitution of the image" (163). Each stratum of course *can* be considered independently but the image likeness—the representation—will "float as an ideal third entity" between the substratum/paint and the original imaged object. The image thus becomes a kind of "mode of existence" that is dependent upon but radically different from the other two strata which, necessarily, remain part of the "movement of becoming"—in other words, they remain insistently part of the real world (163). This idea of Jonas' culminates in the intriguing conclusion that the power and satisfaction of the image lies in the way it absolves the viewer from the burden of causality and expresses this metaphysical freedom as an increased plasticity of form. This freedom is expressed not just in creative images, but in the possibility of reproducing images, creating multiple images of the same object, and representing an indefinite number of objects with one image.

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[95] While it might be true that, in the example of the wax apple, a sentient being—animal or human—might, if they mistake the wax apple for a real one, have an experience of an absent apple and the effacement of the material in front of them—and this would lead to shock when they bite into the wax—Jonas wants to emphasize the *simultaneity* of the experience of the image in consciousness. In other words, if we bother to pay attention, the image-phenomenon manages to bring into our world something absent while causing something else to disappear. Most animals, it seems, cannot experience the simultaneity that Jonas is talking about: a crow mistakes a scarecrow for a man, or sees just sticks, straw, and cloth—the crow can't see both at the same time.

Once the organism is able to perceive and create images, everything changes. The organism has discovered a non-physical form, what Jonas identifies as the "*eidos*" or "idea." The emergence of the ability "to separate *eidos* from concrete reality, or form from matter" (167), is truly one of the most impressive in the evolutionary record: "For the gap between animal world-relation and the crudest attempt at representation is infinitely wider than that between the latter and [for example] any geometrical construction. It is a metaphysical gap, compared with which the other is one only of degree" (175). And what is the consequence of surveying this new metaphysical gap? The myth of remaking the world through language begins with Adam, in *Genesis*, naming the animals and creating categories for being. Ever after, "each horse is the original horse, each dog is the original dog" (173). This generality inherent in the act of naming a *thing* (as opposed to an individual) is of the same type we find in images, except that in the image this property of generality is still *resolutely present*. Jonas writes, "Image-making each time re-enacts the creative act that is hidden in the residual name: the symbolic making over of the world. It exhibits what the use of names takes for granted: the availability of the *eidos* as an identity over and above the particulars, for human apprehension, imagination and discourse" (173). The intriguing fact that Neanderthals were capable of complex language but never made the leap to representational art suggests the special place that image-making might hold in the development of modern humans.[96]

This power of world re-making—and the power, for example, to turn animals into images—is understood by Jonas as an increase in organic freedom. Firstly, the very act of vision made possible the stepping back "from the importunity of environment" to procure "the freedom of the detached survey." With the act of image creation, a step back of a "second order takes place when appearance is comprehended *qua* appearance, distinguished from reality, and, with its presence freely commanded, is interposed between the self and the real whose presence is beyond command" (170). This inserting of something freely commanded (the image) between

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[96] In 2012 and then in 2016, in Gorham's Cave in Gibraltar and deep in Bruniquel Cave in south-west France, very simple representational structures (scratches on a wall and stacked stalagmites) have been found and dated to as far back as 176,000 years ago, well before any conceivable emergence of Homo Sapiens, opening the possibility that perhaps some kind of cave art existed for Neanderthals. However, as stated in *Cave*, no figurative sculptures or paintings have yet been discovered at Neanderthal settlement sites. Cognitive archaeologist, Steven Mithen, has put forward the intriguing idea that Neanderthal language was a complex mixture of music, rhythm, and dance—in other words, what we now consider representational art (i.e. a privileged form of communication) was interwoven and inseparable from basic Neanderthal meaning-making. c.f. Steven J. Mithen, *The Singing Neanderthals: The Origins of Music, Language, Mind, and Body* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006).

the self and the world (which we cannot command) is perhaps the most potent manifestation of the metaphysics of freedom. I'll leave the details for a footnote,[97] but in short: for Jonas, the image is both a plastic and dynamic mental phenomenon (a thing that can be re-made in the mind, and thus can model the making of new things), and also, because it can be embodied externally, it is a bulwark against *both* the "flux of things" and the "flux of the self." The freedom to hold an image in our mind, to reflect upon it, to free its possession from the "accidents of time and space" and also to discover the capacity to free that image from our subjectivity and finitude, this is a version of freedom that "is one of distance and control at once" (171). This kind of similitude—and a high degree of comfort with it, even a sense of *relief* concomitant with *wonder* at the sight of an image—is definitive of an organism that can relate to the world through images.

It is in the convergence of multiple temporalities—the spectator's, the artist's, the imaged-thing's, and the image's—that the unique temporality of the overall image-event is made manifest. This temporality consists of shards of evidence of events that have passed (including the making of the image itself), and the felt presence *and felt irrelevance* of that history. Jonas writes that the substantiality of the image-thing (i.e. the substratum)

> whose sole requisite is to be stable, so as to preserve the image, is submerged in its symbolic aspect, and therewith is submerged its causal background—not only that of its natural prehistory (its past as a tree, a rock) but also that of becoming, under the artist's hands, its present self.[98] The activity that went into making [the image] is a matter of the past, of which the image-present keeps no record. That present has, as it were, renounced the status of effect, which still implies its cause: dissembling any past, it also presages no future—and out of this nontransient and timeless present the image meets the time-bound beholder in a

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[97] This section of Jonas' essay breaks down the image experience into the following main properties: 1) the externalized image becomes again internalized, and in this internalization enters into a form of freedom; 2) Human memory differs from animal recollection in the "freely reproductive faculty of imagination" and the image thus enters into the possibility of sharing and remaking; 3) Image making benefits perception and knowledge unintentionally, but as a consequence of the process of recording; 4) The pictorial representation expresses the unique way that the *eidetic* can control the motility of the organism; 5) Image-making is analogous to the Biblical act of naming animals: just as with the invention of names a singular word can stand in for all manifestations (the phenomenon whereby the word "dog" stands in for all dogs, past, present, and future): image-making "exhibits what the use of names takes for granted: the availability of the *eidos* as an identity over and above the particulars, for human apprehension, imagination, and discourse" (173).

[98] Jonas does not exclude the possibility that an artist might "betray this causality in visible technique" by, for example, using brushstrokes that bring attention to themselves. In Jonas' estimation, these images become "more than images." See 164n4.

presence that is as much detached from the process of its own genesis as from
that of the beholder's life. (163)

This, then for Jonas, is the key fashion in which the "image-present" diverges from reality: it is ontologically incomplete and cut off from the causal nexus, existing in a kind of non-causal presence while insistently positioning the subject, in contrast, as "time bound."[99] And this may be a source of our feeling of loss, say, or the lack that tinges our experience of images and the relief from temporality they bring—the feeling that these images exist without us.

And this summons our attention, in a roundabout way, to one of the most astonishing things about prehistoric cave art: we see no pictures of humans on these walls. This is why any hint of identity in the artist—a crooked finger in a hand print, for example—becomes the source of so much wonder for the Chauvet scientists. The physical world that these imperturbable images forestall—the physical world for the artist with a broken finger—becomes a bit more alive when a particular author can be identified. Herzog is interested in these missing faces (and missing authorial presence) as well and is forced to leave for Germany to get his hands on some figurative sculptures from that era, getting a good look at some samples of Paleolithic Venuses and pontificating on how early humans saw themselves. These astonishing little sculptures depict a female body with exaggerated sexual organs, but the sculptures are all headless.[100] The one we see in *Cave* has a little hook in place of a head, perhaps so that it could be worn as pendant on a necklace, suggesting that what was figurative for early humans was always the body; the human face exists outside time.

The Paleolithic reluctance to depict human faces is one of the great mysteries of human evolution. From a Jonasian perspective, we might entertain the idea that while the *eidos* of a horse or rhino was available to prehistoric humans, for whatever reason the *eidos* of 'human'

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[99] Jonas derives these ideas from a systematic investigation of eight properties: 1) Likeness; 2) Likeness produced with intent; 3) Perceptible incompleteness of likeness; 4) Freedom of selection of specific properties of imaged object; 5) Alteration of imaged object; 6) Representation through visual shape (rather than size, color, detail, etc.); 7) The image as inactive and at rest even though it may depict movement and action; 8) The difference between image and imaged object matched by the difference between image and imaging thing. These latter two gaps make possible an infinite number of possible likenesses of the same thing (different angles, as it were) and an infinite number of copies of the image. This ontological indeterminacy of the image, the way an image is merely a particular 'view' upon a generality must for Jonas find a pleasing analogue in the diversity of organic forms—each expressing a shared ontology of life—that his phenomenology brings into ontology, and which he argues generally defines life itself.

[100] The fact, for example, that lions are depicted with enough detail that we can tell which were female and which were male makes clear how important sex was to Paleolithic humans

was not. Was the pan-psychism of this epoch so complete that the artists only saw themselves *as* animals? This is an idea entertained in *Cave*, and along with the image of the lower half of a female body entwined with a bison, we see a half man/half leopard sculpture found at another Homo sapien settlement site: for all our post-modern pretension, it seemed like early humans were very comfortable with ambiguity. Perhaps there are no humans on the cave walls because, to the humans drawing these images, they already see themselves as animals; perhaps, each animal on the wall is not a depiction of something in the artist's world, but a depiction of their selves—*literally*, the artist who drew the zodiac of horses was drawing his or her likeness over and over.

But to entertain such a notion of a time when humans and animals spiritually cohabitated (when there was no real split between figuration and literalization) we also need to consider the opposite and do so in the context of a consequence we know is undoubtedly true: that over the intervening 35,000 years, the human animal would start to see itself as very separate from other animals. As such, perhaps the image of the woman and bison is not an example of the merging of two bodies, but the first inkling of a metaphysical separation. I come back to Jonas' idea of a kind of freedom that is both a sense of "distance and control." How astonishing a sensation it must have been for early humans to confront these image-events, especially if next to these images of animals summoned out of a space in the physical world they saw their own shadows

Fig. 6: The bison/woman image at the furthest limit of the cave system

moving freely, moving without body, moving amongst the animals without danger. In the image-event we witness the trace of a human inspecting the missing space of the world that has 'disappeared' in order to bring forth the image, and, according to Jonas, we see the presence of a non-physical *eidos*. We see humans confronting a thing with its own space and temporality, the "nondynamic existence that is the image-existence proper" (163). And, in this cautious but playful relationship to images, the human "I" is excluded as is the human "you," and instead, something formless, some great potency is gathered. Freed from the "flux of things" and the "flux of self" these early artists and perceivers reveled in their sudden time-boundedness. They were aliens to their own art; the 'image of the human', forestalled.

In *Cave*, Herzog is struck quite forcefully by the fact that two overlapping drawings of a rhino—notably similar in style and design—were drawn 5,000 years apart. As he rightly says, "this timescale is unimaginable to us. Because we are locked in time. And they were not." The documentary he has crafted is an attempt to lock those artists in time, and when that fails, to unlock us. With this goal in mind, and in the context of what the discovery of images has meant for the organism, we might get some clues to explaining Herzog's evasions and compulsions inside the cliffs of Ardèche and above them. We can see more clearly the choices he and his collaborators made (and which his subject has made for him, and which this medium of 3-D documentary cinema has made possible) as he confronts these images that are more-than-images, these human-animals without determinate nature, and cinema itself, the artform-without-essence.

Making Space Before Images

In a very insightful essay published soon after the release of *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, Barbara Klinger interrogates Herzog's use of 3-D from the perspective of a traditional, documentary, 'realist' impulse. On the one hand, Herzog's documentary goal is well served by the increased degree of "spatial verisimilitude" granted by the 3-D cameras—the paintings, one can argue, appear more 'true to life' thanks to the imaging technology. But on the other hand, *Cave* indulges in all sorts of gratuitously spectacular moving camera shots, often drifting quite far from the cave paintings in order to stage them. Is this just to ensure that audiences get value for their inflated 3-D ticket price? Klinger thinks there's more to it. She links the 'realist' impulse in Herzog's choice of 3-D to the most classic example of a 'realist aesthetic' in film studies—deep focus and long take cinematography—and uses the occasion of *Cave* to make a point that has always been true about 'realist' techniques: that realism is invariably wedded to the *spectacular*, to spectacle for its own sake (think of the virtuoso opening sequence of Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil*, 1958, a long-take lauded for its temporal verisimilitude, its 'realism'). For Klinger, despite Herzog's own penchant for longer takes and deep focus shots (even in interviews), "3-D cinematography tends to turn everything into spectacle: the cave's interiors, paintings, interviewees, landscapes, and the filmmakers themselves," thus wedding

verisimilitude with "spatial inconsistency" and introducing a pervasive "sense of unreality."[101] She writes,

> Herzog's 3-D experiment earns a unique status by virtue of its extensive and thoughtful self-reflexivity. Through the couplets that animate its aesthetic enterprise [reality/unreality, classical/traditional, science/art], *Cave* explicitly confronts matters essential to understanding 3-D as a contemporary mode of expression and experience. It meditates impressively upon issues that are continually negotiated in 3-D filmmaking today: its competing capacities to enhance cinema's verisimilitude and tendency toward spectacle; its use in both documentaries and fantasy-oriented films; its complicated existence as a scientific, technological, and artistic instrument; and its dependence for subject matter and style on interactions with old media and their conventions.[102]

In a sense, Herzog is performing his own brand of 'experimental archaeology'. Rather than attempting to understand an ancient people by sharing their physical limitations (by, for example, dressing up in deer skins and camping out in the woods), Herzog is attempting to share a pan-historical metaphysical potentiality. By getting playful in cramped confines with a medium that, in the words of Wim Wenders, "loves a horizon," Herzog reveals, and revels in, the emerging "spectral qualities" of 3-D cinema (and, indeed, the spectral qualities of our image-culture in general). And thus, in a kind of forensic recreation, Herzog maneuvers to overcome the "abyss of time" between our era and the paleo by demonstrating, at the original crime scene no less, that the spectral and ghostly remains of *self* we experience in the cave are not unique to these cave paintings but are inherent to the discovery of new media. While we have no access to the phantoms of the Cro-Magnon past—their stories, psychology, and intentions are utterly lost—we can share the *other*worldly consequences of new forms of mediation, and, perhaps, a shared sense of metaphysical freedom. In *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, this attempt to 'cross over' inspires an aesthetics of experimental cinematic spatiality that goes well beyond the use of 3-D. We see it in the opening shot of the film, in the use of the radio-controlled flying drones, in the style of tripod shots vis-à-vis the paintings, and we will see it most forcefully in the odd post-script that ends the film. But before looking more closely at this aesthetic regime, let's take a brief detour through Jonas' theory of mediacy. The instinct demonstrated in *Cave* to figure the cinematic traversal of space, in all its forms, as a spectral and

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[101] Barbara Klinger, "Cave of Forgotten Dreams: Meditations on 3-D," *Film Quarterly* 65, no. 3 (2012): 42.
[102] Ibid., 43.

metaphysical phenomenon is, I'll argue, an eco-philosophical one and perhaps best understood as such.

For Jonas, the history of the organic discovery of spatiality is also the history of metaphysics. First, the phenomenon of metabolism makes it possible for the cell, and later, plants, to represent a mediated self-identity *and* continuity with their environment. Compared to the *im*mediacy of vegetative existence, animal *mediacy* demonstrates three evolved aspects: motility, perception, and emotion. As Jonas explains, "all three imply *distance*: across it, and *through* the modes of perceiving, striving, [and] acting, *world* is constituted and replaces the mere *environment* of the plant" (183). From this animal level of mediacy, Jonas moves to the possibility of *perception* itself becoming an experience sought for its own sake, and image-making emerges as a logical consequence of this desire. In the act of image-perceiving and creation, Jonas discovers the faculties that constitute a "potentially speaking, thinking, inventing, in short 'symbolical' being" (158). The human, according to Jonas, is simply a form of life that expresses another "critical level of mediacy" between organism and the environment. The image itself becomes a symbol for the contest between mind, world, self, and other minds; in the image-event, this relation is actualized in a moment of time and in a point in space.

Fig. 7: Frames taken from the CGI created fly-through of the cave system. Pandering to the demands of 3-D, this spectacular 'fly through' of the ultra high-res scan of the entirety of the cave provides a perfect way for Herzog to help orient the audience for multiple descents into the cave—*and* to start building a case for questioning the data-crunchers' approach to experience.

But while the Chauvet cave paintings might be a perfect example of the kind of image-events Jonas has in mind, *Cave* itself—and the self-reflexivity inherent to Herzog's project—is decidedly not fully explained by Jonas' model. What happens to the 'image-event' as we move beyond cave drawings and into the age of

photographic images, projected images, images with audio, computer generated images, and immersive virtual reality? What additional degrees of mediacy are revealed, if any? Jonas, for his part, does not continue discussing images or technology once introducing us to the human—instead, for the remainder of *The Phenomenon of Life*, he discusses philosophy itself as constituting another critical degree of mediacy while admitting that, of course, technological mediacy continues on its own course. Can we extend Jonas' model to help explain where the technology of mediation explored in a work like *Cave* takes us next?

To review Jonas' model so far: the image-event is based on a triad. The *subject* of the image (e.g. a horse) becomes "vicariously present" to the *beholder* through the effacement of "the actually present" *image* (charcoal and cave wall, for example). The beholder of this phenomenon experiences, in that effacement, the "felt irrelevance" of the material specificity and history of that image and, in resonance with that experience of 'outsideness', (re)discovers their own time-boundedness. The trade-off, for the beholder, is the ability to consider an image that is a freed from the "flux of things" and from the "flux of self" and to then experience the manifestation of a fourth component of the image-event: the *eidos* or *idea* of the thing. It is this multifaceted and emergent experience that Jonas calls the "unique temporality of the image-event." The *eidos* is a kind of 'mental image' liberated by the fundamental ontological incompleteness in the material image. As a *mental* image it is thus made malleable by the imagination and is able to be reshaped and recreated in the physical world. The freed *eidos* is then able to act as a *stimulus* to the body and thus an important Jonasian circuit is completed: the *philosophy of life* becomes inseparable from the *philosophy of mind* (but more on that later).

The photographic cinematic image complicates this model in at least two ways: it adds to our analysis the phenomenon of *photographic idexicality* and the illusion of *motion*.[103] The photographic image, analogous to reality and (potentially) far more detailed than any cave drawing, *submerges* to some degree that ontological incompleteness that spurred Jonas in the first place to consider the place of image-making in the evolution of the organism. As such, it seems likely that a very different kind of time-boundedness and eidetic reflection is generated by photographic and cinematographic experience. Indeed, much aesthetic theory has questioned

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[103]As noted in my introduction, my focus on this dissertation is upon non-animated films. Experienced in the flow of time as 'temporal drawings', Jonas would likely compare the image-event of animated films favorably to dance, though one in which the presence of the organic body is submerged in favour of a fantasy of unmediated *eidos*.

the value of photography on exactly the grounds that it uncritically indulges in a fantasy of ontological *completeness*. Rudolf Arnheim, in his 1933 work *Film as Art*, makes the case that true cinematic art must actively resist the "slavish copying" of reality and that the 'unreal' qualities of cinema, like black and white and lack of synchronous sound, must be embraced.[104] Christian Metz, on the other hand, argues that, paradoxically, it is the excess of audiovisual information in a moving image that supercharges our desire for (and our fascination with) that which is imaginary.[105]

On to *motion* and the curious role it plays in *Cave*. To help clarify what is potentially powerful about 'images that move', it is useful to discuss an important distinction made by Christian Metz between the *perception* and the *impression* of reality in theatre, photography, and cinema. Martin Lefebvre and Dominique Chateau explain:

> In the theatre the entire vehicle of representation is real; however, and precisely for that reason — as has been shown by writers such as Jean Leirens or Henri Wallon — what is represented, the imaginary diegesis or fiction, does not appear real or believable. In the theatre, the *perception of reality* on the side of the vehicle thus outweighs the *impression of reality* on the side of the diegesis. With photography, however, it's the other way around: what is shown, although analogous to reality, is too *removed* from the perception of reality *hic et nunc* to give us the impression that it is really taking place now or to sustain a believable diegetic universe. The cinema, Metz argues, finds a rare point of equilibrium between the two: its *analogous* and somewhat corporeal images as well as the *presence* of movement endows the imaginary, *absent* world, of the diegesis, an impression of reality the likes of which have never before been experienced. (emphasis in text)[106]

In other words, Metz's insight into the unexpected "impression of reality" generated by the new technology of cinema allows him to argue that what is *present* to the beholder—besides light and shadow—is *motion* itself. Motion in the cinema is more than imaginary, more than illusion. The cinematic image is spectral, unstable, and transient—it lacks the materiality (and aura) of, for example, a cave painting, but it does generate a unique impression of presence. When we attempt to peel back the strata of mediation of the cinematic image-event, we discover that the

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[104] Rudolf Arnheim, *Film as Art* (Berkeley,: University of California Press, 1957).
[105] I will consider photography and the impression of reality it offers more closely—and the degrees of mediacy it implies—in the chapter on *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*.
[106] Martin Lefebvre and Dominque Chateau, "Dance and Fetish: Phenomenology and Metz's Epistemological Shift," *October* 148, no. Spring (2014): 112.

tenacious isomorphic bond of the *substratum* of the image (the ephemeral projection) and the indexical *object* (photographic subject) that was once present to the imaging device means that, in the moment of reflection, *both* are effaced. The third strata then, the *eidetic* form potentially perceived on its own, is not the image, or reality, but the *idea of a world motion*. In short, the effacement of the cinema image is necessary to bring into vicarious presence the 'thereness' of the original object as *a being in space*. This liberation of space makes cinematic storytelling possible and alerts us to the possibilities of what the organism has gained and lost in the cinematic image-event.

This realization is not to imply that films that 'explore space' are ipso facto ecological. Rather, it is meant to underline an important aspect of how cinema engages in the history of mediation. And with this recognition we can get a better sense of how Herzog's film is using the *cinematic* to explore *humanness* and to understand how such a connection is predicted by and contributes to a pan-organic metaphysics. As obsessed as *Cave* seems to be with exploring *presence*, the fact that the photographic urge to preserve in this film gives way to the *cinematic*, to a fascination with *motion*, is instructive. Herzog's primary interest with *Cave* lies not in the high-res scan and the positivism (and positivity) of scientists, but in the warping of this sacral and world-historical space in the discovery of new ways of moving through the world.

Fig. 8: Forms and motion. Albino crocodile and Skybot

If we are to theorize the post-human through a study of its media, if we are to theorize a more ethical organism that is able to reconcile mediation with sustainability, we need to confront, following Jonas' model, what the development of the cinematic image has contributed to the organism's ever-increasing "degrees of mediacy." Where does the *cinematic drive* lead? What is its inherent creative and destructive logic?—To the erasure of the human, to the replacement of the human with the virtual, to an increase in freedom, to obliteration? Does cinema open a new degree of mediacy? Does it obfuscate this mediacy by creating the

possibility of a radical merging of subject and object into the same homogenous spectral-materiality of the mechanically created image? The framework explored in this dissertation is based on the traditional film studies notion that image-culture in general is in the process of answering these exact questions. But the form this 'cinematic answer' takes is not what is colloquially understood as a 'solution' or 'proposition'. In the next chapter, we will look more closely at how Stanley Cavell's cinematic circle produces a unit of knowledge called an "automatism" that will help describe how meaning about mediation (and, thus, ecology) is generated through hermeneutics. But for the purposes of analyzing Herzog's film, it should be sufficient to note that Cavell's "automatism" is of the same species of philosopheme as the *eidos* insofar as both express the emergence of a new degree of mediacy. By testing the limits of that new degree and the gap it measures between itself and the penultimate, we may be in the process of generating understanding.

Herzog's Freely Roaming Camera

The film does not begin with an establishing shot of the valley, or the river, or a scientist mounting the cliff, but with a relatively mundane and shaky shot of a desiccated vineyard in early spring. As we fade-in, the camera—fitted with a wide-angle lens—is already in motion. The image itself wobbles in the distinctive, jello-like way that images created by consumer-grade digital sensors are prone. The shutter speed is very high, and bits of debris and snow flash by the lens like ash. The camera meanders a bit on its x and y axis—it seems like it's being shot from a poorly balanced steadicam—as it continues to move smoothly towards the limestone cliffs glimpsed beyond the tree line. Gradually, and then suddenly, the camera lifts higher and higher off the ground until it is truly airborne, clears the hedge of trees, and begins to reveal the limestone cliffs in their entirety as it turns towards the distant steel door that blocks the entrance to Chauvet cave. This scene, we will learn later in the film, was shot with a remote-controlled flying 3-D camera called a Skybot. The traversal of this literal and contemporary landscape (domesticated by the vineyard, signaled by the flying camera) *into* a landscape that is both imperturbably physical and highly figurative (well-suited to a disembodied camera) is, in many respects, an appropriate introduction to the notion that the images in the Chauvet cave constitute two overlapping dream lives: Paleolithic humankind and modern humankind. The importance of

this specific kind of boundary-crossing is signaled again later on in the film—and re-mapped—by the scene in which Dr. Geneste demonstrates for Herzog the use of a Cro-Magnon javelin. In this call-back scene, we return to the vineyard that opened the film but this time from a different angle so that on the horizon we see homes nestled in the hills instead of prehistoric limestone cliffs. We watch as Dr. Geneste awkwardly tries to throw the javelin the length of the vineyard that our camera has already traversed. Herzog is unimpressed by the demonstration. The modern human appears limited; the camera, by analogy, is also just a tool, well-used or misused. We are thus presented with two technologies of travelling the same space—prehistoric javelin and flying camera—two human experiences of space closed off to the other, two experientially autonomous dreams of motion.

Fig. 9: The view from the Skybot that opens the film. A consumer version of this same rig is widely available in 2017 for less than $1000.

As Klinger notes, *Cave* is structured from a series of binaries: science/art, dream/reality, and classical/traditional. I would add motion/stillness, micro/macro, landscape/portrait, inside/outside, and machine/body to this list as well. Messily, but instructively, we can map these binaries onto a more fundamental organizing split: organic/inorganic. This metaphysical split structures the two image regimes in *Cave*: the mechanistic-inorganic, signaled by the tripod (and its variants); and the bodily-organic, signaled by the handheld camera. The film attempts

an aesthetic reconciliation of this split—and thus thematizes the blurring of these binary boundaries—through many tactics, not the least of which is to alert us to these different regimes by alternating scenes built from 'mechanical' motion with scenes that document exuberantly 'embodied' ones. Inserting organic bodies into this cave—and into the image—through the proxy of the camera is a major preoccupation of this documentary. But the nature of bodies and cameras and the metaphysics that sustains this split makes this endeavor subtle and circuitous.

Perhaps the most striking feature of Jonas' image theory is his nearly post-modern appreciation for the disruptive metaphysical force of the organic body. He argues that the image maintains an extra metaphysical link to the external world through a surprising organic vector, one effaced in the final image: the very motion of the body that creates the image. The body-that-draws is a source of profound fascination for Jonas' theory. It is an example of an organism acting not because of external stimulus but because an internal form is being 'traced' by the imagination and then translated, biomechanically, by that organism into materiality. The motion of the body becomes isomorphic with the imagination. A drawing, in a sense, is an embodied and stable record of what is transiently visible in artforms like dance: an organic body that can move in accord with abstract mental forms and not just because of external stimulus (the automaton we will meet in *Hugo* in the next chapter, a machine motion geared to an image created by a filmmaker, is a parody of this faculty). Image-making, even more than speech, is a record in reality of the *eidetic* shaping the body, a genuinely potent meeting of the consciousness with the organic form. Jonas writes:

> What we have is a trans-animal, uniquely human fact: eidetic control of motility, that is, muscular action governed not by set stimulus-response pattern but by freely chosen, internally represented and purposely projected *form*. The eidetic control of motility, with its freedom of external execution, complements the eidetic control of imagination, with its freedom of internal drafting. Without the latter, there would be no rational faculty, but without the former, its possession would be futile. Both together make possible the freedom of Man. (172-73)

For the first 4 minutes and 30 seconds of *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, the camera seems to move on its own; Herzog's voice-of-*Götterdämmerung* narration seems dis-embodied and in the "spectral" mode that Klinger describes. It is a traditional, objective documentary camera (we are likely to think)—unbounded by the physical and the subjective, free to respond to its environment through the purity of its attention. The only human body—the first one we see—is

witnessed briefly in extreme long shot, holding a light at the back of one of the rooms of Chauvet cave. Compared to the landscape shot traversed by the Skybot that opened the film, our sense of space, at the bodily level here in the cave, changes from 'being oriented' to 'having enough room'. This pressure of space means that the cameras must be small; the delicacy of the environment, and the impossibility of bringing in electrical generators, means the lights must be cold. The camera must be held so close to the body that the motion of the operator's heartbeat will pulse the edges of the frame. A series of handheld medium shots, edited rhythmically, moves us deeper into the cave. When we confront the paintings for the first time, the camera is still handheld. The camera, in a *pas de deux* with the handheld LED rig that illumines the scene, slowly trace the contours of the first painting we encounter. What we are experiencing is an inversion of Jonas' notion of the expression of bodily freedom embedded in the image: instead of the *eidetic* controlling bodily movement to create stable images, now the stable image incites the body of the camera operator to move tentatively and delicately along its contours in order to generate the *eidetic*, to generate an ungraspable image—a cinematic image *of* an image—within the consciousness of the beholder. The *eidos* of the image, through the mediation of the camera-body, is being *projected* into our imaginations—or, at least, this is the hope. Appreciating this phenomenon, however, is not possible in the first 'disembodied' minutes of the film. The Skybot shots and these handheld shots appear together, unbroken, as a continuous expression of a traditional documentary objectivity. In this cave, however, we quickly meet the limit of this integrity and coherence.

A slightly jarring smash-cut later, and we are looking out the rainy windshield of a car swiftly moving down the paved roads hugging the cliffs of the Ardèche gorge. The camera is locked to the dash of the car and the motion is very smooth, time marked rhythmically by the windshield wipers. We arrive at a parking lot adjacent to the vineyard where the film began. The camera is pulled from the dash of the car and tags along behind a group of gortex-clad scientists. The handheld video camera—producing an image clearly exhibiting the shimmery, jello-cam effect we now associate with 2000s era cellphones—rushes along with the hiking scientist, often low, interested in their shoes and the mud as much as the landscape and the destination. The camera wanders, gaining momentum. As the group begins the ascent, Herzog's voiceover mentions "a massive rock slide" and the camera turns over 180 degrees so that our scientists are now hanging like moving stalactites from the footpath, the sky below. The camera

continues to 'track' along upside down until, threading between two hikers, turns right side up, and looks back at the landscape just ascended.[107] This turn to regard of the valley nicely rhymes with the opening Skybot ascent: but instead of the spectacle of a landscape traversed, we are invited to consider a body in *relation* to that landscape. We have covered the same literal ground twice. The *metaphysical* ground we have covered, on the other hand, crudely marks two ways of being in the world: one defined by stimulus/response (remote-controlled machine), the other by emotion/motion (a body contra gravity). The moment of the 180-degree camera flip and the first-person glance back at the landscape is the first time we can really sense what the documentary will belabor: the disembodied camera is in the process of merging with the human body. In this world-historical place, in this cave especially, this merging will briefly accelerate.

The second descent into the cave is much more practical and much more laborious than the first. We will see Herzog himself for the first time in this documentary and will hear through voiceover about the physical limits of the cave and more about *how* this documentary will be shot. Herzog even apologizes to us that crew members will be unavoidably visible in the frame. The cave *itself* is a remarkable spectacle for Herzog, full of sparkling stalactites, sculptural stalagmites, and frozen waves of limestone deposits; much of the film is spent on its curious and sacral qualities. On the one hand, the emphasis on the cave seems like a straightforward attempt to explore the wonderment that prehistoric humans might have felt, to consider seriously the cave's attraction as a proto-church, or proto-art-gallery, or proto-movie-house. But it's easy to forget that what Herzog is focusing on—the accretion of limestone deposits—are actually all features that did not yet exist for the original cave painters. Those accretions have all happened in the intervening 35,000 years; in fact, it is those accretions that signal (beyond all doubt) the authenticity and extreme age of these paintings. It is this index of stone that both proves the passage of time and separates us from a firsthand experience of this space. A sense of the 'hereness' that prehistoric humans must have felt in this place has been lost to us. The cave has become an image. This heightened degree of mediation both models the merging of mediating technology and organic body and poses a conceptual problem for Herzog's project.

"It's as if the modern human soul awakened *here*," Herzog intones. Midway through the film we find ourselves once again outside the cave to consider the 'hereness' of this place, our

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[107] This kind of moving camera, following a group of figures without showing their faces—a distinct lack of frontality, a powerful appetite for space—will return in every film in this study.

first view high above the river gorge, the perfect vantage for a series of landscape shots. Herzog has asked the scientists many times to verify the possibility that it is this *specific* place where the modern human was born (they can't, of course); but Herzog seems attracted to the idea that this art "burst onto the scene all at once," out of *this* landscape, and persisted, as a style, for

millennia after millennia. High above the gorge of Ardèche, Herzog captures a series of very smooth tilt and pan shots of the Ardèche River, the limestone cliffs, and the horizon. It's a lush, beautiful, and dramatic landscape—Herzog, elsewhere in the film, calls it "Wagnerian" and wonders, anachronistically, if Wagner's Romanticism might be as good as any tool-at-hand to explain the prehistoric fascination with

Fig. 10: The Ardèche River valley

this place. The camera tilts towards distant mountains: "Walking 400 miles in *this* direction," Herzog says, "would lead you to the Swabian Alps of Germany." The film is establishing the extent of the Paleolithic human world, a world crisscrossed, interconnected, and limited by the extent of ice-free corridors. We, of course, can move from Chauvet cave to Germany in just an edit, and indeed, one cut later, we are in a German museum looking at examples of ancient sculptures that Herzog hopes might help give us a sense of the 'hereness' that seems to be eluding us in Chauvet Cave.

High above the valley our vantage has been reduced to a fixed point in space, dimensionality measured in tilts and pans. The telephoto lens roams the contours of the valley in an almost sloppy, unpredictable way. This kind of landscape shot is not new to Herzog's cinema. As Eric Ames writes of Herzog's 1984 documentary *The Dark Glow of the Mountain,*

> While Herzog speaks, the camera actively scans the horizon of the Himalayas, as seen from a distance of several kilometers through a powerful telephoto lens, panning and tilting in a long, continuous movement, which traces the jagged outline of the peaks. The lens and camera movement flatten out the pro-filmic scene, transforming the physical environment into a graphic pattern, re-signifying the depicted mountains and ravines as the 'highs' and 'lows' of an inner world, which the camera seems to register like the moving stylus of an automatic instrument.[108]

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[108] Eric Ames, "Herzog, Landscape, and Documentary," *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 2 (2009): 50.

The presence of an inner world on the side of the camera opposite to that of the profilmic landscape—suspending the camera itself in a kind of Jonasian "third strata"—is also signaled in *Cave* by Herzog's voiceover. Early in the film, Herzog establishes his narratorial relationship to the images we are seeing on screen (and by implication, his relationship to us) by frequently announcing in voiceover what we are looking at— "*these* cliffs," "*that* door," "*these* steps," "for these Paleolithic painters, the play of light and shadow from there could possibly have looked something like *this*," etc. On screen, indeed, we can easily see exactly what he is talking about. This is first and foremost a gesture at orientation, but it is also, subtly, a form of double articulation. The presence of the voice, and the way it pins literalness to the images, summons the spectral back to the bodily, (though it is a body very much aligned with Herzog's subjectivity). I think a key component of the handheld camera's summersault in the 'second approach' to the cave is that the camera seems to respond to Herzog's mention of a "massive rockslide." It's as if the camera had been charmed out of mechanical representation into expressiveness. It's also playful; a human kind of amateur joy in the capability of the camera (as a tool and a medium) that complements the cave paintings, the most astonishing amateur art perhaps ever created.

Fig. 11: Faces in the cave. A couple of the odd 'portrait shots' in the film. Herzog has asked his subjects to stand still for the moving camera as if posing for a still photograph. A shared experience of duration and regard between a body-in-the-cave and the audience-in-the-theater, and a parody of the cave paintings.

But for all the film's playfulness with the camera, in the climactic moment of the film—the confrontation with the paintings—Herzog chooses a much more conventional approach. In the high-res, high-fidelity, tripod-bound shots of the paintings made using professional cameras that dominate nearly the entire last fifth of the film, we see Herzog choosing disembodiment and technology over embodiment and palpable mediation. It is our chance in the film, after approaching these paintings so many different ways, to *merely* observe. After jumps through space, and vertiginous acrobatics, the camera finds its material support and quiets down. From a

tripod, sometimes mere inches from the paintings, the camera pans gently and smoothly, other times the shot is completely locked down. We have seen shots like this throughout the documentary, mostly used as illustration of voiceover or as punctuation, but this is the first concentrated sequence and it goes on for quite a long time. The selections and editing rhythm are very beautiful (though your experience of this sequence likely depends on your taste for Ernst Reijseger's score), and the sequence has its own shape and attention. But it is also a subject to the demands of 3-D filmmaking and it is designed to pander to that mechanical process. Sometimes the camera moves. Sometimes the light moves. In between, the images hover and the cave wall becomes increasingly abstracted—texture and contour becomes graduations of colour and density. A gallery-like, even church-like, respectfulness pervades. There is no voiceover, though these shots are interspersed with more interviews, more ideas, more pressing of the images against the real, more coaching on how we should see these images. Any sense of motion we've encountered so far in this film meets a curious defining limit—ultimately, this last confrontation with the paintings is as far as we can go (though the film, significantly, does not end here).

But as beautiful as these images are, as much as we are meant to consider this smoothly moving camera as one surveying a metaphysical landscape—an automated machine in synchronization with an *other* world and an *inner* world—I would argue that there is something unsatisfying about these sequences, perhaps by design. The 'curious limit' we meet in this high-tech approach to the paintings, is partly felt in contrast to the more lively experience of the hand-held shots we saw earlier in the film, the more intense connection between the *eidos* of the paintings and body of the cinematographer we've already briefly experienced. As such, it's not too surprising that we once again leave the paintings behind and return to the disembodied camera, as if Herzog needs to balance out the stasis of the images with a surplus of motion (and to drive home his most on-the-nose ideas about self-reflexivity). The Skybot arcs a few times above the Ardèche river before we spot the filmmakers down below, and then it comes in close until it is grasped—literally *grasped*—by the cinematographer, thus traversing the gap between the disembodied camera and the embodied subject for a brief respite on the edge of some new mediation. These images, too, point to the future.
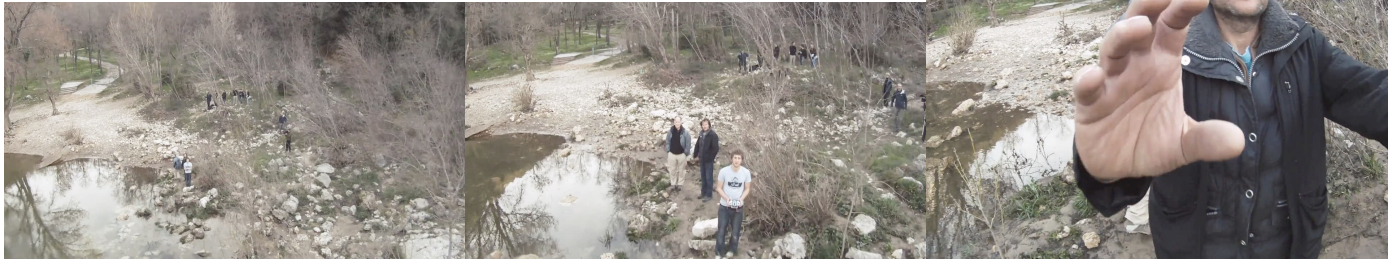
Fig. 12: Three shots from an unbroken take captured by the Skybot as it arcs over the Ardèche river and returns to the hands of the director of photography.

The Chauvet cave paintings, encountered in Herzog's film 35,000 years after they were made, have lost their natural relation to *eidos* by the imposition of geological time. Herzog's attempts to emphasize that physicality of the substratum (the materiality of the cave wall) through the spectral medium of 3-D cinema is, in a sense, a paradoxical attempt to reclaim the *eidos* that structured those images, the 'idea' that animated the artists. The substratum (including the physical image itself) is pressured to return to the flow of time in order that it might be brought into contemporaneity with us. The image becomes conceptually inseparable from its support. We still recognize the images as being, for example, 'about horses' or 'about rhinos', but the timeless present of the "image-event" is *not* contrasted to the time-bound existence of the beholder (or, at least, on a scale that we can recognize). When this process fails, the time-bound beholder of the moving image is now *time-less* in the sense that no *recognizable* temporality obtains. The attraction and repulsion incited by the paintings (Herzog and the scientists all discuss how, at a certain point, it becomes essential to escape from the images) is sourced in that unfamiliarity. It might be exactly this ejecting of the organic body from the "flow of becoming," to quote Jonas, that Herzog is attracted to and which makes *motion itself* his defacto subject, the secular version of 'being haunted'. His interest in motion is an attempt at mollifying the unfamiliarity of this epic image-event as way of understanding it. Indeed, the film can be interpreted from beginning to end as exploring various semantically charged regimes of both representing and recreating motion, both 'in the world' and 'in the body.'

Cave of Forgotten Dreams does not stop with the filmmaker grasping the image. Sensitive now to the tensions of the various image regimes at work in the film, we should not be at all surprised that Herzog, before the end, opts to introduce yet another presence into the cave, yet another form of motion. We turn to regard an *animal*, an albino crocodile, in the hope that another kind of temporal experience will resolve these aesthetic tensions.

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The Postscript: Mutants and their Media

A child's footprint found in Chauvet cave—unique in the paleontological record—is all the more remarkable for appearing beside the paw print of a wolf. Herzog pontificates about the juxtaposition: "Was the wolf hunting the boy, or did they walk together as friends? Or did they each prowl this cave and leave their mark thousands of years apart? We will never know."

After the shot of the hand closing on the floating camera of the Skybot, the image fades to black. Fade in: an unexpected image in this so-far pristine landscape: the lopped-off hourglasses of a nuclear plant. Herzog orients us by once again explicitly referring to the image we see on screen: "Chauvet cave is only 20 miles as the crow flies, beyond these hills in the background." This alien presence in the landscape is also an unsubtle evocation of geological time and a signal that, on the far side of the historical timeline from Paleolithic humans, we may be closer to the end than the beginning.

Herzog explains that the hot water ejected by these cooling towers is being used in a nearby experimental biosphere. The camera cuts to the misty metal walkways, white skylights, and heavy palm fronds of the biosphere, and begins to prowl forward in the same first-person, handheld style we've become accustomed to in this documentary. A decorative "primitive"

Fig. 13: The hills in the background

woodcarving hidden in the trees establishes immediately a connection between this biosphere and Chauvet cave; this biosphere is itself an expression of representation: a cave where the cave itself is artificial, where the cave itself is a kind of image. Instead of images on the wall, new 3-D life forms—including hundreds of crocodiles—now inhabit the representation. Herzog continues:

> Not surprisingly, mutant albinos swim and breed in these waters. A thought is born of this surreal environment. Not long ago, just a few 10,000s of years back, there were glaciers here 9,000 feet thick. And now a new climate is steaming and spreading. Fairly soon these albinos might reach Chauvet cave. Looking at the paintings, what might they make of them?

The albino crocodile is long and attenuated, strikingly white—as if carved from the calcite we've seen in the caves—its claws long and articulated, its eyes slightly pink and prominent. More than anything, this creature seems designed for perceiving.

Fig. 14: The albino crocodile(s)

The crocodile is visible to us—and the camera—thanks to the glass sides of the water tank defining its habitat. It's a privileged viewing position, no less astonishing than those afforded by the Skybot camera rig. The camera effortlessly drops below the water line, and as it does so, the crocodile image begins to become refracted. This refraction prompts Herzog to continue his voiceover:

> Nothing is real. Nothing is certain. It is hard to decide whether these creatures are dividing into their own doppelgangers. And do they really meet or is it just their own imaginary mirror reflection?

I find Herzog's willingness to engage with the crocodile *as an image* so readily more than a little astonishing. While his comments "nothing is real, nothing is certain" seem thematic for the project at large, he is first and foremost referring to the specific image we are seeing before us.

Strange for a documentary—which, conventionally, emphasizes the 'reality' of the event through multiple angles or a strong sense of off-screen action—Herzog wants to limit our apprehension of this creature to the very literal bounds of the cinema frame and, thus, draw our attention to the creature's odd unreality, its out-of-time-ness. In a sense, he wants us to think about the moving screen (and the glass wall of the tanks) as being another cave wall (in all its rich semiotic impertinence). This analogy also emphasizes the visceral dynamism of Chauvet cave, and is a reminder of how unprepared we are—culturally, imaginatively—to appreciate the cave as a site of representation and art. We, the modern art gallery dwellers, are just as limited in our movements, vis-a-vis our artifacts, as this crocodile is in its glass-bound world.

Fig. 15: The camera lens is reflected in the aquarium glass, superimposed before the crocodile

The increasingly abstracted cinema image on display here suddenly includes, reflected in the glass of the aquarium tank, the film's most self-conscious moment: the appearance of the cinema camera itself. At the moment the camera lens reflection appears over the refracted image of the crocodile, Herzog speaks the last lines of the film, "Are we today, possibly, the crocodiles that look into the abyss of time when we see the paintings of Chauvet cave?"

In many ways, this postscript is in direct conversation with Geneste's speech about "what is the nature of humanness?" If "humanness" as he says, is about adaptability to environments, then these odd floating crocodile bodies do present a strained look into the future

of the evolutionary record, a new organic form well adapted to an increasingly warming climate. This postscript is also a rejoinder to Geneste's more hopeful claim that the cave paintings stand as a way of communicating (and imagining) the future. Geneste's inclusion of our own viewing position—our own ontology—into these images, strikes me as a form of wishful thinking, even a hint at a pernicious mis-reading of the cave paintings. The crocodile stands in for both a creature (like us) that Paleolithic humans could not possibly imagine, and thus could not possibly have created images for, and as a creature (like us) that is utterly separate from its origins. Which is to say, that the crocodile, regarding the paintings, would likely never expect that its species was the unintended product of nuclear radiation, an accident of biology. And, thus, perhaps the most astonishing thing about the albino crocodile is that it reminds us that there is almost nothing in the images of Chauvet cave that should convince us that human beings painted these images. As far as the crocodile would be concerned, the images in Chauvet cave would've been painted by the crocodile's ancient ancestor—and just like our ancestors, the crocodile might wonder why those ancestors were obsessed with *other* animals and not with rendering self-portraits. The paintings in Chauvet cave were *never* painted to communicate to *us*, and that they reflect back to us only what we project. To regard these paintings then, outside of our time-boundedness, is an act of non-anthropocentrism.

But thinking back to Jonas' approach to the mixed monisms of our age, we might frame all this differently. If our goal is to expand metaphysics to all living things, we also might be tempted to see in these images—and in the faces of animals like the crocodile—not a distorted reflection of the human, but a positive image of the organic. Jonas would not see the origin of the human in these images *in terms of the modern human*, but in terms of the progress of free thought. In a sense, Herzog is revealing an unexpected way to see these cave paintings. While most visitors wish to see *themselves* in these cave paintings—to reflect on their own humanity—Herzog wishes to experience the paintings as they were experienced at the time they were painted. His cinema is then not in service of creating an illusion of being in the cave, but is stripping back at a pernicious thought: these images connect me to my humanity. Rather, we are invited to think: these images connect us to the evolutionary progress of freedom (to paraphrase Jonas); humanness is something else much further away.

Cave of Forgotten Dreams links together the ancient progress of the cinematic drive with our increasing insecurity with our own humanity. In the confrontation of the albino crocodile we see nothing reflected but the camera, the clearest possible signal of the void where an "image of man" might be. Herzog here is riffing on the idea of the indeterminate human, the self-created human, the invention of the human. In this specific encounter with a putatively irradiated crocodile, Herzog is also testing the limits of digital-age documentary by concocting a kind of post-human fantasy. His fable goes something like this: "there exists a new species on this earth, cold-blooded, born to thrive in the warm and irradiated, that is the product of human negligence and human genius, and when it turns to regard us it does not know us, cannot imagine us, and cannot judge us. And this is a great and terrible relief." If the cave images remain inscrutable, if the faces of its artists remain turned away from us, *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* nonetheless presses on to arrive at the curiously ironic and inherently anticlimactic moment when the post-human turns to regard itself.

Fig. 16: *Swing Time* (George Stevens, 1936). Another moment of self-reflexivity: Herzog cuts to a shot of Fred Astaire dancing with his own shadow as a way to imagine how ancient humans might have viewed their cave paintings by torchlight.

Conclusion: Faces

While writing to his friend Vopiscus Fortunatus Plempius in the winter of 1638, philosopher René Descartes wanted to be absolutely precise on a contentious point of anatomy he was making. Descartes paused, put his pen down, and then performed an autopsy on a live rabbit. Satisfied that arteries do not "fill like bellows" he went back to his pen and wrote, "this is disproved by an utterly decisive experiment, which I was interested to observe several times before, and which I performed again today in the course of writing this letter. First I opened the chest of a live rabbit and removed the ribs to expose the heart and the trunk of the aorta."[109] This commitment to thoroughness was nothing new for Descartes who elsewhere describes with

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[109] René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, 3 vols. (Cambridge Cambridgeshire; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), Vol 3, 81.

clinical indifference his many zoological experiments, his tinkering with what he called the "clocks" of the material world.[110]

In Descartes' infamous idea, "Animals are the mirror of the human: we see our emotions and thoughts reflected even when nothing is there" we see the morally fraught consequences of a dualistic solution to the problem of reality, a worldview that limits emotion—and thus mind—to the human experience, merely. By separating mind from matter for the purpose of separating out humanness from the material, Descartes made the material fair game for all manner of mechanical investigation, progressive or monstrous, and made his reputation as one of the great philosophic villains—especially when we connect the dots from dualism, to industrialization, to environmental degradation, to climate change.[111] But Descartes is also, quite rightly, pointing out (by exploiting) a pertinent fact about the human/animal relationship: namely, that it is fundamentally interpretative. And this interpretation, it could be said, is based on the close-up: the moment when behavior (the animal seen from afar) cedes to Being (seen eye-level in the moment before we regard the animal companionably or we do something terrible to the animal's body). In other words, even if we blanche at Descartes' indifference, we must recognize in his philosophic response a keen sense that we moderns exist in an uneasy, skeptical, outsider's relationship to the animal.

Simply put, Western philosophy has offered no coherent ontology of the animal. The animal exists as symbol, as token, as example, and, most importantly, as counter-example—but is never considered as representing an autonomous *being*. In fact, as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno point out, there is a curious *uniformity* of thought in regard to animals. Be this thinking sourced in Christian, Jewish, or Stoic philosophy, the contrast between "animal irrationality" and "human dignity" is foundational: "few ideas have such a hold on Western anthropology."[112]

This lacunae in Western thinking has relegated the animal to a wholly figurative, phantastic space. Curiously, but not surprisingly, post-modern efforts to undo the metaphysics

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[110] Ibid., 304.

[111] Al Gore in his 1992 book *Earth in the Balance* writes *"The Cartesian approach to the human story allows us to believe that we are separate from the earth and entitled to view it as nothing more than an inanimate collection of resources that we can exploit how we like."* C.f. Albert Gore, *Earth in the Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992), 278.

[112] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, A Continuum Book (New York: Seabury Press, 1972), 245.

of presence have identified in the indeterminate animal a model for humanness-in-flux: from Nietzsche's re(discovery) of the animal body as a spur to a Dionysian philosophy, to Heidegger's meditations on the animal as being "poor in world",[113] to Derrida's "autobiographical animals,"[114] the animal has taken on yet another figurative role: as a trace for what humanness evades. The animal exists outside language, exists outside time, and exists outside familiar thought. The animal is instinct, authenticity, and to many of us (and to all automobile marketers): freedom itself. This relational definition is so pervasive in Western thought that as David Clark puts it, "if the thought of 'the animal' is in question, so too, inevitably, is the thought of 'the human' with which it has always been inextricably bound."[115]

Akira Lippit, in *The Electric Animal: Towards a Rhetoric of Wildlife*, charts the semiotics and metaphysics of the animal in the 20th century, the century in which the animal started to rapidly disappear from the human world. Darwin's establishment of the human as another species in the 19th century—in a very real sense completing the 'idea of mankind' that, as Foucault points out, did not exist before the 18th century—and the rise of anthropology and sociology as disciplines, were all marked by an increased scientific interest in animals. As urbanization accelerated in the 20th century, animals became increasingly abstract presences, wildlife conservation became relevant, zoos started to appear. This cultural process of mourning the animal and retaining a connection to animality extended from the animal and into new forms of mediation. Lippit argues that "modernity can be defined by the disappearance of wildlife from humanity's habitat and by the reappearance of the same in humanity's reflections on itself: in philosophy, psychoanalysis, and technological media such as the telephone, film, and radio."[116] This process, Lippit posits, turns animals into something "spectral" something "undead," experienced more like cinema than like life. And, indeed, Lippit makes the intriguing case for not just cinema's privileged role in documenting the disappearance of animals— literally and figuratively—but cinema as a kind of supplement to the experience of the modern subject that *replaces* the animal as the counterpoint to the human.

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[113] Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, Studies in Continental Thought (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 177.

[114] Jacques Derrida, "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 2.

[115] David Clark, "On Being 'the Last Kantian in Nazi Germany': Dwelling with Animals after Levinas," in *Animal Acts: Configuring the Human in Western History*, ed. Jennifer Ham and Matthew Senior (New York: Routledge, 1997), 168.

[116] Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 4.

It is precisely in answer to the question *how do humans differ from animals?,* that Jonas embarks on his image theory. He had already reimagined metaphysics in the context of cellular life, and then vegetative immediacy, and then animal motility. Just as Herzog is obsessed with Chauvet because of what it might reveal about the emergence of humanity, Jonas uses image-making to make a case for the "specific difference" (157) of the human. Both Herzog and Jonas, in their own way, are picking up the humanist goal of looking for our shared, trans-animal, essence—in Jonas' project, to make the case for our unique responsibility; in Herzog's, to reassure that humans still have some place in the world (though it may not be the one we hope for). Jonas admits at the outset of the essay that the threshold of what we call 'the human'—the decisive step into a new degree of mediacy to our environment—could be identified through the appearance of rationality or mathematics or language. But he chose to pursue the discovery of images instead. By making this choice, he profits from the curious, reflexive ontology of images, narrows the gap between human and animal, and sets the stage for later essays that explore how the humanness he identified in images extends both out into the world and more deeply inwards.

Jonas' goal in his brief discussion of animality in *The Phenomenon of Life* is not to imbue animals with subjectivity, nor rights, nor to note the trace of the animal in our own subjectivity. His ontology of the animal, in this case, is not meant to liberate. And though later in his philosophy, in the decades that follow this work, Jonas will write about human responsibility to animals and on the question of suffering, his goal in *The Phenomenon of Life* is to create the conditions whereby we may begin to recognize the stakes of the formation of an "image of man." His model, we note, is still a hierarchical one, one in which the human sets off on its own and moves beyond the animal. For Jonas, after the animal, beyond the image, and through the discovery of reality, we encounter ethics. While it's true that by eliding the question of animal rationality he reshapes the question of what constitutes human essence as something more in line with a post-modern evasiveness around questions of essence, he also removes one of the most classically important means by which we define the human capacity for virtue: the human ability to, rationally, transcend our 'base', animal desires. Jonas has not completely removed the importance of rationality from his metaphysics of the human, but he has altered the image of the animal as irrational, instead positing trans-rational desire as inherent to the image of self-reflection. The brute binary of rational/irrational is insufficient when arguing for a pan-

organic metaphysics. As intriguing as that may be, in the absence of a traditional concept of rationality we are faced with an important question: how does an environmental ethics progress without a normative goal for the human, without the traditional humanist project of pursuing human perfectibility?

This question, of course, is at the center of all biocentric humanism and everything it has inherited from secular humanism and its discontents. In the next chapter, we will revisit this question in the context of a children's story and the odd figure of the human at its center—a figure both material and cinematic, fixable and phantastic, revelatory and anti-climactic. It is a story about origins, and the faith that these origins will reveal something about ourselves, and it ends with many hopeful claims, not the least of which is that if "we wish to understand cinema," a fictionalized Georges Méliès says to a group of adoring cinephiles, "we must study cave paintings."

CHAPTER 2:
IMMEDIATE DREAMS IN *HUGO*

Introduction: A Trip From the Moon

Hugo begins with a virtuoso special effects shot, a trick shot (if such a term applies to a film where every frame has been scrubbed by CGI), high above Paris one wintry, cinematic morning in 1931. We've barely surveyed the city when the camera begins to descend towards the glassed cover platform of the Montparnasse train station, swoops swiftly passed curls of steam and buttoned-down travelers—who take no notice—and then, rising, aims for the grand clock face at the end of the arcade, where—we may begin to notice—there are a pair of bright blue eyes

peeking out from the outline of a missing #4. This is director Martin Scorsese's homage to perhaps the most famous image in cinema history: the rocket ship stuck in the eye of the moon from Georges Méliès' *Le voyage dans la lune* (1902), an image that will play a surprising catalyzing role in this story of an orphaned boy seeking his place in a virtual world. Rocket ship/movie camera. Moon/moon-faced boy. Clock face/boy's face. Real world/movie world. Dreams/images. These lapidary signals will mark the path that Hugo (Asa Butterfield), an orphaned boy abandoned in the train station, must follow to move beyond his hopelessly lonely world.

Fig. 17: The first and last frames of the opening shot

To escape the world of *Hugo*, however—to follow this film from high above, to Hugo's eye, and out of this cinematic world again—is even more circuitous than the route the slapstick scientists in Méliès' 1902 film follow. Over the course of *Hugo*, and into the world of Hugo, arrives the famous Méliès image mentioned above: first existing only in the boy's imagination, described by his father; then as a drawing, plotted by an elaborate machine called an automaton; then, he will see the same image drawn by its creator, Georges Méliès; then he will see a still frame of the image in a book, and then, finally, Hugo will see the cinematic 'original' image, projected on a home cinema screen. This confrontation with the origin of the image, however, is not an end to the

journey, nor is it properly a new beginning. The cinema image that is circulated and mutated in this world of the film presents a kind of portal, a hermeneutic trapdoor that promises some hidden knowledge about the *idea* of cinema itself and how cinema might be used, for expressive if not redemptive purposes, as a *figure* in the 'post-cinema' (and the 'post-ontology') age.

Fig. 18: The famous frame, hand-tinted, from Méliès' *La voyage dans la lune* (1902)

While anxiety around 'post-cinema' might seem like an odd topic for a kids' film, it makes much more sense in the context of director Martin Scorsese's involvement with The Film Foundation, the nonprofit organization he established in 1990 dedicated to film restoration, preservation, and the development of cinema-related teaching curricula. "Half of all films made before 1950 are lost forever," the front page of the Foundation's website proclaims. "Movies touch our hearts, awaken our vision, and change the way we see things. They take us to other places. They open doors and minds. Movies are the memories of our lifetime. We need to keep them alive."[117] Finding a bankable children's fable of film preservation might seem like a tall order, but the best-selling long-form picture book *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*—by Brian Selznik (grand-nephew of Hollywood producer David O. Selznik)—fit Scorsese's needs perfectly. The book tells the story of our eponymous hero living alone in the walls of the Montparnasse train station, abandoned by his drunkard uncle, thieving pastries when he can,

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[117] http://www.film-foundation.org, accessed November 21, 2017.

evading the martinet station inspector (played by Sacha Baron Cohen in the movie) daily, and driven by a quiet compulsion to keep the station's many clocks in working order. Hugo finds himself in an antagonistic relationship with a sullen toymaker named Papa Georges (Ben Kingsley) also working at the station, and soon discovers, with the help of the toymaker's god-daughter and ward Isabelle (Chloë Grace Morentz), that the toymaker is in fact the long-forgotten cinema pioneer and genius Georges Méliès. Hugo pursues his own need to understand the death of his father, a death that very obliquely connects to the life of Méliès, and inadvertently brings the ex-filmmaker to the attention of a film scholar shocked to discover that Méliès is still alive. The story ends with the triumphant rediscovery of Méliès' films by an adoring audience, and the improvised adoption of Hugo into the Méliès family. For the most part, Scorsese's film closely hews to the book, though, as we will see, there are significant divergences.

The connection between Hugo's journey and Scorsese's activism was not lost on critics in the popular press, even if some of the comments were, like those by Karina Longworth in *The Village Voice*, a bit peevish: "As much as *Hugo* is a sop to the industry's interests, it's also a PSA for Scorsese's personal cause."[118] Self-serving motives were on full-display during the publicity of the film, especially when *Avatar* director James Cameron joined Scorsese for part of the promotional junket.[119] The two present quite a contrast: the older man in the role of the principled guardian of film culture; the younger owning the major patents on the technology that makes it possible to convert old movies into 3-D (and invent new revenue streams along the way). Cameron, for his part, was offering full-throated praise for what he saw as the unveiling of the next big breakthrough in digital 3-D technology: the emergence of *artistry*. While critics might have been reserved about calling *Hugo* a 'breakthrough', few were troubled by what Longworth identified as a contradiction between the aesthetics of big budget filmmaking and a moral of cultural preservation, and the film found its way on to many top ten year-end lists. Roger Ebert, a long-time 3-D skeptic, praised Scorsese's restraint and intelligence in deploying

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[118] Karina Longworth, "A Boy, His Toy, and the History of Cinema in *Hugo*", review of *Hugo*, by Martin Scorsese, *The Village Voice*, November 23, 2011. http://www.villagevoice.com/film/a-boy-his-toy-and-the-history-of-cinema-in-hugo-6433543.

[119] Jay A. Fernandez, "Q&A: James Cameron and Martin Scorsese," *The Hollywood Reporter*, November 16, 2011, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/hugo-martin-scorsese-james-cameron-261940.

the technology.[120] In the *Guardian*, J. Hoberman contrasted *Hugo* to another work of early-cinema nostalgia, *The Artist* (released the same year), calling Scorsese's film "an altogether more complicated piece of work—overtly cinephilic and historically self-conscious."[121] This unusual popular conversation about the nature of the cinematic medium followed the film into more esoteric and academic conversations: from Phil Coldiron's musings on the unique status of the digital in the film,[122] to Thomas Elsaesser's reflections on the nature of our appetite for digital reality.[123] In short, by stumping for cinema, *Hugo* prompts us to ask what cinema *is*—and, by implication, whether it is *worth* saving. And this small cultural flourishing of self-reflexivity around the film, to my mind, speaks volumes about the medium itself and what we might still want from it. Despite the seemingly straight-forward happy-ending of the film—orphaned boy and broken man both come to terms with the past—the disparate parts of *Hugo* don't quite fit together and the paradoxes raised by the film are more complex than simple self-serving moralizing.

During Méliès' brief introduction to the gala retrospective of his work—the penultimate scene of the film—the rejuvenated filmmaker offers heartfelt thanks directly to the little boy now sitting in the audience: "I am standing before you tonight because of one very brave young man, who saw a broken machine and against all odds he fixed it. It was the kindest magic trick that ever I've seen." This speech will most likely strike viewers as either wishful or patently false. Hugo's part to play in the transformation of obscure and broken filmmaker into feted celebrity, and orphaned boy into loved family member, is ambiguous at best. Indeed, when Méliès refers to a "broken machine" fixed by Hugo he is neither clearly referring to himself nor speaking entirely metaphorically: the inciting event that brought these two to this theatre together is the literal repair of a broken automaton Hugo inherited from his father. Hugo's kindness, as we will see, is based not in empathy for a fellow broken human—not in the conventional sense, anyway—but because of the young boy's philosophy of 'purpose' and his obsession with the mystery of the automaton. So, what are we to make of this world of Hugo

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[120] Roger Ebert, review of *Hugo*, by Martin Scorsese, *rogerbert.com*, November 21, 2011. https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/hugo-2011.
[121] J. Hoberman, "*Hugo* and the Magic of Film Trickery," *The Guardian*, February 24, 2012, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2012/feb/24/hugo-martin-scorsese-oscars-georges-melies.
[122] Phil Coldiron, review of *Hugo*, by Martin Scorsese, *Slant*, November 22, 2011. https://www.slantmagazine.com/film/review/hugo.
[123] Thomas Elsaesser, "The 'Return' of 3-D: On Some of the Logics and Genealogies of the Image in the Twenty-First Century," *Critical Inquiry* 39, no. 2 (Winter 2013).

Cabret where a young boy's bravery is the product of an ambiguous and private kind of compulsion? Is this simply a flaw in the story or does it speak to another kind of internal coherence structuring this fictional world? Acts of loneliness and compulsion bringing about heroic ends are not new to Scorsese's cinema certainly: think of Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver* (1976) or Jake La Motta in *Raging Bull* (1980). *Hugo* is Scorsese's most deliberately meta-cinematic narrative work—moreseo than even his Howard Hughes' biopic *The Aviator* (2004)—and over the course of this odd, little-big-budget film, an inchoate theory of cinema itself emerges.

Obsession, purpose, nature, the mechanical: none of these concepts are foreign to the history of cinema theory,[124] but in *Hugo* they achieve something of a hodge-podge worldview that is, in the end, a long way from, say, Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929)—another work powered by cinema and obsession. Because *Hugo*, unlike Vertov's ground-breaking work, is self-consciously perched at the end of cinema (or, at least, at the transition point between analog and digital film) and not the beginning, the sense of the nature of cinema presented by the film—and the vitality of obsession—is tweaked more towards to the eschatological than the generative. Through its metacinematic world-building and the themes it stages there, *Hugo* attempts to reconcile life and dead media: to discover what cinema *can be* in order to save it, and to recover for the medium both a sense of destiny and liberation.

Death, Cinema, and a Broken Man

A minor mystery seemingly unsolved in this film is *what caused the fire in the museum that killed Hugo's father?* and was it the work of God, a random accident, or was it improperly stored celluloid film? I'm not sure why the latter occurred to me when I first saw *Hugo*. Maybe it's the odd film-reel like gear churning in the medium shot of the moment when Hugo's father hears a noise and makes the fateful decision to head to the museum's stairwell to investigate. Maybe it is the ubiquity of flame imagery throughout the film: Méliès threatens to burn Hugo's notebook, the scene of Hugo's flashback to his father's death begins with Hugo striking a

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[124] Obsession as a uniquely cinematic pathology finds full expression in the cinema of Alfred Hitchcock and pyschonalytic inflected film theory, including the work of Christian Metz. The question of the 'purpose of cinema' is a central question of early film theory, including Arnheim and Eisenstein, theorists who also routinely ask the related question: what is the nature of cinema? The mechanicalness of cinema is central to theorists ranging from Jean Epstein to Stanley Cavell.

match, Hugo cradles candles throughout the film, and when Hugo's uncle comes to 'adopt him' he appears in a puff of cigarette smoke. Later in the film, we will see Méliès set fire to his own studio. Perhaps, the nature of the medium is *combustibility*. Maybe it's just my own taste for poetic irony (and, indeed, in this film the idea of 'fate' and 'poetic irony' are not far apart). But if cinema is to be both the redeemer and betrayer of Hugo's fate, it might explain why the depths of Hugo's orphanage seem so curiously inescapable.

Fig. 19: Hugo's father (Jude Law) hears a noise late at night in the museum

Is *Hugo* the most death-obsessed of all children's films? It certainly holds its own up against the child-centered violence of *Grimm's Fairytales*, and features at least two orphans more than the average Disney animated film.[125] There is also the long shadow of the First World War over the film, a shadow into which we learn has fallen a florist's brother, a station inspector's leg (and manhood), all of Méliès' joy, and "youth and hope" itself. But it is the death of cinema forecast here 90 years before the fact—the film's ostensible meta-preoccupation—that mixes a different tint into the pall.

The death of cinema in *Hugo* seems so extremely fraught because cinema in this film is associated with so *many* aspects of life. Throughout the film we hear that "movies are our special place" and that Méliès' studio is "where dreams are made." We learn that movies are like "seeing your daydreams in the middle of the day," that they are "great adventures," "magic," "illusion," "the world of imagination," partly divine (see Figure 20), and are "the invention of dreams." Of course, in 1931, cinema was nowhere near dying, but its first practitioners were getting older, silent cinema was now obsolete, and its first masterpieces were bursting into flame.

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[125] In *Hugo* our eponymous hero and his friend Isabelle are both orphans, and we will learn near the end of the film that Hugo's nemesis, Gustav the station inspector, is also an orphan. Gustav makes it his business to provide the offscreen orphanage with a steady supply of pastry thieves caught in his station. And, of course, film preservationists call films unlikely to be preserved due to "clear copyright holders or commercial potential" *orphans*. c.f. Timothy Corrigan and Patricia White, *The Film Experience: An Introduction* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004), 391–98.

When the film scholar René Tabard[126] (Michael Stuhlbarg) encounters Hugo and Isabelle, he tells them that Méliès died in the war; we learn later that, for Méliès, death came *after* the war. After putting his heart and soul into creating a profitable business making fantastical shorts, in Méliès words, "Then the war came, and youth and hope were at an end. The world had no time for magic tricks and movie shows. The returning soldiers had seen so much of reality that they were bored with my films. Tastes had changed. But I had not changed with them. No one wanted my movies anymore." Méliès then burned all his old sets and costumes and sold his old films to a company that melted them down to make heels for women's shoes (an image of Méliès trapped in his toy booth watching well-heeled train passengers trotting upon his life's work is deliciously cruel). This is a sad story of changing fortunes, certainly, but Méliès' disappointment—and his almost self-aggrandizing sulking—creates a deeply flawed equivalency between the horrors of the First World War and one man's misfortune. Why is Méliès "broken"? Why does he suffer an almost paralyzing fear of the past?

Fig. 20: The fictional mural in the fictional Film Academy Library. It's one part an image of a Zeus-like figure gathering cosmic lightning in one hand and projecting cinema from the other, and one part Michelangelo's fresco for the Sistine Chapel, depicting Man reaching for God.

Méliès' grief, frankly, seems out of proportion to what has transpired—his sense of extreme loss makes sense only if something more than his own legacy is at stake.

` As Méliès tells the story, he began his career as a magician. Very successful at it, he had time to tinker with inventions, even building the elaborate automaton that Hugo's father would later rescue. Méliès admits the automaton was very precious to him, and that he poured his "heart and soul" into it. The automaton is an intriguing choice for a magician. While an elaborate automaton is indeed fantastical, unlike the illusion of a floating woman above a packed theater, the open chest of the machine invites a patient scrutiny: it is a magic trick that announces itself as a trick. It is also, intriguingly, an example of a kind of 'permanent trick'. Méliès' theatrical performances were necessarily transitory—a passing moment of sleight of hand that paid off in a sense of awe for his audience. The automaton is a

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[126] Named after the riot-inciting schoolboy in Jean Vigo's *Zéro de conduite* (1933)

trick that can be experienced, stopped, rewound, and experienced again. It should not surprise us, then, that Méliès—after being introduced to the Lumiere brothers' new cinematograph at a carnival—would be willing to scavenge parts from his beloved automaton to build his own cinema camera. We see him prying a Maltese cross—the five-sided gear that makes the intermittent start and stop of the film frame possible—out of the automaton and using it in his camera. The implication here is that Méliès' "heart and soul" was transferred from one machine to another.[127]

But, nonetheless, what is at stake is the dream that a magic trick might be 'permanent'—a fantasy of preserving not just the means and procedure of the trick, but the actual moment of the trick itself. As a magician, we'd think that Méliès would be comfortable with the fact that fads and tastes move on—transitoriness is part of his industry; it is sustained only by the keeping of secrets. But in cinema, as presaged by the automaton, we find an invention that allows magic to repeat, to be captured, to be shared, and to be kept. There is a sense that the transfer of Méliès' heart and soul must also accompany the creation of *dreams*—the other metaphor linked closely to cinema in this film. Through Tabard's history of cinema, *The Invention of Dreams*, the children learn that Méliès was the first to realize that movies could be used to show more than reality and delight the eye: the movies could "capture dreams." With this in mind, perhaps we can

Fig. 21: The Maltese cross that Méliès removes from the automaton to create his own camera

explain Méliès' soul-sickness another way: Méliès is not just one of the first artists to ever work in the medium of cinema; he is, in the para-cinema-history of *Hugo*, also one of the first to be outlived by it. In the figure of Méliès we have not only the portrait of a frustrated and emasculated artist; we have a portrait of what's it like to get old when your dream-life has been drained out onto celluloid and when you believe that celluloid all but destroyed. In a sense, Méliès was invented along with cinema. When that cinema is destroyed, Méliès too is orphaned; his dreams, spent.

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[127] One of the film's several odd screenwriting choices is evident here. We learn in this flashback that it was Méliès himself who 'broke' his automaton in order to create cinema. It seems bizarre to me that the fixing of the automaton by Hugo wouldn't necessitate the reverse: a discovery of a cinema camera and the scavenging of parts to repair the automaton.

Hugo's own loss of his father and mother is so shattering that his grief exceeds representation—and it is through Hugo's sense of loss, not Méliès', that the film endeavours to represent the horror of both a (contemporary) disappearing film culture and a (contemporary) disappearing dream culture. *Hugo* is full of the expected representations of Death and Loss (tombs, statues, limited lighting, bright 'spiritual' lights, ominous music, urban decay), but none of these are adequate. Instead, these fugitive shards of catastrophe concentrate, unpredictably, in the automaton. In this regard, the automaton in *Hugo* takes its place alongside two other cinematic avatars in this study: the monkey-ghost in *Uncle Boonmee* (as we will see), and the albino crocodile (merged with the digital camera) in *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*. All three, as figures for a new cinema, merge a certain degree of fascination with repulsion, and all three cross the mechanical/organic boundary. And, perhaps most importantly, into these avatars converge, semiotically, various forms of death and transformation.

Fig. 22: Candlelit vs moonlit. The first view of the automaton and last image of the film: from the warm glow of sentimentalized and mysterious memory to the cool clarity of a knowing present

It is this complex figure of the automaton—the very image that ends the film—on which I want to focus this analysis. Cinema and the automaton are able to help Hugo escape his fate because they present a different relationship to death by offering a different conception of life. It's not that there is more death in *Hugo* than other children's movies, or most movies for that matter—but there may be more compulsion. This compulsion gives birth to an intriguing philosophy of life that is both aided and confounded in this film by cinema itself.

Hugo, the Automaton

We first see the automaton as a drawing in the notebook of Hugo's father. As Méliès scans it, the old filmmaker suddenly stops, stunned. He mutters, "ghosts," and then flips through the

remaining pages, revealing several consecutive drawings of the automaton; as he flips faster, we see a flipbook-movie of the automaton turning its head towards us. This is not just our first hint of the connection between cinema and the automaton, but is also, upon reflection, an insight into Hugo's father who was so mesmerized by the possibility of seeing the automaton move again that in lieu of fixing it, he animated it on paper.

When we see the actual automaton for the first time in the film, it is after Hugo has sullenly returned to his garret on threat of having his notebook burned. He lights a candle and sits in front of the empty eyes and teapot face of the little machine. It is not easy to identify scale when it comes to this automaton—is it human-sized or much smaller?—because Scorsese chooses to often shoot the automaton in a medium close up, or in a medium shot, all alone in

Fig. 23: The automaton in the notebook. As Méliès flips through the pages, the consecutive drawings of the automaton makes it appear that it is turning its head—a kind of proto cinema. Scorsese's editor, Thelma Shoonmaker, makes a nice move here and cuts 90 degrees to Méliès' profile to show his shock, mirroring in 'our' movie the turn of the automaton's head in the 'mini-movie'.

space. Hugo is often shot the same way. As Hugo regards the automaton while cradling his candle, a blue-white moon-like light flickering from some great gear turning offscreen brushstrokes the face of the automaton, clearly invoking the light of a film projector. But instead of projecting a film, this light and this little machine project a flashback and we dissolve to an amber lit scene of Hugo and his father. This revelatory power of machines is revisited, later in the film, when a movie projector—the one that shows us *Le voyage dans la lune*—will also incite a flashback.

Hugo's flashback begins with the first time he laid eyes on the automaton—badly tarnished and dressed in a child's ragged shirt and jacket. The automaton had been rescued from

the attic of the museum[128] where Hugo's father discovered it ("abandoned" Hugo's father says in disbelief—yes, the automaton was orphaned, too). When Hugo's father pulls open the automaton's shirt to reveal the skeleton chest of the automaton stuffed with clockwork, Hugo steps back repulsed. But he soon leans in closer—"Can we fix it?" Hugo's father dies in a fire before they can, Hugo's uncle Claude arrives abruptly to take the boy away to a new life as a clock keeper in the Montparnasse train station, and the flashback ends with a shot of Hugo standing beside a lonely grave and Uncle Claude muttering (in voiceover), "time is everything. Time is everything."

The automaton seems less like Hugo's companion and more like a thing he needs to study, a thing he needs to interpret—a thing that holds a secret about Hugo himself. Later in the film and during a dream sequence, the automaton will completely merge with Hugo's body. But the transition of the automaton, for Hugo, from curiosity, to metaphor, to symbol (in which the figure is perceived as being *literally* of the same stuff as what it figures) is complex and relies on a quality of the automaton not immediately obvious. When Hugo discovers that Isabelle, Méliès' granddaughter, is in possession of the heart-shaped key he needs to wind the automaton, he invites her into his secret space in the walls of the train station to witness the re-animation of the little machine. But Hugo pauses. He says to Isabelle, "I know it's silly. But I think it's going to be a message from my father." She urges him on.

The machine's jeweled gears start to turn and its elaborate music-box chest starts to click and pump. The head moves, the hand moves, and the children are transfixed. It turns out that the automaton is not a logographic but a pictographic machine: it doesn't write; it draws. Hugo is understandably distraught, at first, when the machine begins to 'work' and instead of drawing words it begins plotting seemingly random scratches on the page. Because Hugo is not sure what the machine is 'supposed' to do, he can't be sure of the success or failure of his repair job—its quick meaningless squiggles are a neatly horrific expression of inscrutable malfunction. Hugo slumps into a chair and sobs softly to Isabelle: "You don't understand. I thought if I could fix it I wouldn't be so alone." But the machine isn't broken at all; what Hugo is witnessing is a

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[128] The museum attic where Hugo's father discovered the automaton gets a brief scene in the flashback. This scene is interesting for two reasons: 1) it of course couldn't be part of Hugo's memory (some of it must have been imagined by him), and 2) the attic, a kind of giant storage space for artifacts not ready for display, is set-designed as a wonderful mixed-media mishmash of Egyptian hieroglyphics, orthodox tombs, and da Vinci era astronomical equipment. This is quite a vision of where old cinema paraphernalia might be hiding and, potentially, a testament to the vibrancy of Hugo's imagination.

different way of thinking about message transmission from one world to the next. The creation of the message does not proceed in the order of a telegraph, in the linearity of words, but in the non-linearity of an illegible machine-friendly garbling of an image so it can be translated from music-box spindle 'recording device' to points on a page. What he is witnessing is the unspooling of an algorithm of mass-production. In other words, he is witnessing something digital.

When the image finally coalesces, Hugo and Isabelle gasp. It's the picture of a rocket ship in the eye of the moon, an image (we learned three scenes previously) that Hugo's father described as the indelible image of the first movie he ever saw. At last we have a payoff for all the ominous mystery slathered upon the automaton. But how could the automaton look into the soul of Hugo's father and divine this image? Or, did Hugo's father plant this image in the machine for Hugo to find? We, the audience, are meant to believe for the moment—as Hugo and Isabelle do—that they have stumbled upon a machine that is sensitive to fate, that is able to look into minds and hearts, that is capable of crossing seemingly uncrossable boundaries. But the machine is not done. The final touch?—a maker's mark upon the 'daydream' that Hugo's father remembered so well, and the most potent clue for the mystery now set before Hugo and Isabelle: the signature of George Méliès. "That's Papa Georges' name!" Isabelle exclaims.

Of course, we learn later that it is all just an elaborate coincidence. But the fact that the machine does not have any special powers is, in a sense, irrelevant—Hugo sees himself in the machine, and the machine as a fragment of life through which coincidence flows into order. We get the sense of how circuitously lost Hugo is in his own process of hermeneutics, in the process of making sense of the world as it is given, during two uncharacteristically emotional outbursts. I judge them uncharacteristic, because for the first hour or so of the film, Hugo is guarded and uncommunicative—so much so, that the plot hinges on it (Hugo is surrounded by trustworthy and sympathetic adults he is incapable of trusting with his secrets). The first outburst of feeling (though still very restrained), is to Mama Jeanne (Helen McCrory) when she insists that Hugo must leave her apartment immediately after he and Isabelle come looking for answers upon receiving the 'message' from Hugo's father. Hugo pleads, "My father and I worked hard to fix this [automaton]. This is all I have left of him. I need to know what this means. Please." And, at the climax of the film, when Hugo has nearly escaped, the Station Inspector grabs Hugo still clutching the swaddled automaton. Gustav—after checking to see if the boy is okay—growls,

"We'll let the orphanage deal with you." "No I don't belong there!" Hugo yells. "Then where do you belong? A child has to belong somewhere." "No, listen to me, please please listen to me. You don't understand! You have to let me go. *I* don't understand why my father died. I don't understand why I'm alone. This is my only chance. To work. *You* should understand." Hugo looks down at Gustav's mechanical leg (the biological one was lost in the war) and a flicker of recognition passes over the station inspector's face before it hardens. Méliès saves the day: "I do!" he calls from across the station, meaning, "*I* understand!" Méliès finally asserts what Hugo has longed to hear, sealing the intervention with a promise: "Monsieur! This child belongs to me."

It's a touching moment, this sudden overlapping of so many secret centers. Most importantly, in his frantic speech to Gustav, we get a glimpse into Hugo's quiet motivations. What does he mean when he says, "this is my only chance"? What exactly does returning the automaton to Méliès mean for Hugo? *We* aren't meant to know for sure, but it's a reminder that what makes Hugo an appealing character is not just his sensitivity and resourcefulness, but the poignancy of his determined imagination to apply reason to an irrational and arbitrary world. From his reference point of orderly clockwork, he interprets chaos in the world not as a figure of ultimate decay, but as a sign of a kind of magic—an external and unpredictable force that must be quietly held at bay through gears, and oiling, and winding. Hugo reads signs, and reading the signs, he concocts what seems to be, to him, a sensible strategy.

The translation by a precocious and sensitive child of the irrationalities of an inscrutable adult world into the easily explainable logic of a magical child's world is a staple in children's films (e.g. *Miracle on 34th Street*, 1947; *The Secret Garden*, 1993). In these kinds of narratives, the child's world (Lynne Ramsay's *Ratcatcher*, 1999, is a brilliant subversion) is often sanctioned by a permissive adult who recognizes in the putative purity of the child's experience an authentic—though still ironic—alternative to understanding the world, and experienced as 'authentic' because it re-enforces the adult's own sense of the integrity of their 'inner child' granted exceptional perception.[129] But the magical world of *Hugo* is founded on something

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[129] In retrospect, it's no surprise that three of the four ontological films in this study feature children and the representation of childhood as major interventions in their respective 'ontological debates' (*Uncle Boonmee* also includes a father/son relationship and a child's footprint makes an important cameo in *Cave*). I'd imagine that we could go quite far investigating the correlation between 'thinking' about nature in film and 'thinking' about childhood, and discover a rich cinematic history linking the two. Sequences in *The Secret Garden* (1993, dir. Agneiska Holland); *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe* (2005, dir. Andrew Adamson), and *Spirited Away*

unusual: not the adult-sanctioned metaphysical/symbolic legitimacy of the child's 'way of seeing', nor even the magic of storytelling (a staple trope in kid's films like *The Neverending Story*, 1984), but a human-transcending materialist philosophy. In his solitude, Hugo is faced with the possibility that not everyone has a home in the world. He counters this with a belief in the coherence of the world drawn from clockwork and machines. For this to make sense, either Hugo must ignore the overwhelming evidence that the world is full of pain, despair, inefficiencies, and waste and is therefore *not* a machine, or he must accept that this world-machine needs something else to function. Fortunately, for Hugo, a mechanical solution already exists to exactly this problem.

The Inventions of Purpose

In 1788, just outside Smethwick, England, inventor James Watt unveils a new version of the Newcomen steam engine. Widely regarded as one of the earliest and most important events of the Industrial Revolution, a less well-known (yet instantly recognizable) auxiliary invention unveiled that day is perhaps even more significant—at least for the study of ontology. [130] Steam engines up to that time were both unreliable and dangerous: sudden and unpredictable power loss was common, and exploding boilers were deadly. Watt claimed that his patented 'flyball governor'—two balls on shafts hinged to a vertical spindle spinning atop the engine—solved all these problems. The system works like this: as the engine speeds up, so does the spindle, and propelled by centrifugal force, the balls fly outwards; the faster the spindle turns, the higher the balls will rise. The rising and lowering of the balls is rigged to the closing and opening of the engine throttle: thus, as the engine speeds up, the balls will rise and thus

FIG. 4.—*Governor and Throttle-Valve.*
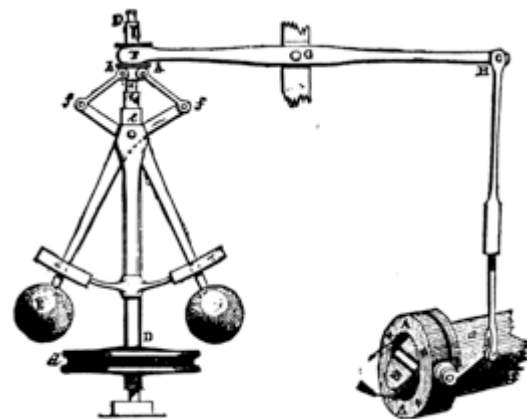
Fig. 24: A flyball governor schematic

(2001, dir. Hayao Miyazaki) all come to mind. *Stalker* and *The Tree of Life* present almost impossibly complicated examples. In *The Imperative of Responsibility*, Jonas bases his entire metaphysics of 'responsibility' on the parent/child relationship.

[130] Technically, Watt's iconic flyball governor, though patented by him, was in use, in some form, a hundred years earlier in windmills. Watt never actually claimed to have invented the system.

slow the engine; as the engine slows, the balls will fall and thus throttle up the engine—gently, but with astonishingly precise sensitivity, equilibrium is achieved, and the engine is able to deliver constant power. With this development, Watt not only exponentially increased the efficiency of his engine, he also helped pioneer a new kind of machine. Because the flyball governor operates the steam engine automatically, without the need for human intervention, the system can be seen as an early mechanical form of artificial intelligence. Watt's steam engine was controlled by a feedback system; his machine had become self-regulating and, in a very real sense, responsive to its environment.

During a scene at the center of the second act of *Hugo*, we see a flyball governor spinning in the foreground of several shot-reverse shots showing Hugo and Isabelle discussing their recent discovery that Papa Georges is in fact the great cinema pioneer Georges Méliès. It's an unmotivated and likely unconscious bit of set design—flyball governors like these have never been used in clockwork—a choice that taps into a deep set of cultural associations (steam engines, early 20th century modernity, Lang's *Metropolis*, 1927, perhaps). The flyball governor is simply part of the whirligig paraphernalia that sets the stage for the film's clearest articulation of theme. Moving to a new clock to maintenance, Hugo and Isabelle's discussion turns from the logistical to the philosophic. Hugo notices the bookseller Monsieur Labisse (Christopher Lee) from his secret amber-lit place of observation inside the clock, talking to a customer beside a stack of books. Hugo tells Isabelle:

      HUGO
Monsieur Labisse gave me a book the other night.

      ISABELLE
He's always doing that. Sending books to a good home.
That's what he calls it.

      HUGO
He's got real...*purpose.*

      ISABELLE
What do you mean?

HUGO
Everything has a purpose. Even machines. Clocks tell the time.
Trains take you places. They do what they're meant to do. Like
Monsieur Labisse. Maybe that's why broken machines make me so
sad. They can't do what they're meant to do. Maybe it's like
that with people. If you lose your purpose, it's like you're
broken.

                ISABELLE
Like Papa Georges.

                HUGO
Maybe we can fix him.

                ISABELLE
Is that your purpose? Fixing things?

                HUGO
I don't know. It's what my father
did.

                ISABELLE
I wonder what my purpose is?

                HUGO
I don't know.

                ISABELLE
Maybe if I'd known my parents, I'd
know.
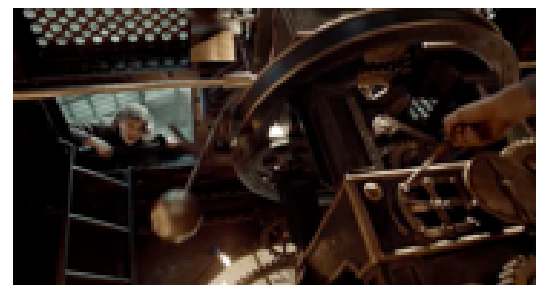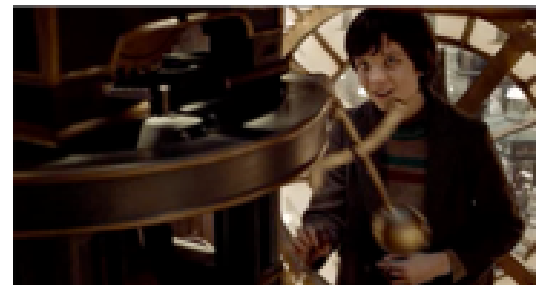
Fig. 25: A spinning flyball governor sets editing
tempo in the middle of the scene

                HUGO
Come with me.

INT. THE CLOCKTOWER. NIGHT. *Hugo leads Isabelle to the clocktower at the top of the train station, the location we first saw at the end of the pre-credit sequence and where we imagine Hugo has spent a great deal of time contemplating the city. We see* PARIS below, lit up at night, *and* the MOON.

          HUGO
Right after my father died, I'd come here a lot. I'd imagine the whole world was one big machine. Machines never come with any extra parts you know. They always come with the exact amount they need. So I figured: if the whole world was one big machine, there couldn't be any extra parts. I had to be here for some reason. And that means that you have to be here for some reason, too.

ISABELLE smiles and slowly takes HUGO's hand.

Deconstructing the extant philosophizing of a children's film is bound to be disappointing—especially if we concentrate on the dialogue alone—but my intuition is that if we follow the metaphysical implications of this little conversation we can get at my confusion around the image of the automaton in this film and understand the kind of generational or historical tension it might be meant to ameliorate (in the form of an embedded moral on film preservation, perhaps). We can also better understand what has happened, for the first time in the film, to allow Hugo to imagine a different way of being that is *responsive* to his environment.

Hugo makes the point that purposes are important and that everyone has one. It is also asserted that if we know our parents (i.e. our origins) we can derive said purpose. This assertion is made on the premise that the world is itself a machine made up of smaller machines and there are no non-essential parts in a machine so everything—and everyone—must have a purpose. It is important to note here that Hugo is not suggesting that each of us must invent our purpose; by noting that the world itself is a successfully functioning machine, each of us *already* has a

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purpose, we just need to *acknowledge* what that purpose is. *Pace* Hugo, we are all broken until we discover our larger purpose, our destiny, until we see how we fit within a larger plan. The role of our free will to work in harmony with that purpose, or to work against it, is beyond Hugo's philosophy (for some important reasons).

This philosophic position, or versions of it, has a rich history. The ubiquity and power of the concept of a feedback mechanism that regulates the world can be seen clearly in the legendary paper that Alfred Russell Wallace presented at the Linnean society of London in 1858, a year before the publication of Darwin's *The Origin of the Species* (the introduction of which includes a generous thank-you to Wallace). Wallace describes *evolution* as a kind of control mechanism for all organic life:

> The action of this principle [of evolution] is exactly like that of the centrifugal governor of the steam engine, which checks and corrects any irregularities almost before they become evident; and in like manner no unbalanced deficiency in the animal kingdom can ever reach any conspicuous magnitude, because it would make itself felt at the very first step, by rendering existence difficult and extinction almost sure soon to follow.[131]

Wallace is one of history's great naturalists, but his mobilization of a mechanical analogy here has the effect of reducing the progress of life to something quite abstract: to the ebb and flow of energy, excess input smoothed out by the oiled functioning of evolution. It is a relatively antiseptic vision of biological history, one without the violence, messiness, and unfairness inherent to a model of biological change predicated on a win-at-all-costs competition for survival. Hugo inherits a version of this perspective on his own terms, and his empathetic concern with clockwork belies a poignant attraction to a conspicuous absence in this film—and the missing link in Hugo's thinking—the presence of God. There is no mention of a godlike divine clockmaker whatsoever in this film, no sense that a world where a young boy's father could be taken so arbitrarily is a world that is God bereft. In the place of God, we have the flyball governor: the notion that there are ways to build machines that can adapt to the chaos of the world. Abandoned by fate, on the edge of despair, Hugo must seek out some sign of a self-regulating system, a system that is responsive to changes in its environment, a mechanism that

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[131] Alfred Russell Wallace, "On the Tendency of Varieties to Depart Indefinitely from the Original Type," in *On Evolution: The Development of Theory of Natural Selection*, ed. Thomas F. Glick and David Kohn (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Pub., 1996), 345.

can respond to the non-mechanical, that can order raw, unknowable chaos into mechanical reality. This leads the orphaned boy to his curiously materialist philosophy and to a poignant decision: to sustain the comforting idea that the world works like a machine, Hugo will take on the role of being a flyball governor himself: first as a tender of clocks, and later as an agent in the 'fixing' of Méliès.

By the 1960s, the application of this metaphor of the flyball governor to life, as a philosophic practice, was called *cybernetics*. At the time Jonas was writing *The Phenomenon of Life*, undoubtedly the most sophisticated feedback mechanism yet devised was the self-regulated, radar-controlled torpedo. Devices like a torpedo were controlled at the time by elegantly and intricately designed clockwork servomechanisms that sensed changes in the torpedo's trajectory, speed, and orientation in the water, and made appropriate adjustments to the propulsion and stabilization. This is the technology that had put satellites in space and would soon put humans on the moon. The nearly magical, eerily sentient and organic effectiveness—based on relatively simple mechanical principles and sensor systems—of these machines offered a persuasive model for all self-regulating systems: perhaps, like the torpedo homing in on a submarine, organic life is likewise a kind of complex mechanical system built up of many simpler—and eminently understandable—mechanical systems.

A well-known post-war early example of complex system theory, Norbert Wiener's 1948 book *Cybernetics*[132] "abounds with cybernetical explanations," Jonas notes, "of human behavior, processes of thought, and sociocultural organization" (110). Jonas is highly critical of this approach. He writes, "there is a strong and, it seems, almost irresistible tendency in the human mind to interpret human functions in terms of the artifacts that take their place, and artifacts in terms of the replaced human functions" (110). He notes how the steam engine is described as a "slaving giant" and the human or animal body is a "fuel burning power machine." The danger here to philosophy is new even in the history of materialism. Cartesian dualism first radically split mechanical matter from human mind; now the "symbolism of physical science" has invaded the mental realm, now consciousness appears as epiphenomenon.

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[132] Weiner derived *cybernetics* from the Greek *kybernete*s, meaning 'to pilot'. Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics: Or, Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (New York: Wiley, 1948).

Flash forward thirty years or so from the beginnings of cybernetics, and neuroscience has become the dominant mode of understanding and manipulating the 'human machine'.[133]

Jonas intervenes by pointing out that applying the concept of 'purpose' to machines is misleading, and profoundly so when we attempt to apply a mechanized sense of purpose back upon organic life. This distinction is clearest when we consider human and mechanical failure. "Aristotle could distinguish between the mere ending and the intrinsic 'end' of a motion, a distinction without which, as he points out, death would be have to be considered the aim of human life" (113). A clock, for example, is designed (and wound) by a person with a purpose, but if the clock has any 'natural' (i.e. physical) tendency, that tendency is to eventually cease to work. Jonas sees the *apparent* purposiveness of machines as fundamentally a problem of language. "It seems that once we have abandoned the original meaning of 'purpose' as the *propositum*, that which someone sets *before* himself as the whereto of his action, we are reduced to the necessity of granting purpose to *all* action—thereby depriving the definition of all defining force" (115). 'Purpose', on this account, must refer to a successful expression of freedom to set a goal. This goal-setting is necessarily a mysterious process, and is not an expression of structure or design, or of matter itself, but comes about by the liberation of *eidos*. The organism is able to enact a purpose when it is capable of separating form and content, when it is in mediation with its environment.

The concept of freedom in Jonas' philosophy of life is absolutely essential, and it is one he explores, as we have seen, by looking at metabolism, evolution, materialism, and even image-making. The reason, of course, is that it is precisely the concept of freedom that is in the process of constantly being philosophized away: first, by dogmatic religions furthering philosophies of dualism; and now by dogmatic mechanical scientific theories inspired by materialism. It is one of the most pressing contemporary metaphysical questions: in light of the dangers of life to *itself*, what constitutes a truly sustainable organic freedom? Are we always thrust back upon the notion that it is, inescapably, the human fate *to end*. This is the difference of degrees of freedom measured by the Greek concepts of *autonomia* (acting in accordance with one's own law, from which English gets the word 'autonomy') and *automatos* (acting under one's own power, from which English gets the word 'automatic'). The former describes a state

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[133] See Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

of freedom in which it is possible *not* to act; the latter, describes being designed to act independently of external systems. Only the first imagines something eternal, some universal standard for the creation of internal laws that determine our actions from the inside out. In other words, cybernetics conflates *function* and *purpose* in order to obviate the riddle of the existence of life in a non-feeling universe: the riddle posed by the existence of a phenomenon that sets goals but has no apparent function (life for life's sake, we might say). Life is the paradoxical phenomenon that strives to replicate itself but will do so at its own expense.

      Hugo is a parable of how a young boy copes with his grief, both psychologically and practically: how a child's consciousness, on its own, processes the 'riddle of life'. Practically, he fixes the clocks in order to maintain a safe space for himself: a place away from the imprisonment of the orphanage, and a place where he can work on the automaton. His obsession with the automaton makes intuitive sense because, arguably, it grants Hugo a comforting connection to his father. But the salutary effect of that compulsion is suspect. Hugo sees the machinery that his father worked on as a sign of order in the universe. To affirm that philosophy, and in light of the very real possibility that the 'machine' is about to fail, Hugo is forced to take on the role of self-regulating machine himself. His philosophy, developed to help liberate himself emotionally from this father's death, takes the form of an obsessive replication of his father's life. This is a trap. Whatever psychological comfort might be initially gained from a cybernetic philosophy that assures that the world *does* function rationally, that the world *can* be understood, is at the expense of a broader horizon of possibilities. For cyberneticians and evolutionary scientists, of course, the notion that the world can be understood through a process of reduction and simplification is appealing because it means it can be predicted and ultimately hacked for our benefit. Despite the curious conviction in the rationality of the world he has developed, Hugo

Fig. 26: The dream within a dream

has no idea what he should *do* with this knowledge nor how to escape the cycles of compulsion that make it possible to sustain this conviction over time.

Hugo expresses these misgivings through a dream sequence. Surprisingly, it's actually two dreams—one dream inside another that together comprise one nightmare. The sequence begins with a little narrative trick: Hugo wakes up on a regular day and he sees a key on the train tracks. He jumps down to retrieve it, gets stuck, an oncoming train slams on its brakes, it derails, destroys the station, and kerlplunks to the street below. Hugo wakes up in a fright. It's the start of yet another day tending the clocks. Hugo hears a ticking sound. He looks for his pocket watch but can't find it. He looks down at his shirt, opens his chest, and reveals the clicking gears of the automaton. As he leaps out of bed, his transformation continues—Hugo turns into an automaton just as massive gears swing in from the sides of the frame, clicking and snapping and entrapping him.

Hugo's fear of the automaton—or rather, his admixture of attraction and repulsion—should not come as a surprise. His philosophy of 'purpose' requires a full-bodied submission to his interminable role as flyball governor, and he is right to fear that he will never escape. But his experience of the destruction of the train station—his world, his reality—is a bit more mysterious. One clue is the key he finds on the train tracks that initiates the disaster. It's when Hugo reads the words engraved there—"Cabret & Fils, Horologers"—that the train comes barreling towards him. Does Hugo fear he is doomed to his father's fate? Like so many Disney heroes and heroines who must assert themselves in the world by denying the will and expectations of their parents, is Hugo looking for a way to free himself not just from his grief, but also from his origins, from a sense purpose he has inherited rather than invented?[134] This thematic line, of course, is also pertinent to the film preservation meta-text: i.e. we must recognize—in a way that Méliès could not—that our tastes for cinema (and for reality) are always changing and, perhaps, for cinema to evolve it must become unchained from what it once was or was meant to be.

These self-reflexive questions of 'what is/was/will be cinema' play out in *Hugo*, most clearly, at the level of the film's commitment to the technology and incipient aesthetics of

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[134] Clement and Long raise this same question in Jennifer Clement and Christan B. Long, "*Hugo*, Remediation, and the Cinema of Attractions, or, the Adaptation of Hugo Cabret," *Senses of Cinema*, no. 63 (July 2012), http://sensesofcinema.com/2012/feature-articles/hugo-remediation-and-the-cinema-of-attractions-or-the-adaptation-of-hugo-cabret/.

digital 3-D: an aspect of the film that, depending on your perspective, may seem like a predictable and welcomed intensification of the familiar terms of cinematic spectacle or as a more sinister cultural shift away from a traditional (and still unresolved) meta-cine-physical preoccupation with issues of truth and illusion. *Hugo*, by integrating self-reflexivity about the making of spectacle into its world-making, is posing its own understanding of the essence of the medium: one based not in material, method, or moral imperative but in innovation, discovery, and enchantment. Thomas Elsaesser takes up this self-reflexivity and uses the dream sequence of *Hugo* to launch his 2013 essay, "The 'Return' of 3-D: On Some of the Logics and Genealogies of the Image in the Twenty-First Century." Elsaesser's goal in the article is to make the case that the sudden interest in 3-D jumpstarted by the enormous box office success of *Avatar* (2009), is not simply an example of the rediscovery of an effective marketing gimmick, but more like the return of the repressed. He notes, in regard to Scorsese's film, not only the in-joke of Hugo—as a proxy for Méliès' gentle fantasias—being run down by the avatar of the Lumière brothers' cinema of attractions, but that the train driver in Hugo's dream is none other than the besotted madman played by Jean Gabin in Jean Renoir's *La Bête humaine* (1938), one of the masterpieces of social-realist cinema. In other words, the dream sequence is an in-joke about the confrontation between the cinemas of reality and fantasy. Elsaesser thrills to this "*mise-en-abyme* of film history," calling it a "temporal anamorph"—i.e the self-reflexivity on display here is not a kind of hall of mirrors, but more like a sculpture stretched in length as if it were a blurred photo taken from a moving train.[135] It is a figure at home in post-Euclidean spatiality and discomfiting to those who equate Renaissance perspective with reality. Elsaesser goes on to gloss a genealogy of 3-D in order to remind us that cinema's historical allegiance to spatial verisimilitude was hardly inevitable and that critiques of 3-D premised on the idea that the technology undermines the 'reality' of film[136] distract from what an interest in 3-D is really signaling: a metaphysical desire for a more total cinema, one without a frame, one "layered, material, yet also mobile and pliable"—a cinema more fully *digital*. Elsaesser suggests that *Hugo*'s playfulness about the nature of cinema

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[135] Elsaesser, "The 'Return' of 3-D: On Some of the Logics and Genealogies of the Image in the Twenty-First Century," 217.

[136] Roger Ebert, "Why 3-D Doesn't Work and Never Will. Case Closed.," *rogerebert.com*, January 23, 2011, https://www.rogerebert.com/rogers-journal/why-3d-doesnt-work-and-never-will-case-closed.

> … hints at a paradigm change in the way we might come to look at 3-D itself: not as a special effect in the field of cinematic vision but a different kind of mental image … fitting for an age when cinema (and television) history is likely to become the only history our culture has an affective memory of, an age when time has become a function of space.[137]

Though he opens the essay discussing the dream sequence in *Hugo*, Elsaesser concludes with his admiration for the 'real' narrative event—the moment when the station inspector averts disaster by pulling Hugo, who has leapt to the train tracks to rescue the automaton (substituting what in the dream was a key), clear of an onrushing train. It is an image, in Elsaesser's estimation, that hints at a "new symbolic form," one encompassing both "being and becoming", and that brings together multiple dimensions "whose common denominators would seem to be the obsolescence of film-based photography, the historical contingency of monocular spatial projection, and the recovery of stereo space as a multivariable, nonocular spatiotemporal (dis-)orientation."[138] Put in terms of the parable: before Hugo, the real boy amidst the digital 3-D imaginary, is crushed by the cinema's moral commitment to revealing *truth*, he is pulled free by his antagonist, the station inspector, the loyal foot solider of discipline and order, the man most in need of new dreams.

The vengeance of reality upon fantasies of physical and temporal freedom is a theme always close to the surface of the metaphysics of *Hugo*. The ambiguous nature of reality in the film is conceptualized via several binaries: 3-D spectral mobility vs Renaissance perspective spatial verisimilitude; analog vs digital; past vs future; materiality vs virtuality; life vs fantasy; chaos vs order; a happy ending that neatly ties up all loose ends vs an 'open' ending; organic vs inorganic. 'Reality', as a concept, as we've already noted, is invited into the world of *Hugo* by Méliès himself, who blames the first World War for disenchanting the youth of Europe by showing them "too much reality." Hugo's philosophy of purpose is an attempt to mollify his own experience of horror by arguing for an organizing structure in the universe that is insensible to the "broken" (i.e. to those who have suffered too much reality) but can be rediscovered by pursuing a sense of purpose. Put differently: the universe might *seem* random and arbitrary, cruel and indifferent, but it is, in fact, *someway* else, and it is the burden of

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[137] Elsaesser, "The 'Return' of 3-D: On Some of the Logics and Genealogies of the Image in the Twenty-First Century," 218.
[138] Ibid., 246.

cinema and its medial projection—the automaton—to reveal this sanctuary to Hugo. What is at stake in the film, in its own vocabulary, is Hugo's quest to escape *reality* and discover his true *nature*. Once he has discovered his true nature, it is hoped, reality will no longer appear antagonistic—it will be successfully mediated. He will do this through *dreams*—and by dreams I mean his heart's desire; his *nightmares*, on the other hand, will give allegorical form to his frustration about reality. In the process, his dreams will become *nature*. It was cinematic experiences that made his philosophy of purpose possible, and it will be cinema that will allow him to enter into a world that he will no longer need to mediate, that will disentangle dreams and reality enough for Hugo to project a previously unimaginable alternative. As such, there must be some kind of theory of the past at work in *Hugo* that is complementary to its self-conscious place within cinema history.

The contest between historical fact and creative self-invention is embedded in the dream sequence, but not in a way fully acknowledged by the film. The scene of Hugo's 'real-life' rescue, the second 'arrival of the train in the station' and near crash, is not just a disarming of the prophecy of Hugo's dream nor merely a hint at a new symbolic form that is not so troubled by a wishful split between dreams and reality. It also, in a way Elsaesser leaves unnoted, elides historical reality, replacing historic event with oneiric uncertainty: in 1895, a train *really* did crash through the wall of the Montparnasse station.[139] Because this date corresponds to the 'official' birth year of cinema makes it irresistibly figural: the revenge of the real,

Fig. 27: The Montparnasse train wreck, 1895

perhaps, upon the myth (depicted as factual in *Hugo*) of moviegoers leaping out of their seats

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[139] Laura Marcus makes the same connection between the birth of cinema and the Montparnasse train derailment in *Dreams of Modernity*, 2014. Marks discovers an additional twist to the symbolism, noting that the two causalities of the derailment—a working class man and a woman—went little remarked upon in the press about the accident. Laura Marcus, *Dreams of Modernity: Psychoanalysis, Literature, Cinema* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 3.

upon witnessing *A Train Arrives at the Station* (1895). It's as if at the same moment that cinema made spatiotemporal experience vicarious, real trains started smashing through walls and killing innocent passersby. Hugo's nightmare, spun out of the unconscious cultural imagery that attended the emergence of cinema two decades before his birth, figures the entanglement of dreams and cinematic reality. This entanglement is what Elsaesser argues is just now being fully realized by innovations like digital surround sound and digital 3-D and explored by films like *Hugo* that take on the task of looking for happy endings in the end-of-cinema-as-we-know-it. But this entanglement does not mean that all images now all tend to the virtual; it may mean that in order to signify, in order for images to remain in touch with place, space, and history, the digital image must now struggle against its own virtuality. For an image to be an image it must in some way be captioned: its origin and mode of production verified; its original purpose noted in order to make sense of how the-image-as-image actually works.

Why does the esoteric cine-philosophic contest between unvarnished truth and salutary bedazzling fiction matter to this orphaned boy? It matters because he has taken it upon himself to play caretaker to the world and there is an additional process that Hugo must discover to *fix himself*, to discover a role for himself in the world beyond regulating imbalances and mediating perceived injustice. The process by which a destiny might be fixed (or fluid), that an organism might rediscover that their purpose is in fact aligned with a higher plan, requires yet another mechanism. And this is what *Hugo* asks of cinema: to mediate between fantasy and reality in order that Hugo might freely set a goal. In order for *Hugo* to represent purpose, it must find a way to represent freedom.

Small World Projections: The View From Outside, From Inside

To trace how cinema, as a concept and an Elsaesserian "new symbolic form," helps Hugo both nurture his materialist philosophy and discover a way out of his prison in the clock tower, let's return to the super-mechanical powers of our spectatorship as the film opens, to the cinematic conventions that enable us to move, without resistance, from high up above Paris and right up close to a boy's averted gaze. This familiar cinematic form of liberation exists in Hugo's world as well: his ability to move through it, and to observe it, while remaining unseen is its primary appeal. He races from clock to clock, efficiently leaping through enormous drifting gears, zipping down slides, and clanging over metal platforms, soberly at ease, taking each of these

dark corners for granted. Every clock face in the train station is a viewing portal onto an adult world of connection, communication, and disconnection. While this aspect of Hugo's world is noted in the original graphic novel, Scorsese takes the notion much further, and introduces to Hugo's routine a series of real-life 'mini-movies'. From his hidden place in the walls, Hugo quietly observes the dramas of the train station: the café owner (Frances de la Tour) in a painfully drawn-out flirtation with a timid bachelor (Richard Griffiths), the station inspector in awkward awe of the florist (Emily Mortimer), and Monsieur Labisse amongst his kingdom of books. Though Hugo is not free to *be*, he is free to *move*—and, thus, to change his view.

This capability of seeing while remaining unseen is central to Stanley Cavell's theory of the allure of cinema. In *The World Viewed*, Cavell argues that in the act of cinematic spectatorship we find both a lessening of responsibility (and thus a sense of freedom) and also a sense of displacement—but a *displacement* of a curiously cinematic, and even pleasurable, kind. For Cavell, cinema doesn't give us a feeling that the world is "passing us by" but a sense that "we are displaced from our natural habitation within it."[140] This sense is paradoxically reassuring because by entering into this state, via cinema, "it is as though the world's projections explain our forms of unknowness and our inability to know." In this way, cinema verifies what we may suspect but do not acknowledge in our *real* life: that we do not seem to fit within it, that we do not have faith in our reality. Hugo in the clock face, this boy who has lost his place but not his way, becomes a kind of camera, and his running from face to face a form of editing. His place of observation is not defined by leisure (like a moviegoer) or desire (like a voyeur), but by the ceaseless cyclical routine of tending the clocks. There is no *outside* to his spectatorship, and thus in a sense he is a thoroughly post-modern media subject surrounded by ubiquitous, always-on screens. That said, Hugo's interminable spectatorship is defined by distance, not by the illusion of control.

In a sense, the modus operandi of *Hugo* is to thrill to the possibilities of 3-D cinema to overcome physical and metaphysical distances—even distances that have previously flummoxed the medium. We can see this philosophy of distance-crossing in the two parallel stories Hugo witnesses from his place in the clock faces: both involving the progress of love. In the first, the station inspector advances romantically towards the florist inadvertently barricaded by her bouquets; he seizes up and retreats on his squealing mechanical leg. From another view:

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[140] Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, 41.

a timid bachelor is thwarted every time he approaches the owner of the station's café by the little nipping dachshund entangled in the lady's arms. These dramas are ideal fodder for Hugo's fascination because they must play out in space rather than in words and must be legible from a distance—they must be *silent* movies.

The movies themselves, and not just their stand-ins, comes to the rescue in *Hugo* in a very roundabout way. Hugo's connection to cinema, before finding himself interpolated into the mechanism of cinema itself, was through his father's cinephilia. Hugo calls it their "special place," a liminal space that retains in his memory a sense of hope and comfort. It is also described, notably, as a form of palliative escapism, the place where he and his father went to distract themselves from the death of Hugo's mother. Hugo's prepubescent flirtation with Isabelle—the means by which he is able to insert himself into her family—takes the form of appealing to her bibliophilic desire for a "real adventure" and convincing her to sneak into the movies with him and into the same familial space that he shared with his father. We are meant to believe that Hugo recognizes in the automaton another version of this shared psychophysical space, and it's no surprise then that it's only once Isabelle's been to the movies with Hugo that she is allowed to see the automaton.

Hugo is a reluctant hero. Before Isabelle is allowed to see the automaton, and before she joins him to see a movie, Hugo sees *her*: at Méliès' toyshop from afar, at the window of her bedroom reading a book (he summons her by throwing a stone at her), and the plot bumps along by bumping Hugo into her at just the right moment. It is after a day of work at Méliès' toy shop, after making progress on repairing the automaton, and finishing his maintenance routine, that Hugo spies Isabelle dancing with friends. In one of the most disorienting cuts in the film, we jump from Hugo's place of spectatorship in the walls to Isabelle and Hugo rummaging

Fig. 28: Hugo spies Isabelle without being seen

through Labisse's bookstore together. This gap in time is significant because it elides the only instance in the narrative in which Hugo makes a choice to do something that does not have an instrumental end, that is apparently plotless. This choice has major narrative ramifications of course—it is their upcoming conversation in the bookshop that results in the trip to the movies—but Hugo has not planned this. Instead of a scene in which Hugo must screw up his courage, depart from his routine, and seek to share time with another, we see only the image of Hugo watching. All it takes is an edit, and he is together with Isabelle.

The automaton is a figure through which Hugo can translate his appetite for the cinematic into a theory of action in the world and it contains within it powers we may not traditionally associate with the apparatus of cinema. Ostensibly, it is an artefact of pre-cinema— Méliès is able to recognize the magic of early cinema immediately thanks to his love for his automaton—but it also holds within it manifest dreams of future cinema. We can understand this better by imaging an alternative version of *Hugo* in which the boy is driven by his fascination to understand a strip of celluloid (an artefact that most contemporary audiences of this kid's film will likely have never seen) wedged in an old rusted projector, say, that Hugo must learn how to repair. The key difference here is the degree of inscrutability each machine presents in addition to a potent degree of mechanical wonder. While much of the content of a strip of film is visible to the naked eye (by holding the strip up to the light, say), the automaton's message cannot be divined by taking it apart. This codes the ontology of the automaton as *digital*: Hugo requires a supplemental key (a codec) to understand what the machine *does* (or is meant to do).

A film strip must be put into motion in order for the images to coalesce into something *more* than what is perceivable, for the thing to move from presentation to representation—a film strip presents the promise of a transient message in time and is dependent on the replacement of one kind of motion with another. The automaton, on the other hand, is a static thing that must be put into motion so it can create a static image. The automaton, at some level, is meant to present a relief—an endpoint—to the ceaseless motion of Hugo's world, a privileged space of rest beyond reality. Hugo's compulsion/fascination with clockwork allows him to enter into an enchanted, spectatorial relation with the world; the automaton, and the secrets it holds (and holds at bay), offers the possibility of escape. The automaton is thus a fantasy of what the digital could (and might still) be as a hybrid artifact: the malleable digital message in the geared

and spring-loaded body of the analog cinema camera. It is an object designed to give us the benefits of the digital while maintaining a privileged, analogic link—in this film at least—to the 'real'.[141]

The twist in *Hugo*, of course, is that Hugo's fascination with the automaton leads him right back to cinema. This paradox is explained by the instinct in this film—shared, to some degree, by all the films in this study—that the way to free ourselves from the power of images is *through* images themselves. But this process for Hugo isn't a kind of metaphysical materialist redemption; the power of cinema that *Hugo* privileges, that rescues Hugo, is much more pragmatic: it's the power and appeal of cinema as a *popular* art form. What Hugo stumbles into by repairing the automaton is a network of coincidences made possible by the power of mass production. Multiple actors, in different times and spaces—Hugo's father, the film scholar, and Méliès himself—all share an unpredictable, cinephilic fraternity thanks to the amorphous, multidimensional force of the image of a rocket ship stuck in the eye of the moon. It is the infinite shareability of the image that is the automaton's most powerful capability. It is because of the power of cinema to enact a *shared* dream life that Hugo is finally able to make himself understood to the seemingly random assortment of characters who have been touched by that image. This is a cinematic power, as I've suggested, that through the figure of the automaton we can understand as being intensely, if not uniquely, digital.

Themes of shared images meet themes of shared spaces in the very last shot of the film. Very clearly meant to parallel the very first, it is an elaborate, unbroken, 1m51s travelling shot that begins far outside the window of the Méliès home, swoops ghostlike through the glass, picks up Méliès and an excited group of film fans, veers into the living room and, one by one, revisits all of the parallel stories of the film: Monsieur Labisse speaking pedantically, the bachelor and the café owner flushed with the positive result of their canine romance, the station inspector (with a new mechanical leg built by Hugo) and the florist as a happy couple, Hugo performing magic tricks for an appreciative audience, Isabelle writing in her journal, Méliès and

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[141] The craving for reality is still alive and well in film culture. Kristin Thompson, on her blog *Observations on Film Art*, expressed her excitement that the automaton we saw working in the film was a 'real thing.' And while, indeed, such automatons—even at the level of complexity seen in *Hugo*—do indeed exist and still function, Thompson was later forced to retract her excitement after she discovered that the automaton in the film 'drew' the Méliès picture through a combination of magnets guiding the hand and a bit of CGI. Kristin Thompson, "Scorsese's Birthday Present to Georges Méliès," *Observations of Film Art*, December 7, 2011, http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2011/12/07/hugo-scorseses-birthday-present-to-georges-melies/.

Mama Jeanne dancing together, and, finally, sitting alone in another room, the camera finds the automaton, just like it found Hugo in the first shot of the film, and we move closer and closer towards its expressionless face as the film concludes. Isabelle—who drifts off on her own—now provides perspective on the scene. As she writes, she narrates, "Once upon a time I met a boy named Hugo Cabret. He lived in a train station. 'Why did he live in a train station?' you might well ask. This is really what this book is going to be about. It is about how this singular young man, searched so hard to find a secret message from his father,"—the camera is now closing in on the automaton—"and how that message led him all the way home." In this scene we have a tenuous connecting thematic thread stringing along the moving camera, the neatly tied-up story narrated by Isabelle, and the presence of the automaton itself: all three hope to contribute to the breaking of cyclical time (the kind that trapped Méliès and Hugo in their respective compulsive solitudes) into the kind of linear time favoured by Hollywood: one with an ending so triumphant that we long to repeat the story over and over.

The effect of the unbroken long take (of course, the shot is actually constructed out of many separate takes digitally composited together) is to sanction a shared space and temporality, to unify all of the stories that were once fragmented by Hugo's many 'views'. The camera becomes the mechanism by which these atomized worlds are smoothly linked together, and thus ending with the automaton—the presence, persistence, and permanence of which made this gathering possible—is thematically appropriate. Even Hugo is now part of this view. He has found his place, quite literally, in the moving series of cameos. Thanks to his unwillingness to let an old artifact from another era languish, Hugo unleashed a chain of coincidences that collapsed distance, revealed true selves, and overcame the exigencies of time. In other words, from a certain perspective, he has achieved all that we hope cinema can accomplish. When Isabelle writes, "he found his way home," we are meant to believe that in the act of extending concern to an artifact and by literally returning that artifact home (in this case, to its creator), the person of care is granted an insight into the complexities of their own loneliness, the unique conditions of their struggle to belong. It is a noble and touching message and serves Scorsese's film preservation agenda—that there is value in preserving old films even beyond the apparent value of the artifact—very well. And yet, like most endings, while an important version of the past may have been redeemed to make a positive present possible, the future is much less clear.

The "Hollywood Ending," the desire to neatly tie things up, is a euphemism for a kind of unrealism, for the suppression of the messiness and open-endedness we experience outside the movies. James MacDowell, in his book length study on Hollywood endings, dedicates a chapter to unpacking the claim that a happy ending is unsuccessful because it is unrealistic.[142] MacDowell's focus is on Hollywood romantic comedies, and makes the point that in order to counter this charge of unrealism, many romantic comedies—throughout cinema history—have used the trope of the "Hollywood Ending" self-consciously in order to still 'pull-off' a satisfying conclusion.[143] *Hugo* is not much different—Méliès, exhausted after recounting his life story to the children, even utters the words familiar to so many romances: "but happy endings only happen in the movies." And, as if on cue, the end of this film *is* happy: with not one successful heterosexual couple formed but three, with a community united, and with many life-altering lessons learned. Hugo, we are told, has found his true nature: his tutelage watching the 'silent movies' of the train station has made him adept at playing with space and time, he delights in showing magic tricks to party guests, and we can be certain that a future as a digital filmmaker is open to him. No longer behind the scenes, now on the margins of a scene, the analogic life of Hugo-as-flyball-governor, as the unseen assistant steward of life-as-it-goes-on, gives way to Hugo-as-magician, the performer/spectator of his new shareable, fully mobile, mutable self. He stepped out from watching movies, he overcame his displacement, learned of the inner life of the characters he was watching, and then, for perhaps Scorsese's assurance if no one else's, emerges from the movies still enchanted.

The Invention of Hugo Cabret, the book upon which the film is based, ends a bit differently: it is Isabelle, not Hugo, who seems destined to become a filmmaker. She prowls the party (held at a small restaurant) with a camera instead of a notebook, totally absorbed with her image-making, while Hugo—still the narrator—"sat at a table doing magic tricks," much more at the center of things. It is revealed on the final page of text that the very book the readers holds in their hands—all "158 drawings, all 26,159 words"—has been 'printed' by a special

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[142] James MacDowell, *Happy Endings in Hollywood Cinema: Cliché, Convention and the Final Couple* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

[143] MacDowell's signal example is *Pretty Woman* (1990), a film that spends a great deal of its runtime disdaining the possibility of a happy ending and then makes a brazen about-face and clearly announces to the audience in the final minutes that its characters will fully embrace the fairytale roles they've been asked to play.

automaton that Hugo created to tell his story.[144] It is thus Hugo who is both the author of the story we are reading, and, in a way, the physical medium though which the story is delivered; it is Hugo who leaves his authorial mark, through the magic of mass production, on the specific copy I quoted above, and to which the final pages of *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* draws attention. In contrast, Scorsese's film seems much more timid about its self-reflexivity, though perhaps it is inevitable: Scorsese's 'film' is not a *film*, it is no single artifact like a book that Hugo might have touched-by-proxy before handing it over to us: it is a DCP file projected in a theater, it is a Blu-ray played at home, it is a digital download viewed on a smartphone, etc. It is, in a sense, beyond media (and this is the challenge posed in figuring the automaton). This helps clarify why, when Tabard screens *La voyage dans la lune* in the Méliès apartment, Méliès doesn't watch the film with the children. Méliès doesn't recognize the medium in front of him,[145] nor does the film take the old man's POV at the moment of the projection. It does not show him asleep in another room, waking, and finding his dreams suddenly returned to him in the form of a strip of celluloid—this thing we've been told again and again he thought had been destroyed—that once pressed against his fantasy. Méliès' *story* supersedes his dreams. The primary fascination for *Hugo*'s audience—the filmmakers are implying—is with the mystery of its characters and not the mystery of its own making; not with cinema but with getting the *whole story*, not with the circularity of ontology but the linearity of narrative. The narrative goal is to create the conditions for the happy ending and that ending is powered by figuring cinema as a kind of mixed-media, shared dream life. In this odd narrative based on the twin structuring absences of God and celluloid, it seems that the conditions of a happy ending require a full commitment to the secular power of storytelling. In this, *Hugo* fits with the mandate of The Film Foundation: to save *movies* and not necessarily the esoteric experience of watching film-on-film.

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[144] Brian Selznick, *The Invention of Hugo Cabret: A Novel in Words and Pictures*, 1st ed. (New York: Scholastic Press, 2007).

[145] The one moment we see celluloid in *Hugo* is when it is being used during some cross-cutting to show how Méliès created his cinematic disappearing illusion. We cut from Méliès looking at celluloid, the actual profilmic scene, a snip, and back to the profilmic scene now edited. The ease and facility here is another digital fantasy.

The quiet elision of the apparatus and the physical media of the very 'film' we are watching and the technology it endeavours to both honour and replace, precludes by matter of course a cinematic phenomenon that has much more to do with the metaphysics of medial reality than the plausibility and palatability of a happy ending or an aesthetic commitment to spatial verisimilitude. When physical celluloid disappears, so too goes some degree of faith—rightly or wrongly—in the phenomenon of photographic *indexicality*, the theory attempting to explain both our personal attachment to, and putative truth-value, of photographs. Though *Hugo* is a film about *film*, concepts like *photogénie* and the *punctum* are absent; photographic magic, of the ontological kind, is not part of the cosmology of *Hugo*. We know this because Hugo lives in a world without photographs— none of his dead father, none of his death mother. His deep attachment to his father's handwritten notebook is an indexical attraction, but the notebook is really little more than a MacGuffin in the film, and once it has moved plot along, and once Hugo has wept a bit over its possible loss, it is never mentioned again. The automaton is a very different kind of memento: not an index

Fig. 29: *Hugo*'s menagerie: M. Labisse' cat, the dachshunds, and Maximillian

pointing at the historical presence of Hugo's father, but one signifying his passion (and, perhaps, his distraction, and his shortcomings as a father). As a digital machine 'at heart', as a para-photogenic device, the automaton is ambivalent about the past and about the possibility of absence: it can offer no argument for what would be lost if no trace of our forebears existed, if our cinematic worlds and subjects were created strictly through CGI and not through imaging

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devices isomorphic with a profilmic space, nor what would change about *Hugo* were it an animated film and not live-action.

And yet, even without celluloid, anxiety about an emerging absence of presence is still part of *Hugo*'s cinematic metaphysics. We can see it in the ironic role Méliès' forged signature plays in jumpstarting the adventure. And it's there when the film scholar, in an attempt to win permission to screen an old film, flatters Mama Jeanne's desire to see her younger self again. And it is also thematized, in a very curious way, when Hugo makes his final trip to the train station to retrieve and to rescue the automaton. As Hugo walks through the arcade and past the café, he stumbles upon the resolution of one of his 'mini-movies'. The timid bachelor has arrived with his own miniature dachshund to distract the café owner's dog—canine love blooms, the guard dog is distracted, and, at last, the bachelor is able to close the gap between himself and the object of his pursuit. In this moment, an animal becomes a kind of medium: not just for communication, but for literal traversing of space. This moment may remind us that the edit from Hugo's surveillance of Isabelle to their companionship in the book store is linked not merely by a cut, but by a cut to M. Labisse's *cat* lounging on a pile of books: this animal appears as an establishing shot, as set decoration, and as a token of this singular safe-space that Hugo and Isabelle share. As an image, it is the medium that links Hugo's inside with Hugo's preferred outside. As an animal, it signifies a different kind of spatial canniness. In a sense, Hugo is witnessing in the satisfaction of the bachelor a validation of his own theory of using the automaton to cause the closing of a gap, to bring someone else—remote to you, lost to themselves—into presence. But what happens next makes clear that animal and mechanical spatiality—and the kind of presence possible in each—is not the same.

Hugo is so mesmerized by the mini-movie playing out at eye-level, that he fails to notice the Station Inspector marching towards him. Hugo runs for cover, but the two dachshunds spot him on the move and come over to investigate, drawing the Inspector's attention. Hugo is nabbed and taken to a holding cell, he escapes, and the Station Inspector and his dog Maximilian give chase into the walls of Hugo's sanctuary, a pursuit climaxing with Hugo dangling Harold-Lloyd-style from the swaying minute hand of the big tower clock. The reason Hugo is forced so far outside his comfort zone is, literally, because of the powers of Maximilian's animal ability to sniff out Hugo in any hiding spot (figuratively, it's because you can't make a movie-about-movies featuring a giant clock and not reference *Safety Last*, it

seems). Like the albino crocodile in *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, the presence of animals in *Hugo* signals the possibility of another kind of aesthetics of space. It's worth noting that the first POV shot in the film not from Hugo is granted to Maximilian, whose single-minded pursuit of Hugo gives us our first rambunctious tour of the public side of the train station. Maximilian moves in straight lines, like the camera, billiard-balling around the arcade while Hugo feints and weaves. In this way, early in the film, camera/animal/child space is defined in parallel to adult space. This parallel space is imbued with the cinematic power of a surreptitious vantage on an

adult reality. Because it is one defined by animals, it is also 'documentary' and charged by possibilities of motion outside of the measured and clocked: it is open to the contingent and the unexpected. It is thus appropriate that it is the invasion of Maximilian into the walls of the station, it is the overlapping of the indexical/animal regime with the animated/automaton one, that signals the end of Hugo's metaphysical captivity. Hugo escapes from Maximilian and runs onto the train platform cradling the automaton. He bangs into passersby as he goes. Unlike the opening of the film when the unbounded and spectral camera first soared down this platform, this time passersby turn to look. Maximilian is waiting around a corner for Hugo, the boy loses his grip on the automaton, film speed slows down, and we watch as this resolutely immobile thing suddenly takes flight before crashing on the train tracks. Hugo's nightmare is about to come true.
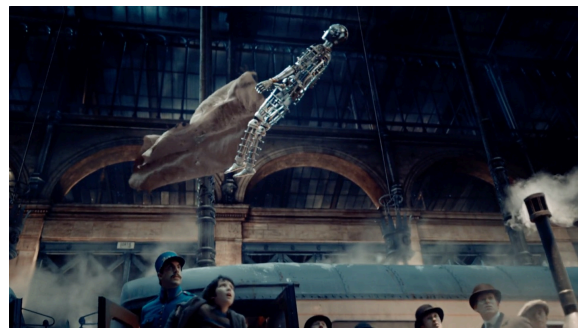
Fig. 30: The automaton takes flight, and (seen in 3-D) enters the theatre for a moment, as if—like the Skybot camera in *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*—it could almost be grasped

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Animal regimes of spatial continuity indifferent to time; mechanical regimes of space-time continuums: *Hugo* invites both into the film as if they could both make sense in the same cinematic world. As transformative as these invasions across spatial regimes might be, the thresholds that define them are decidedly blurry. In the final frame of *Hugo*, the restless moving camera comes to a stop on the implacable gaze of the automaton locked down in its chair. Despite Isabelle's words of wonder on the voiceover, we may feel less inclined to believe in some creative potential about to be liberated by this stoic little machine and instead discover an uncomfortable reminder of our own lack of mobility, our own place in the audience. This overlapping of regimes may remind us that despite the vertiginous camera moves and swooping 3-D vistas, Scorsese's tricks are not too much different than those of Méliès. The shot of the rocket ship stuck in the eye of the man-in-the-moon from *Le Voyage dans la lune* is famous in cinema history for many reasons, but perhaps most importantly for what it demonstrates about the technical and imaginative limitations of early cinema. It is easy to forget that this totemic image, brought into Hugo's world thanks to the automaton, is first and foremost a moving image: a POV from the rocketship of the moon getting closer. To achieve this effect, Méliès made the surprising choice to move the papier-maché moon closer to the camera rather than tracking his camera forward through space. Though far more elaborate in its effect, Scorsese's opening shot does nothing very different. In place of the moon we have Hugo's eye: a bit of video that grows in size as the army of *Hugo*'s animators expand and expand the digitally created frame around it, creating the illusion from our locked down seats of Hugo getting closer. The animals in *Hugo*—marginal, sometimes CGI, sometimes real, sometimes active, sometimes decorous, all, in their own way, *animated*—are hybrid figures that help plot the hybrid space of the film: an elaborate physical set floating in a CGI universe. This hybridity explains the primary mode of unmediated encounters between bodies in the film (and a nod to the power of coincidence in this story; to the world of *Hugo* being a *small* world): they literally, and unpleasantly, bang into each other as if to provide a counterpoint to the virtuality of the 3-D world.

From here we can ask again "why is *Hugo* not an animated film?" and come up with the simple astonishing answer: because Méliès' films were not animated. They were fantastical, and full of hand-crafted frame-by-frame effects, but they were resolutely profilmic. They were made in a way, and designed as such, so that that humans could share space with extravaganza and spectacle. In 2011, to share cinematic space with the films of Méliès and to stage the events in which they were created, to forego the necessity to (re)animate them or to blend the ontologies of CGI and photographs into the same movie, to bring Méliès' films into *our* world, we are still beholden—for the time being at least—to indexical photography. As such, and because of what we know about the *way* our camera

Fig. 31: The bachelor clutches his body (his wrist? his heart?) after Hugo, Maximilian, and the Station Inspector all collide into him

crosses the space between the completed circle of party guests and this silent cinematic avatar, as prim and proper and untouchable as a museum piece, we might consider these multiple cinematic spatial regimes a bit differently. By contrasting a camera pushed across a soundstage with pixels 'pushed' across a grid, the film is positing two competing regimes of motion and two ideas of freedom. As a thing both physically delicate and virtually absent, the automaton, for all its wonderment, withholds an essential kind of metaphysical freedom and spatial relation from Hugo: the boy who fixes toys but is never allowed to *play* with them. There is no play in Hugo's world; it runs on predetermined tracks.

For Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'play' is a paradigmatic medial experience because, like the experience of truth itself, *to play* is to be drawn *away* from yourself and towards something *beyond* yourself. Gadamer argues that play absorbs the subject into it, that we lose ourselves in play.[146] Play, like art, is defined by a special kind of projection of self, a "self-presentation" that has little to do with the possibility or sanction of *being ourselves* or revealing our true nature and everything to do with the degrees of freedom available to each of us, within the context of a game, to be coherent:

> The end pursued is certainly a nonpurposive activity, but this activity is itself
> intended. It is what the play intends. In this fashion we actually intend something

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[146] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 104.

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with effort, ambition, and profound commitment. This is one step on the road to human communication; […] The function of the representation of play is ultimately to establish, not just any movement whatsoever, but rather the movement of play determined in a specific way. In the end, play is thus the self-representation of its own movement.[147]

Animals play. Human beings introduce rational goals to the phenomenon of play. But the goal is always the same: not to play for the delectation of an audience, but to figure out how to re-present ourselves so the game will go on. This insight allows Gadamer to get closer to the kind of anti-subjective truth claim *art* can make: "it is not only the 'This is you!' disclosed in a joyous and frightening shock; it also says to us: 'You must change your life!'"[148]

The automaton is many things in *Hugo*, but it is not a toy. It takes on the crushing burden of mediating reality by instrumentalizing dreams, including Hugo's dreams of his father. It helps lead Hugo to cinema, and cinema is able to free Hugo from his role of flyball governor by replacing that mechanism with the power of storytelling. Cinema will lead Hugo to discover the power of storytelling as the best possible regulator of reality and the primary means of discovering a way of shaping reality to be in line with our nature. Storytelling holds out the promise of not just salvation, but self-discovery, climaxing in Hugo's discovery of his true nature as a magician, his revelation as the protégé of Méliès. The film first represents revelation/transformation, during the dream sequence, as something horrific; and then a second time, during the party scene, as something happening off-screen, as something marginal. The sudden distance at the end of the film between us and Hugo might be a way for the film to signal that it is now turning its attention elsewhere, that Hugo is now free of his morbid self-attention, and the film is now addressing the audience, say, in preparation for imparting a moral (i.e. we each need to find our own nature). Or maybe, we are meant to take satisfaction in Hugo becoming a heroic subject for Isabelle, the new narrator. Regardless, our attention—following the convention of narrative fiction at the cusp of its ending—is upon the future and what might happen to these characters once the film is done. Is Hugo's flirtation with being a magician a sign that he is permitted now, at last, to *play* at being someone else (as opposed to simply

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[147] *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 23.
[148] *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 104.

stepping into his true nature as a cog in a machine)? Is he granted the child's privilege of making serious choices without severe consequences?

All of the films in this dissertation struggle with endings. A couple end with radical-seeming digressions (*Uncle Boonmee*, *Cave*); a couple more require nothing less than the ending of the world (*Melancholia*, *The Tree of Life*, and, in a sense, *Boonmee* and *Cave* too). All the films in this study make risky moves in order to conclude. The problem with endings, of course, as we attempt to determine what final word they might have upon the whole, is that they are inherently unrealistic (i.e. they are at odds with at least one fundamental truth of our world). As Henry James writes, "in reality, relations stop nowhere … it is up to the artist to draw a circle in which they appear to do so."[149] Indeed, the success or failure of the ending of *Hugo* rests, ultimately, in our imaginative appreciation of the fantasy of the future being projected. No matter how sourced in grim realities or high-minded philosophy a text might be, much like our own lives, all futures are fantasies and it can be very hard to muster much conviction that those fantasies are our own. If we are unmoved by the ending of *Hugo*, it is likely because we feel that the future it imagines for our hero is too conventional or doubtful, that the film is insufficiently acknowledging of the past upon the present, or that the sheen of communion is disingenuous, that its dollop of happy ending is in bad faith with the trauma it exploits to power its narrative of reconciliation. In other words, we might fault *Hugo* for being too cavalier about the past and the cinematic experiences it wishes to leave behind and its faith in the apparent newness of identity it wishes to animate.

Hugo takes up the difficult task of trying to save cinema without really knowing what cinema is. It evades answering this question (it posits many things that cinema is *like*) by making the case that cinema *itself* can save (like it saves Hugo), and for that reason, if no other, cinema proves *why* it should be saved. Hugo, too, discovers something about himself in the process of saving and being saved and this knowledge is expressed through the image of a final form, of *becoming* a magician, of sustaining make-believe. In a sense, the presence of the past on the horizon of possibilities in *Hugo* is more Jungian than Freudian, its sense of dreams more collective than idiosyncratic. It takes as given the power of the past upon the present, but it is not at all interested in exploring past trauma (it is, after all, a kids' film) or the defining

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[149] Henry James, *The Portable Henry James*, ed. Morton Dauwen Zabel, Viking Portable Library (New York: Viking press, 1951), 471.

influence of that past. Instead, it places conviction in the power of a medium to *transform* tradition, to make old forms new again in a way that is historical only in the sense that they make it possible for generations to understand each other. This is the same hope at the heart of *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, but at a much different scale (though, arguably, the two-generation gap between Hugo and Méliès is more fraught than the 30-generation gap between us and the Chauvet cave painters, the people of the sublimely past). Neither films are attempting, for example, to mimetically represent, narratively or viscerally, an historical moment with such fidelity that we might believe we've lived it and can thus draw life-changing knowledge from the experience; rather, both—intentionally or not—are mobilizing self-reflexivity about cinema to create a link between disparate human eras that have in common a sudden increase in "degrees of mediacy." In *Cave*, the event was the birth of images; *Hugo*, the birth of cinema. Attendant at both births, of course, is also the possibility that the new medium might die, that media are fragile, and that care must be taken. *Hugo* is able to offer a closed-ending to its narrative because it has faith that on the matter of discovering our nature, the matter is closed: our media, like nature, will always go on, they *must* go on, and our media will evolve with time freeing us to project ourselves outside of them. *Hugo* suggests that we can use the medium of cinema to escape what reality has done to us, that we can save ourselves from unknowingness, that we can be assured of always getting this chance.

This is one way to take control of history in order to change our future, though it requires us to make some doubtful assumptions. Other aesthetic and philosophic tastes might still tend towards an open-ending. By way of conclusion of this chapter, I want to look more closely at how Stanley Cavell thinks about the phenomenon of a medium being both fixed and fluid, how media change over time, how history is processed through a medium, and why even though *Hugo* makes the case for storytelling as both an engine of self-discovery and capable of redeeming history, the version of cinema that it is exploring holds out yet another much less linear possibility.

Conclusion: Homing In

Faced with the sort of skepticism that attends both the end of a film and the claim that someone has 'altered their life', Stanley Cavell divines a potential moral about film's "image of skepticism," arguing that in holding/withholding reality before us, we might perceive how much

and how well reality "speaks for us" and we may endorse that message, we may admit that, indeed our dreams and reality *do* overlap. And this is important to Cavell, because "to know how far reality is open to our dreams would be to know how far reality is confined by our dreams of it."[150] Thinking about both Hugo's self-knowledge and the 'self-knowledge' of *Hugo*—and how they both share a problem of not fully knowing who/what they are, who/what they were, who/what they might become—there is little sense in this film that such a representation is possible. Hugo has made a paradoxical transformation in this film: from the clarity of being a 'flyball governor' without agency, to the ambiguity of being a creator of enchantment without (apparent) function. *Hugo* has established its faith in the reality of cinematic narrative as a potential positive force in the world. Is this enough for Hugo—and for cinema—to be assured of a positive future, a predictable outcome?

For Cavell, the claim of art to represent reality must lie in its ability to represent the reality of skepticism. This can take any number of forms. Art is perhaps uniquely suited to the task for the paradoxical reason that art *itself* is subject to skepticism about itself and its own value—indeed, according to Gadamer, the need to justify art has always been part of the phenomenon.[151] In *The World Viewed*, Cavell puts his meta-historical philosophy of skepticism in touch with the degree to which modern art—and cinema in particular—has thematized questioning the value of art. Cavell sees this process as emerging out of a truly radical re-invention of what art is 'supposed' to do: in the modern era, art cannot simply justify itself, cannot simply be concerned with "renewing a tradition," but must constantly *re-invent* itself with each act and with each work. Modern art does this, typically, by pushing the boundaries of the physical medium of art—paint, stone, etc.—in order to draw attention to what art *is* in our world, and what we will accept as art. Cavell sees this kind of 'exploring' or 'mastering' a medium in the age of skepticism as epiphenomenon and argues for the need to define an artistic medium as encompassing much more than mere material. Cinema, as the modern artform par excellence, as the artform that poses the most serious challenge to the traditional concept of art, both emblematizes this new notion of medium, and, in an odd way, parodies it, too.

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[150] Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, 189.
[151] Hans-Georg Gadamer and Robert Bernasconi, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays* (Cambridge Cambridgeshire ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3.

According to Cavell, an artist's goal is not to divine a truth about the medium in order to lend their insights into the world extra persuasiveness and authority; nor is their goal to find themes that best suit their idiosyncratic and privileged understanding of the capability of a medium. Rather, a medium is a phenomenon that is manifested through a critical circuit—the *cinematic circle*—that engages in the invention and discovery of what Cavell calls

Fig. 32: Mixed feelings about mixed media: James Joyce and Salvador Dali disapprove of Hugo's antics

automatisms. Cavell expands the notion of the cinematic medium well beyond editing, photography, and motion; even beyond more metaphysical definitions of cinema, like, for example, Erwin Panofsky's argument that the essence of cinema is the "spatialization of time" and the "dynamism of space."[152] Cavell suggests that genres like the Western and the Musical are both *automatisms*; so too are tracking shots and quick editing patterns. An automatism, once it has been 'discovered', and in a strange but apt twist of logic, becomes a *natural-seeming* element of a medium—a technique, theme, idea, or sensation we (as viewers and critics) learn to expect and accept of a medium. The term 'automatism' very clearly plays on the tension between a mechanical *automaton* and the ancient Greek idea of the (organic) soul as something "self-moving" (i.e. *automatic*).[153] Back again to the boundary between dreams and reality, we can see how the concept of 'automatism' skirts both mechanical-logic and dream-logic. Like dreams, automatisms seem 'to happen on their own'. But, like dreams, they are based on a fundamental ontological uncertainty: who or what is authoring the dream? Is the dream meaningful by itself, or only when interpreted?

Cavell chooses the term "automatisms" for at least three reasons, all three speaking, obliquely, to how he sees the nature of art: 1) Because the discovery of an automatism is an event in the history of a medium that seems to attest to something about the medium that "no single work could convey"; 2) because a work of art, at some point in its creation, exceeds the

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[152] Erwin Panosfksy, "Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures," in *Film, an Anthology*, ed. Daniel Talbot (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1975), 18.
[153] c.f. Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995), 68.

power of the artist to control it, and thus "seems to happen of itself"; and 3) because the term recognizes that automatisms can become obsolete: viewers free themselves from irrelevant automatisms, whetting their appetite for the new, for the latest fad, while also acknowledging the *autonomy* of the art object—its existence beyond its reception as a piece of art.[154] While *automatisms* enjoy a status beyond discourse—they are anti-subjective—they do inevitably suffer from a sort of exhaustion. This is the reality of the phenomenon of art. Automatisms like jump cuts, split screen effects, hazy filters, cross-processing…we watch them, even in the flush of their newness, slip from currency and become like dead metaphors—invisible to most of us, most of the time. Artists then rush to expand their media and discover new automatisms. For a character like Hugo to hitch his self-invention to cinema, he must be prepared to adapt to a form of mediation that is all beginnings and without end.

This model of artistic innovation, boredom, and more innovation is an unusual interpretation of what it means 'to explore a medium' and seems to be in danger of confusing art with fashionability. Cavell draws this distinction by first criticizing the fascination of filmmakers and audiences alike with new techniques like rapid editing and moving camera: "But what is new in these products? It is hardly news that the camera can move, even rapidly; that it can subtend varying directions and distances from its subject; that a story can be told by abrupt editing from scene to scene."[155] He calls these sorts of explorations of the medium merely "mechanical extensions" and "intensifications," distinguishing them from the kind of productive engagements with the medium that might produce new automatisms. They are not enough to hold our interest; not enough to establish a viable media. It is in the context of these inert proto-automatisms that Cavell most clearly expresses what is at stake in a medium, in a phenomenon that mediates thought braided with skepticism. In his words, a viable media "requires belief, relation to one's past, conviction that one's words and conduct express oneself, that they say what one means, and that what one means to say is enough."[156] In a sense, when Méliès admits that "happy endings only happen in the movies," no matter how tired we may find the trope, he's addressing a community of viewers who have acknowledged about

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[154] Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, 107-08.
[155] Ibid., 61.
[156] Ibid., 62.

themselves an indefatigable commitment to happy endings (and, thus, the movies), and not just an audience who will take escapism whenever they can get it.

This process of "giving significance" to automatisms (e.g. moving camera, quick cutting, a style of acting) is a process shared by critic and director; Cavell calls this "reciprocity" between significance and automatism the "cinematic circle."[157] The circle is defined by the facts that 1) the giving of significance to automatisms should be the goal of artists and critics; 2) an automatism is only understood as an automatism once it has been given significance. Cavell is saying here that an automatism is much more than a critical conceit, but no catalogue of automatisms can exist outside of the shared discoveries of artist and critic. To explore the circle is to explore the medium of the film. As David Rodowick puts it "the creation of automatisms brings the medium into existence."[158] Thus the medium itself, while it may have recognizable prime movers, is defined *in media res*. Understanding how a medium can be both anti-essentialist and ethical, both dynamic and normative, is only possible from inside the circle. And the circle only exists when a work of art exists.

What kind of ending would we have if Hugo and *Hugo* didn't need to *be* anything, if Hugo were just allowed to *play* and not to take on another automatism? What if in the acknowledgement of their mutual indefinability, the two entities—the film and its subject— opened another space of sustainable presentation? The skepticism of modern art about art, of course, is also a form of skepticism about the individual, about the ontology of a modern subject who is free from the burden of having a true nature and must invent one on its own. This combination of self-invention and world-creation leads Cavell to discuss skepticism using exactly the same terms as Hans Jonas: as a form of "metaphysical isolation"[159] and, indeed, this leads us back to the cybernetical notion of *purpose* that Jonas found so problematic, so clearly a product of materialism. Resonant with the philosophy of both Jonas and Gadamer, Cavell's automatism *always* requires a critique in order for a medium to emerge, to reveal the degree of mediacy that measures our pan-organic experience. And indeed, Hugo requires this as well.

According to Jonas, cybernetics makes the mistake of ascribing sentience to the phenomenon of perception and mobility only. It forgets (or ignores) emotion; emotion—both

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[157] Ibid., xiv.
[158] Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, 86.
[159] Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, 21.

animal and human—becomes epiphenomenon. Jonas does not see emotion as a mediate experience, reality is not 'colored' by emotion: color *is* emotion, emotion *is* movement, movement *is* mediation. It is fully the presence of all three together that can produce a mediated organism. To explain this point, and put into relief the difference between purpose and design, Jonas poses a thought experiment. If, going back to our cybernetic example of the torpedo, we replaced its servomechanism with a human pilot, the 'purpose' of the torpedo—on the account of cyberneticians—would now lie in the pilot, not the mechanism. But if this pilot had been commanded on a kamikaze mission, the purpose would lie with the commander, and the pilot, despite his technical organicity, would be mere mechanical extension, would be, in every sense, an automaton. And yet, no matter how exploitative this arrangement, the commander—lest he too is a mere mechanical extension—must face up to a basic truth about the nature of his command:

> His knowledge that he [too] is thus viewed from without, and that he is always capable of being thus viewed, does not cast doubt on the knowledge he has of himself from within. Reflecting on this, if he has the time, he will apply the same consideration to his subordinate and grant him that he is, of course, not really a robot. (123)

This question, for Hugo—who is a robot and who is not?—is the subtlest and saddest question in the film, and is the impetus, I'd argue, for his cinematic fascination with viewing other lives (a deeper look at the Cavellian "problem of other minds" and what it means to play 'make-believe' will wait for the chapter on *Melancholia*). At the end of *Hugo*, after the camera has slid to a stop, and the machinery of plot has wound down, and though it is perched on the edge of a set of automatisms in which we are rapidly losing conviction, it nonetheless takes on convention in order to *present* as a conventional film. It presents as a film with the conventional shortcomings, one that can imagine dissatisfaction in what it knows about itself—what it knows about the confinement of its dreams by reality—but retain faith in the possibility of discovery by deferring questions about how its reality is confined by its dreams.[160] Which is to say, that

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[160] Richard Brody makes a similar point in his review of *Hugo*: "Scorsese's film sets up, from the outset, two other connections that it ultimately makes explicit and that are themselves connected: the one between cinema and robotics, and, in turn, between cinema and prosthetics. Just as the story's crucial link of cinema to life is provided by means of a human-scale, wind-up automaton, so the same technology is applied to the mechanical leg of a victim of Verdun to make it work in a more lifelike way. Scorsese's cinema is an emotional and a virtual prosthetic—one that substitutes for unbearable human absences and one that allows for motion, albeit virtual and

Hugo's Catholicism about technology, its eagerness to merge the romance of analog equipment (trains, clocks) with the exultation of digital effects, is making the case that machines have always *been* digital, that there is no real distinction between eras of technology. Likewise, humans have always strived to recognize themselves—and what they want of themselves—in their technology, and that there is a strange comfort in coming to terms with the fact that we do not require free will in order to live, that much of what we are is *automatic.* This is why *Hugo* ends with the automaton and not the boy. If Hugo is the proto-filmmaker who moves from a place of heroic martyrdom outside of life to one of praise inside the circle, from viewing Isabelle to being narrated by her, to aligning his life with a set of automatisms, he has both escaped the threat of judgement and, unfortunately, its ethical benefits.

  In the last chapter, I suggested that if we are to theorize the post-human through a study of its media, if we are to theorize a more ethical organism that is able to reconcile mediation with sustainability, we need to confront, following Jonas' model, what the development of the cinematic image has contributed to the organism's ever-increasing "degrees of mediacy." Where does the *cinematic drive* lead? The kind of self-reflexive cinema on display here, I've argued, is in the process of answering these questions in real-time, but their solutions—their statements on the matter—will take the form of *automatisms*: as phenomena that appear with a life of their own, but emerge out of an on-going, but intentional, hermeneutic process. The difference between being stuck within yourself and achieving even the vantage to be able to make the ludicrous-seeming claim, with conviction, that you are not a robot, is not small thing, and in a post-cinema age of mediation there is no algorithm or method to get us there. It is one of the means of hermeneutics to embrace the notion that it is possible for a medium, for an 'artificial thing', to achieve something of the organic, to be both *in media res* and to achieve a stable form, to produce an *eidos*, a thing that has its own autonomy, and that can both move bodies and sustain a medium *in media res*.

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vicarious, in places one could never go. In a few weeks, Steven Spielberg's version of *Tintin*, done via motion-capture technology, will be on screens. Well, for Scorsese, the very fact of filming is, from the outset, motion capture—the mechanization, the very machine-ization of human life, in order not to supplant its humanity but to augment it, and, indeed, to discover aspects of it that had hitherto gone unnoticed, unlived, unknown. His cinema isn't a machine of fantasies but of discoveries, not of surrogates but of untapped psychic realities." Richard Brody, "Martin Scorsese's Cybercinema," *The New Yorker*, November 23, 2011, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/hugo-martin-scorseses-cybercinema.

By the end of this dissertation, we will have identified two automatisms. The first, which we've already seen in *Cave*, and most forcefully in *Hugo*, is the deployment of an avatar for cinema, a figure that is too unconventional to be an allegory, too complicated to be a metaphor, too abstract to be a symbol. The emerging automatism deployed by *Hugo* reveals the contours of a medium that might address our loss of purpose in a materialist/instrumentalist world but allow us to recover our enchantment. In that sense, the figure of the automaton is not just a way to make the digital more palatable, but a real affirmation of the need—however unclearly or unimaginatively articulated in *Hugo*—for the material body. And it does this, in the end, because of what it hopes the digital will be able to do for this little orphaned boy and for the broken man, the artist who was one of the first human beings to experience what it meant to have one's dreams poured out into celluloid. In witnessing the generation of Hugo's enchantment and the boy's new role reliving the past of the previous generation, Méliès has, indeed, turned back the clock, but has done so outside of the renewing of a tradition; he has done so by renewing a relation with creativity. This, I'd argue, is where *Hugo* puts its faith in the digital.

This idea of the next iteration of the cinematic drive, the spectral, frameless, pliable reality of the digital-image regime Elsaesser opines, is perhaps not primarily a fantasy of the immersiveness of the image and the discovery of a new degree of spatial freedom, but a fantasy of how digital tools allow us to make and remake our world with ease. This ease of making, of course, includes the promise of easy *un*making, the ability to undo our mistakes and start over with just a key stroke. In this, the digital is the most appropriate possible conceit for a children's story—one in which, no matter how devastating, evil can be dispelled and everything will go back to normal, unscarred (and, in this, children's films are all environmentalist fantasies). The cinematic drive is thus not simply the desire to preserve the world, say, for posterity or salvation; it is also the desire to have complete control over it: to unmake it, to remake it, and to *undo* it. The capacity of this new automatism to erase history, is a reminder that art criticism remains, as always, and even as it increasingly becomes a philosophy of life, a philosophy of history—both personal and medial.

The notion of a dead or obsolete medium is not part of Jonas' theory of mediation. Is an old media like an old form of life? Cavell would argue, like Jonas, that whatever the route, the tendency is always towards increased mediation. *Hugo*, for its part, seems to be capable of

fantasizing that media never die, that art resolves dualistic tensions better than philosophy can. Taking this cue, and moving on to the next chapter, we enter a world where both skepticism and responsibility seem to be held permanently at bay. Origins are fluid in time, identities are in play, and other minds exist in watchful and dependable silence. In *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, the ultimately displaced (and automatically replaced) question at the heart of *Hugo*—"why do I have to die?"—meets its mournful consciousness.

CHAPTER 3: CONSCIOUSNESS AND CRAVING IN
UNCLE BOONMEE WHO CAN RECALL HIS PAST LIVES

Introduction: Waking Up

They are sitting on the patio overlooking the dark unbroken jungle, discussing stir-fried chilies and where to sleep, when ever-so-slowly Huay (Natthakarn Aphaiwonk)—the long-dead wife of Uncle Boonmee (Thanapat Saisaymar)—materializes at an empty seat. This conversation and apparition all play out in a 1m30s, unbroken, eye-level, medium long shot, minimally lit by a

single overhead bulb glowing at the dead center of the top middle third of the frame (fig. 33). Before Huay appears, Boonmee (on the far right) and his guests are crowded on one side of the table—a reasonable attempt to create intimacy at a table too large for three and perched on the edge of a jungle. The way the carefully composed frame creates a stage for a second composition to materialize with the arrival (via slow lap-dissolve) of the ghost, gives an early hint to the way *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* structures and sustains a stable cinematic world on the feathered edge between being and non-being. When the ghost appears, she *balances* the world.

Fig. 33: Waiting without knowing. The ghost of Huay appears.

Huay materializes wearing a simple blue-white blouse, is fine featured, with long straight black hair, parted in the middle—indistinctive, still semi-transparent, but not exactly *super*natural. With the diction of a somnambulist she turns to address her still living husband's subdued surprise. She acts as if she is hearing him for the first time in a long time, as if her

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nerves are miles longer, her reactions superslowed. She has no more sense of time, she explains. Uncle Boonmee tells Huay that he often wonders if she's okay, if she has enough to eat, if she's cold, treating her as a material body with material needs. She smiles gently, but it's not clear if she remembers how smiles signify. She says that she remembers feeling cold and lonely after the funeral, and she recalls how the supplies her sister left her at the temple felt good and comforting, and how Boonmee's voice was reassuring. But without a change in her tone, as if she's retelling a simple fact, she wonders about the verifiability of the voices that she heard: "perhaps they were being replayed by my dying consciousness." This strange admission of skepticism—essentially the ghost is admitting to wondering if she has access to the world anymore or is being haunted by her own memories—invites us to establish, at the outset of this film, an emotional and intellectual comfort with the disorientation caused by the intermingling of the material and the immaterial. We are also invited to ask a lot of ontological questions: if our consciousness dies with our bodies, then what remains of us to be born again? Are the dinner guests speaking to Huay's *soul*? Her projection? Who/what is doing the projecting?

Huay is a Theravada Buddhist either reincarnated as an animistic spirt or caught in some kind of karmic limbo. Dead for nineteen years, far longer than even the 49 days Tibetan Buddhists reserve for the completion of the karmic calculus of rebirth, we might wonder if her ambiguous status is a subtle provocation on the part of the filmmakers: a critique, perhaps, of the lack of a Buddhist monastic tradition for women in Thailand. Or, maybe, Huay's experience is the product of the matrilineal-based ancestor worship still practiced in parts of Northern Thailand, the belief that a deceased matriarch will persist as a ghost for three generations before reincarnation in order to help her loved ones and descendants. The writer/director of *Uncle Boonmee*, Apichatpong Weerasethakul—who has admitted in interviews his high level of comfort with both Buddhism and quantum mechanics[161]—seems to be crafting a super-natural ontology for his characters that is, by turns, traditional and iconoclastic.

From a traditional Buddhist perspective, it's important to note that Huay's experience of 'consciousness' should not be confused with an experience of 'self'. Buddhism teaches the doctrine of non-self, the belief that selfhood is really only a 'clusters of habits' (to paraphrase David Hume), and it is the illusion of self—and the moral hedonism the illusion permits—that

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[161] Kim Ji-Hoon, "Learning About Time: An Interview with Apichatpong Weerasethakul," *Film Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (2011): 52.

traps us in cycles of rebirth. Consciousness is just one phenomena of many that aggregates in living beings and is just as easily shed as the non-self continues 'its' paradoxical karmic journey. In Thailand, questions about the non-existence of the self are more than esoteric theology; relatively recent debates around the self's existence have resulted in charges of heresy and threats of violence.[162] If Huay is just one more Buddhist trying to reach *nirvana* and not some utterly new post-modern projection-spirit, it would seem that she is still grappling with the illusion of self and what of her exists beyond consciousness—or, at least, she hasn't found a way to talk to Boonmee about her experience without using the language of self, without talking about her needs, and desires, and most importantly, her uncertainty. But while Huay's complex ghost-hood—whatever the spiritual logic—is clearly an imaginative engagement with the Buddhist/animist religious traditions of Thailand, her *skepticism*, as we will see, is very cinematic. What else are we supposed to make of the idea that consciousness is a kind of *device* that involuntarily *replays* memories as it dies? Is this cinematic skepticism a sign of attachment holding Huay back from enlightenment?

Consciousness split from bodies. Content split from form. The following analysis of *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, 2010 Palme d'Or winner and fifth critically lauded feature film of Thai director Apichatpong Weerasethakul, pays close attention to how the presence or absence of consciousness is woven throughout its structure. This is a film that spins up self-reflexivity out of a sophisticated playfulness with both the conventions of cinema and a materialist/mystical connection to indexical photography. At its heart is an old-fashioned distinction between the material and the immaterial rendered permeable by religion and cinema: a distinction that Buddhism/animism, in its own way, hopes to undo—as does Jonasian eco-philosophy.

Before briefly examining the philosophic context of post-dualism where this film seems to so effortlessly travel, and before turning to the film itself, it's worth a brief pause to admire how Huay-the-ghost comes into being for *us*, the film viewer, through the automatism of cinematic-ghost-as-super-imposition. After she materializes via optically printed lap dissolve, and the dinner guests recoil to one end of the table, the camera cuts to a medium-close three-shot with Huay offscreen (to the left and behind us). After a long conversation in this manner

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[162] Rory Mackenzie, *New Buddhist Movements in Thailand: Towards an Understanding of Wat Phra Dhammakaya and Santi Asoke* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 51.

with the living on-screen and the ghostly off (it is through this framing that we hear the line about her 'dying consciousness'), Boonmee offers her a glass of water. He passes it to another dinner guest, Tong (Sakda Kaewbuadee), there is a cut, and Tong tentatively places it on the table in front of her (fig. 34). Because the ghost—technically—is a superimposition on top of a background (a supra image which includes Tong, the table, and the glass, all imaged in a separate time and place from the image of Huay), the glass seems to appear 'inside' of her. By choosing to try and put a transparent material *in front* of a transparent ghost created by superimposition, Tong (as a proxy for the filmmakers) has given

away the photographic trick (if this film had been made with CGI, we'd be able to see *through* the glass and *to* the ghost). Apichatpong's choice to place a transparent glass full of transparent liquid in the same space as a semi-transparent cinematic entity is an exceptionally self-reflexive gesture, a way of indulging in the power of this complex automatism to miraculously summon the filmic existence of a non-material/trans-human into our consciousness while also acknowledging a limit to how the cinematic imaginary of the psychophysical is able to

Fig. 34: Layers on top of layers of transparency (cropped frame)

share space with the actually physical. The ghost may have *told* us about her psychophysical reality, one that includes the satisfaction of her needs and, presumably, her ability to interact with the world, but we haven't *seen* it … at least, not yet. This automatism, by its nature, is extremely tentative about the boundaries of photographic layers and the meeting of imagination with reality.

However, Huay will also be granted full materiality by this film. Later on, no longer transparent, she will sit with Boonmee through the long afternoon of his dialysis. She writes diligently in a book to record the progress of his treatment as tubes gurgle out of his stomach and leafy tree fingers slide over the windowsill with every breath of wind. They sit quietly and politely. Presently, pushing his surgical tubes gently aside, the old man rises up and hugs her

tightly. "I love you so much," he says. "How will I find you in the afterlife?" While her body may be empathetic, her voice is still monotone and distant. She tells him that ghosts are attached to people, not to places. If that's true, Boonmee begins to realize, what will happen when his body dies?—what will be left of him for her to return to?

It's a curious and lovely moment in this curious and patient film. While the trans-cultural legibility of the semi-transparent super-imposed figure provides a kind cinematic evidence for the possibility of moving images to divine the spiritual—to help the desirous and suffering think through the paradoxes of Buddhism, perhaps—the film is reticent about transcendence, its interest lying more in the taste of tamarind honey than karmic accountability. Despite the slow pacing, the emphasis on 'empty' frames, and the flat and affectless acting, it is not a film about detachment. Especially in the way it holds and withholds the presence of consciousness, scene by scene, the film is dramatizing, on behalf of its characters, and at the level of its form, the shape and range of their desire, especially as that desire persists in proximity to an uncertain past. After all, how else are we to understand Boonmee's unusual ability to remember his past lives than as signaling a deep and abiding attachment to the world? He is no enlightened Buddha, after all, but a man deeply concerned about loss, about who will inherit his farm, and if he will ever be able to recognize his son. This attachment to the world is surely the source of his grief—but it may also be the means of his liberation.

Consciousness, Post-Dualism

Jonas' call for a metaphysical response to the environmental crisis is grounded in his understanding of our current, post-dualist metaphysical condition. As described in the introduction of this dissertation, his "mental history" posits—in the broadest possible terms—a human philosophic journey from an early period of psychophysical totality in which *everything* seemed alive and death was "a vexing and mysterious riddle" (the animism of Northern Thailand has its roots in this kind of metaphysics) to a contemporary reductionist materialist one, an era under the dominance of death in which life appears as a mysterious phenomenon. We arrived here via the long history of dualism, what he calls the most "pregnant chapter in the history of man's interpretation of himself. At its hands, the paradox of life received its most antithetical articulation and, on it is expiration, was left behind in its most irreconcilable form" (26).

The Western philosopher most associated with first theorizing dualism is René Descartes, who persuasively made the case in works like *The Treatise of Man* (unfinished in 1637, published posthumously in 1664) that in order to explain the human being, a kind of division of labour is necessary. "First I must describe the body on its own; then the soul, again on its own; and finally I must show how these two natures would have to be joined and united in order to constitute men who resemble us."[163] For Descartes, the material laws of the universe apply to the *res extensa* (the physical realm as it extends is space), while an immaterial domain, with its own laws, is the proper home of consciousness (*res cogitans*, or 'thinking thing'). The material and immaterial are rigorously split in this system with interaction between the two only occurring in a special transcendental organ that Descartes identified as the "pineal gland." This split was not simply a way to save the notion of the human soul; it was also a way of establishing the proper field for scientific investigation—the *res extensa*—untroubled by messy mental processes. This intellectual approach was immensely influential and, in many ways, still persists today.

Jonas explains that though this division was expedient for scientific revolution and consistent with a much longer religious history of positing a trans-mundane spiritual reality to help mollify the human fear of death, it could not persist as our scientific appetites increased. Eventually—and both David Hume's anti-teleological naturalist-psychology and Charles Darwin's theory of evolution can take much of the credit—consciousness too would be subject to scientific investigation and would lose the protection of the Cartesian philosophic firewall. Enter the monism of *materialism* (or 'physicalism', if we wish to distinguish it from the Marxist variant) and the notion that *all is extension*, that consciousness is fully explainable by physical laws. And enter *idealism* as a countervailing argument, an alternative to what Karl Pearson called the "crude materialism of older physicists."[164] This monism proffered some variant of the idea that all things are imbued with mind or spirit, that consciousness and the world, including the organic body, are all made of the same stuff and, for all intents and purposes, reality is simply "an idea in the mind of God" (Berkeley) or, à la the logical positivists, a mental construct of sense data. Both monisms are active today, to some degree, though both claim to explain reality totally. Jonas argues, however, that they are both inadequate as comprehensive

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[163] Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, 1:79.
[164] Karl Pearson, *The Grammar of Science*, Everyman's Library (London: Dent, 1937), vii.

systems: idealism is unable to explain the-thing-in-itself, and materialism is unable to explain consciousness (17).

What is Jonas' real concern here? Besides the messiness of this current metaphysical situation, what is the danger? The answer, simply, is that on Jonas' account it is very hard—if not impossible—to make a materialist or idealist case for environmentalism. Neither a materialist physics nor an idealist psychology is able to answer the question, '*why ought the human species go on?*' This is why Jonas urges for the importance of an "image of man" and a metaphysics that encourages us to see an essential correspondence between the deeper understanding of figuration and the re-theorizing of mind as immanent to the cosmos. However, this is not an easy task, as evidenced by the tremendous flourishing of 'neo-materialist', 'post-humanist', and body-oriented critical theorizing that has emerged in literary studies, film studies, media studies, feminist studies, the social sciences, and beyond since the 1970s.[165] As Jonas puts it, there is no going back to a pre-dualistic philosophy, because the "two-ness which it asserts is grounded in reality itself." His solution is a "new, integral philosophical monism" that is able to see dualism as well as the partial monisms of materialism and idealism as "faces of its being or phases of its becoming" (26). *The Phenomenon of Life* is an attempt to establish the grounds for this investigation. Jonas does make the case multiple times for the importance to think of "life" not primarily as our human "conscious lives" but as material life, organic life— but to do so in a way that is freed from a reductive materialist account of reality, and thus, makes room for a renewed understanding of consciousness. It is for this reason that Jonas argues that "materialism has an advantage over idealism as a meeting ground with the problem of life, since [organic life] can be less easily evaded there" (26).

According to Thomas Nagel, though some form of idealism initially led the charge against dualism—and much of our contemporary philosophy issues from the rich diversity of idealist thinking—materialism eventually, rapidly, and a bit obscurely became the dominant philosophic mode of understanding reality.[166] Nagel has spent much of his philosophic career questioning this monism and, like Jonas, he takes as his starting point the inability of

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[165] c.f. M. Hauskeller, C.D. Carbonell, and T.D. Philbeck, *The Palgrave Handbook of Posthumanism in Film and Television* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016); D. Coole et al., *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Duke University Press, 2010).
[166] Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False*, 37.

materialism to account for consciousness. Consciousness: the phenomenon of being awake to both one's surroundings *and* inner life. Consciousness: what makes it possible for us to catch a fly-ball, solve a puzzle, and to feel like a coherent self. From an evolutionary bio-materialist perspective, consciousness is an epiphenomenon resulting from a whole series of successful adaptations: fear of death, ability to function in a community, the ability to process our unconscious desires into action, etc. The reductionist account, a purely materialist account, attempts to show how what we experience as consciousness is nothing more than the confluence of effects created by basic processes of the central nervous system. Nagel, however, argues:

> All these theories seem insufficient as analyses of the mental because they leave out something essential that lies beyond the externally observable grounds for attributing mental states to others, namely, the aspect of mental phenomena that is evident from the first-person, inner point of view of the conscious subject: for example, the way sugar tastes to you or the way red looks or anger feels, each of which seems to be something more than the behavioral responses and discriminatory capacities that these experiences explain.[167]

Nagel offers a couple of reasons why what he calls the neo-Darwinian/materialist account is incorrect. The first concerns how dependent the theory is upon contingency and the kind of cop-out thinking this encourages: i.e. name a phenomenon that seems beneficial to an organism, no matter how complex, and neo-Darwinists will maintain that evolution will invent it (given enough time). And secondly, while the Darwinian account might hypothesize why certain consciousness-like behaviors are beneficial to an organism, so much of what we associate with being conscious—for example, the feeling of red or our sense that a flower is beautiful or what it's like to be human: the *qualia* of phenomenal experience—seems in excess of what is needed for mere survival. Consciousness seems in excess to its procreative use-value.

Nagel's contribution to this problem, besides making clear (he hopes) that neo-Darwinist assumptions about the nature of reality are subject to a certain degree of willful blindness and non-falsifiability, is to lay the groundwork for a surprising question: if we reject the notion of a divine creator or intelligence (Nagel is an atheist), can we develop a non-dualistic theory of reality that truly accounts for mind as a kind of *final cause* (a purpose for reality), a theory that supports the conscious observation that the universe tends towards legibility? He is stepping

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[167] Ibid., 38.

into the very muddy waters of a kind of post-materialist teleology: an approach that, to many commentators, seems as old-fashioned as vitalism.[168] But Nagel maintains the logical consistency of his argument: "Mind, as a development of life, must be included as the most recent stage of this long cosmological history, and its appearance, I believe, casts its shadow back over the entire process and the constituents and principles on which the process depends."[169] In short, Nagel advocates for a kind of hermeneutic open-mindedness that, while perhaps not clearly influential on the mundane work of day-to-day physical scientists, will produce an important revision to the grander cosmic narrative. He writes,

> This means that some kind of psychophysical theory must apply not only nonhistorically, at the end of the process, but also to the evolutionary process itself. That process would have to be not only the physical history of the appearance and development of physical organisms but also a mental history of the appearance and development of conscious beings. And somehow it would have to be one process, making both aspects of the result intelligible.[170]

Nagel calls this imagined philosophy of our reality a "postmaterialist theory … a unified explanation of how the physical and the mental characteristics of organisms developed together, and it would have to do so not just by adding a clause to the effect that the mental comes along with the physical as a bonus."[171] Nagel and Jonas both share an uncertainty about how to proceed, though for Jonas, the starting point to such a mental history is a return to the question of death. An encounter with death, according to Jonas, is an encounter with that which 'feels' the most *un*real: "if life is the natural and comprehensible thing, death—its apparent negation—is a thing unnatural and cannot be truly real" (8). The most material evidence of death, the "corpse, this primal exhibition of 'dead' matter," Jonas argues, becomes an image of that "which was the limit of all understanding." But as a limit, it "is therefore the first thing to be accepted at its face value." We can start to see how the corpse, as a symbol and a phenomenon,

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[168] For a slim book of philosophy it attracted a surprising amount of critical attention. See Simon Blackburn, "Thomas Nagel: A Philosopher Who Confesses to Finding Things Bewildering," *New Statesman*, November 8, 2012, https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/culture/2012/11/thomas-nagel-philosopher-who-confesses-finding-things-bewildering. ; Brian Leiter and Michael Weisberg, "Do You Only Have a Brain? On Thomas Nagel," *The Nation*, October 22, 2012, https://www.thenation.com/article/do-you-only-have-brain-thomas-nagel/. Nagel published a rebuttal of sorts in Thomas Nagel, "The Core of 'Mind and Cosmos'," *The New York Times*, August 18, 2013, https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/08/18/the-core-of-mind-and-cosmos/.
[169] *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False*, 8.
[170] Ibid., 52.
[171] Ibid., 46-47.

accrues an 'excess' of reality, and how, according to Jonas' mental history, that reality starts to drain away from a panvitalistic monism and creates the inciting 'problem' that leads to dualism. Jonas' subject, then, is the kind of human consciousness that has emerged since the 'discovery' of death, and it is within this context that he argues for a reconsideration of the human not as the apex of an evolutionary chain, but as an exemplar of a psychophysical organism, one from which we are encouraged to then understand the rest of the organic world. Jonas, like Nagel, is seeking out the occasion to thoroughly interrogate our philosophic prejudice against anthropomorphism and zoomorphism and to understand the humanities as doing the hermeneutic work of renarrativizing the emergence of a post-materialist, psychophysical monism—one that is able to describe an organism defined by increasing degrees of mediation.

The connection between the corpse and the notion of media, of course, is one made by Bazin in his essay the "Ontology of the Photographic Image." Here he crafts a mental history for photography that goes back to Egyptian mummification and the desire to overcome death. As rich as this connection is, it should be noted that Bazin's account thus begins *after* the early advent of dualism, after the emergence of the break that metaphysically isolated humans from the rest of nature. Can we push the story of indexical photography back even further, into a time pre-dualism—and thus, into, a post-dualist future? The kind of eco-philosophical speculation that in *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* was accomplished, I argued, by a diversity of cinematic motion, in *Uncle Boonmee* is explored via indexical photography and an attempt both wishful and wistful to activate the Bazinian notion that the photograph shares the same ontology—is made of the same psychophysical stuff—as what it images. The invention of photography has smuggled into our world a unique psychophysical ontology by promising unmediated material reality but—as we've learned over the last nearly two hundred years of modern skepticism—reflecting back to us the omnipresence of mind. This is where *Uncle Boonmee* finds inspiration for its own attempts to represent immaterial consciousness attached to the world.

A Post-Materialist Cinema

A materialist cinema is one that uses the very materiality of film—its nature as industrial product, as commodity, as massive industry—to draw attention to how things are made, to the relationships of things, and to puncture an implacable mystification that accompanies the naturalization of commodities and the dissemination of false consciousness. This may be

attempted, as was the case with American structuralist experimental film in the 70s and 80s, as a (mostly) formal exercise.[172] Along these lines, but with a diametrically opposed goal, we could also go looking for an *immaterial* cinema, one that turns its energy from the material basis to the experience of projection to make a case for a higher reality, a parallel reality, that is reactive to our desires, to our subjectivity, to our consciousness and internal narratives. The astonishing history and emergence of spirit photography (and the painful debunking of its brazen fraudulence) attests to this aspect of the cinematic drive.

An idealist cinema, on the other hand, is much more familiar to audiences of Hollywood narrative films. *Hugo*, for example, though its metaphysics tends decidedly towards

Fig. 35: A portrait of Mary Todd Lincoln and her deceased husband, Abraham, by pioneering spirit photographer, William H. Mumler, 1872

the materialist and mechanical, nonetheless peddles an idealist message: the magic of *Hugo* may not 'really be' magic—the coincidence that makes the happy ending possible may be arbitrary—but if a group of actors truly *believe* in that magic, then that is enough to base a community upon. The Victorian obsession with taking *memento mori* photographs of dead loved-ones, especially of dead children, posed as if they are sleeping along with their living brothers and sisters is also paradoxically idealist. Often in these photographs, the dead family member appears the sharpest and clearest because of the inherent photogeny of the corpse: while the living start to ghost-away as they fidget during the long exposure times, the clarity of the corpse intensifies and doubles the 'deadness' of the photograph. The final photograph is meant to maintain the fiction that there is something in the dead that might still be captured as if it were alive; it testifies to our own willingness to repress the brute facts of irreversibility in order to stage a moment that might-have-been. It praises a willful suspension of disbelief as more important than anything profilmic and forces the living subjects into such poses of artifice that perhaps they find relief in focusing on the camera. The camera

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[172] c.f. for example, Peter Wollen, "'Ontology' and 'Materialism' in Film*," *Screen* 17, no. 1 (1976).

grants the living a measure of the same temporality as the dead—for at least the length of an exposure—and gives them something to do in the presence of the corpse.

What about a *post*-materialist cinema? Is this what we're seeing in *Uncle Boonmee*, a film about final causes in the absence of divine intelligence? A secular spirituality? A unified psychophysical metaphysics alive to the question of death? The study of film, as we've noted in the example of Bazin, has inspired exactly these kinds of questions. The idea of a corpse being both a concrete thing (a kind of fact) and an intangible symbol of the limits of reality—a determinate thing that creates an indeterminate image—is resonant with the cinematic theory of Siegfried Kracauer. The realist cinema, for Kracauer, requires a recognizable presence of intention (signified through artistry, ideas, and a quest for meaning), up against a physical reality that provides context for artistry, but also exceeds both artistry and intention. The cinematic image, defined by this excess, pushes us back to material reality. Kracauer most perfectly

Fig. 36: A memento mori photograph. The young woman in the middle, posed with her parents, is dead. 1860s

summarizes this idea in his "Marseille Notebooks" when he writes that film art is the confrontation of "intention with being."[173] The spectator is "wavering between self-absorption and self-abandonment…the stream of consciousness [experienced in the dream state of film watching] in a measure parallels the 'flow of life,' one of the main concerns of the medium. Consequently, films that feature that flow are most likely to initiate both movements of dreaming."[174] The "two directions of dreaming" Kracauer mentions are 1) toward an object, and 2) a moving further away the closer you get as you become lost in a series of substitutions, condensations, replacements, and the chain of dream-world semiotics. The indeterminate image thus always provides an unmastered, unaccounted-for quality.

Kracauer's deeply held belief that cinema could be a source of ontological thinking and critique (these are the only kinds of films he calls *cinematic*) leads him to invest cinema with an ethical imperative to do more than just present reality. In *Theory of Film*, he addresses the problem of describing reality by synthesizing (or, rather, revealing) a broader, "more inclusive" reality by bringing "perceived reality" and cinematic ontology into a dialectic. He writes:

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[173] Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, xvii.
[174] Ibid., 166.

> [C]inematic films evoke a reality more inclusive than the one they actually picture. They point beyond the physical world to the extent that the shots or combinations of shots from which they are built carry multiple meanings. Due to the continuous influx of the psychophysical correspondences thus aroused, they suggest a reality which may fittingly be called "life." This term as used here denotes a kind of life which is still intimately connected, as if by an umbilical cord, with the material phenomena from which its emotional and intellectual contents emerge.[175]

In other words, for Kracauer, there is a certain subset of reality that appears especially suited to cinema and receives a kind of ontological charge when it is folded into a narrative film. What results is not mere representation—though Kracauer is very appreciative of the nuances of representation—but a 'truer' reality, or at least, a reality redeemed from abstraction (it is in the abstraction of the world that Kracauer sees the malicious progress of instrumental thinking). He calls this uncovered reality "life." Kracauer's sensitivity to the 'organic world' and instrumental materiality—especially the material reality of consumable products and war machines—is exceedingly complex: he sees the ease, and the inherent danger, with which human beings conflate the living and organic body of the crowd with the purely material "mass ornament." I want to focus, though, on what for Kracauer in the quote above truly distinguishes the reality of life: its potent connection with the material from which it comes. He uses an organic metaphor: the "umbilical" connection between material phenomena (the form) and its "emotional and intellectual contents." Our contemporary material reality,[176] according to Kracauer, fosters an alienation of content from form and 'inner world' from 'outer world'. In the modern urban reality, that inner world is alive; the outer world is dead. Kracauer wants to move that 'aliveness' into the space between outer and inner world, into the umbilical cord. This aliveness, for Kracauer, is animated by cinema: it is sourced in the material evidence of the image, but also in the spectator, the interpreter, and the consciousness 'alive' to its environment. It is a material world redeemed from instrumentalism by the "psychophysical correspondences" generated by cinema that seeks out the proper subjects. As rich an idea as this is, it's still, in effect, putting cinema in the role of animating dead matter. The redemption of reality occurs by extending the

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[175] Ibid., 71.
[176] It should be remembered that Kracauer's discussion of material reality is, for the most part, an *urban* material reality. The contrast between non-life and life is thus much starker than in a rural or global context.

human mind outwards via the prosthesis of cinema. Kracauer's sense of the materialist power of film, according Miriam Hansen,

> [N]ot only undercuts the sovereign subject of bourgeois ideology but with it a large anthropocentric worldview that presumes to impose meaning and control upon a world that increasingly defies traditional distinctions between the human and the nonhuman the living and the mechanical, the unique (integrated, inner-directed) individual and the mass subject, civilization and barbarism.[177]

Does *Uncle Boonmee* fit this standard? Does the film's Buddhist ambiguity about the authority of the senses undermine it? Can we at least detect the post-dualistic reality that influences its structure? Apichatpong is very articulate about his hopes for cinema in interviews, as well as the potential for a self-reflexive and sensual cinema, a mind/body cinema. For his part, he is consciously working at such a level to not so much expand consciousness, but to make the existence and emergence of consciousness a sensual experience:

> Film is able to increase the self-awareness of the audience—to become aware of the other people sitting in the dark, to see the activities on the screen as illusion, and to realize that this is an animal behavior. But for me as a filmmaker, it's less about self-awareness than about getting to learn about time. In *Uncle Boonmee*, I came to learn a lot about how time affects us, how it triggers certain emotions, and how it helps audiences have a particular relationship with cinematic time. So it's primarily not about my awareness, but about their awareness.[178]

This is the perfect opening to go travelling through this film, to go searching for a sense of what kind of metaphysical landscape is opened up by such a cinematic multiplicity of consciousnesses.

Form and Content

Uncle Boonmee unfolds with the sleepy but sober pace of a tarot card reading. Put simply, it's the story of the last days of the titular Uncle Boonmee and the visit of his sister-in-law, Jen (Jenjira Pongpas), to his farm (tamarind orchard and apiary) at the edge of the ancient jungle of Northern Thailand. Jen arrives with her nephew Tong, an affable young monk and a good cook.

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[177] Miriam Bratu Hansen, "Introduction," in *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), xvii.
[178] Ji-Hoon, "Learning About Time: An Interview with Apichatpong Weerasethakul," 52.

Her reasons for coming are not clear: we might suspect that she knows that her brother-in-law's time is short. Over the course of what appears to be a night, a day, and a night, Boonmee is visited by three supernatural creatures: his dead wife Huay, his son Boonsong, and a memory of his past life. Seemingly more haunted by his memories than the supernatural, Boonmee, at last, sets out into the jungle to meet his own death. The final sequence of the film turns on a very strange encounter between Tong and Jen on the night of Boonmee's funeral. Simple and unassuming, the film patiently crafts an affectionate tribute to a way of being sensitive to the thinnest points of the boundary between this world and another. By turns poignant, stone-faced, and goofy, the film concocts a kind of philosophical fugue state where ideas come and go, threads picked up and lost: it is a film inspired as much by the capacity of cinema to forget as to remember.

The progress of memory—from experience, to history, to rebirth or annihilation, to knowledge or acknowledgment—is an almost compulsive natural force in this cinematic world. Though an opening title card (and the title of the film) tell us that Boonmee is capable of recalling his past lives, there is very little evidence of that in the film. There are three flashback scenes in the film: the first, of a water buffalo escaping into the jungle, is not clearly associated with any character; the second, about a lewd piscine fairytale, seems more connected to Jen or Tong than Boonmee; and the third, about a man becoming a monkey-ghost, is the story of Boonmee's son, Boonsong. The only thing we learn directly about Boonmee's past life is what little he tells us about his 'current' life: his life as a married man, as a father, as a soldier, as a killer of communists, as a killer of bugs, as a photographer, and as a farmer. The curious decision to leave these metadiegetic scenes obliquely connected to the primary storyline, and thus not contained inside of any one subjectivity (or life), suggests that Apichatpong may have discovered something, or suspects something, about the way cinema is able to present *current* lives, contemporaneity, and currency. More than a catalogue of past lives, *Uncle Boonmee* depicts the curious evanescence of a current life when moonlit by the surprisingly persistent materiality of the past, even when it is oriented towards the future.

The presence of this past in this film takes inspiration from the filmmaker's own personal attachment to the region of Isaan where the film is set and to which Apichatpong moved with his parents, both doctors, when he was still young. He grew up with a keen sense of a life blurred between urban sprawl and implacable jungle, widespread poverty and archipelagos

of middle-class opportunity. Years later, it was back in Isaan that Apichatpong discovered a monk who had transcribed the story a local man named Boonmee who claimed that he could recall all of his past lives "as if they were a movie." The book drew Apichatpong into the past of the region, and in particular to the permeable zone between the jungles of Northern Thailand and the cultivated farmland at its boundaries. Long a region of para-civilization—at least from the perspective of the Bangkok-based monarchy looking to extend its influence—Isaan is entangled in the sad history of the state-run (and U.S. supported) purging of communists and suspected communists in the 1960s and 70s. The jungle was a safe-haven for communists to go into hiding, and large tracts of it were deforested by the Thai army. One village near the jungle, Nabua, became almost completely devoid of men after many fled to the jungle. This historical event eerily resonated with "an ancient local legend about a widow ghost who abducts any man who enters her empire" and set the groundwork for Apichatpong's interest in combining history and myth into the same cinematic idea.[179] In the video installation *Primitive*, made while he was prepping *Uncle Boonmee*, Apichatpong collaborated with some young men who grew up in Nabua—descendants of the residents who survived the military occupation—to pose set-pieces for the camera that obliquely evoked the history of Isaan without directly addressing the historical pain and suffering. Rather than reaching out to survivors with direct memories of the events, the filmmaker was drawn more to the young people on the periphery of those memories. As Apichatpong describes it, "it was more like we did activities together, playing a kind of game, knowing that this land has this history, and I think that was really enough."[180] Scenes from these avant-garde performance games appear as still photographs in *Uncle Boonmee* during Boonmee's recollection of a dream. This is an intriguing choice: these images created through an instinct to address history by circumventing the memories of a previous generation end up, in a new media, illustrating the inner life of an old man.

The increasing self-reflexivity about this project permitted Apichatpong to pursue a diversity of influences in *Uncle Boonmee*—though all filtered through his slow-cinema sensibility—including Thai horror movies from the 1960s, comic books, and Thai TV costume dramas.[181] The choice to shoot on super-16mm not only helps connect this project to the visual

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[179]Lawrence Chua, "Inverview with Apichatpong Weerasethakul," *BOMB*, no. 114 (2010): 46.
[180] Ibid.
[181] Ibid., 44.

media Apichatpong remembers from growing up in Isaan, but is also a direct effort to connect the theme of mourning in the film to the potential end of film-based cinema. Like *Hugo*, the generative, organic capacity of the film medium—even at a moment of mourning—is the source of hopeful potential. "Film is still like an entity by itself," Apichatpong says in interview. "The phantom is not disappearing but something that transforms itself. Cinema also has been transforming itself."[182]

Given this interest in media history, we might not be surprised to find that, also like *Hugo*, Apichatpong's film poses a father/son relationship at (or, at least, near) its center. As we will see, there is a subtle suggestion in this film that the son might be following in his father's footsteps, defying his father, or—unbeknownst to the younger generation—doing both. May Anadol Ingawanji argues that this intergenerational uncertainty in the film makes sense within the context of what she describes as Thailand's general cultural malaise, exemplified in 2010 by the national obsession with the slow death of a widely beloved (though controversial) monarch.[183] The fantasy of modern art to release a radical change in a familiar medium—the fantasy that such a breakthrough would tell us 'what we are' and 'what we should become'— becomes yet another self-reflexive aspect of *Uncle Boonmee*, an art film leaning heavily on art film tropes subtly addressing a Thai popular culture stuck in state of perpetual waiting.

Uncle Boonmee is a film made out of gentle variation, patient suggestiveness, and the felt presence of another level of meaning that seems close to the surface of the long takes and thickest at the littoral of the ellipses. Ingawanij maintains that "the fundamental attraction of Apichatpong's films lies in their combination of sensorial intensity and temporal reflexivity. We perceive non-synchronicity of time and indeterminacy of space through juxtapositions that stimulate our senses of hearing and touch as intensely as sight."[184] As much as the film invests energy in creating a certain kind of synaesthetic ambience, it also tilts towards a denser ambiguity in five key sequences, sequences that seem to compel exegesis. These are moments when this sedate style seems to lurch forward into an unexpected ontological uncertainty, one sourced in a carefully calibrated and crafted understanding of cinematic conventions. These are

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[182] Ji-Hoon, "Learning About Time: An Interview with Apichatpong Weerasethakul," 52.
[183] May Adadol Ingawanij, "Animism and the Performative Realist Cinema of Apichatpong Weerasethakul," in *Screening Nature: Cinema Beyond the Human*, ed. Anat Pick and Guinevere Narraway (Berghahn Books, 2013), 107.
[184] Ibid., 96

all scenes built around some kind of ambiguity related to consciousness, scenes in which we are meant to become aware of the tenuous but necessary overlaying of consciousness in the creation of a scene. To encounter them is to wonder if some organizing principle or grander aesthetic or philosophic sense links them together. This flickering of multiple consciousnesses in *Uncle Boonmee* will be the background for our reflections on a post-materialist cinema and its potential contribution to eco-philosophy.

The Water Buffalo Escape

The film opens with a relay of glances mediated by an utterly unresolved ambiguity. After a title card informing us that Uncle Boonmee's past lives, human and animal, "rise up before him" we see a shimmering and heavily muscled water buffalo tied to a tree in the moonlight. It's a twilight-for-night shot, and the jungle around the water buffalo is blue and luminescent— it appears 'realistic', but is not entirely convincing. Smoke rising from the ground indicates the presence of a fire—or, more importantly, the absence of the people who let that fire die. The water buffalo pulls on the thin rope that binds it to the tree. We cut to a family—dressed in loincloths and beads, tending to a smoky fire and lying down for the night. They are unaware of the water buffalo. With a smooth tug on the rope, the water buffalo is free.

The water buffalo works its way laterally through the jungle, drifting gently to the lower right corner of the frame where it suddenly stops, its head no longer visible (fig. 37). The camera waits and waits so long that it is impossible not to be struck by the awkward misframing of the shot. Finally—after a sudden 6 second

Fig. 37: The water buffalo in the jungle, misframed

close up of the water buffalo—the animal's keeper wanders into the frame from the opposite side, grabs the rope from the jungle floor and pulls it away. It's because of the careful perfection of the previous images that the apparent submission to contingency here stands out. The edge of the frame is defined, suddenly, as a sloppy and corruptible edge. In a sense, the sloppiness of

the frame reflects our own epistemological conundrum in regard to establishing point of view: which creature onscreen, is in fact, Uncle Boonmee? The water buffalo or the man? The jungle? What, exactly, is the content of this memory?

The promise of recognizing a 'past life' in the progress of the unfolding of a moving image re-intends the image and thus re-enforces its status *as* image. Along with the troubled ontology of 'story', 'being', and 'memory', we get in *Uncle Boonmee* a rarely explored epistemological category: 'past being'. And while horror films and ghost stories have parsed the cinematic conventions of these mind-bending nether-bodies since the earliest days of cinema, few films—outside of the work of Andrei Tarkovsky—have so elegantly questioned the expressive and philosophical effect/affect of the supernatural 'on film'. In *Uncle Boonmee*, all of the ontological categories contend for dominance in our parsing of the image.

This moment of confusion, of category slippage, is taken to another order of complication with the sudden cut that follows the recapturing of the water buffalo. Standing very still, in medium long shot, is the hunched over shape of a shadowy monkey-like creature, a

Fig. 38: The water buffalo *vis-à-vis* the monkey ghost

creature somewhere between natural and supernatural, convincing and kitschy, real and imaginary. We'll later learn to call this creature a monkey-ghost. This creature's eyes glow red, and it seems to be staring into the camera, giving the impression that this shot is a "retrospective POV"[185] and what we've seen is a 180 degree cut. Apichatpong is bringing subtle attention to

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[185] I am using Edward Branigan's vocabulary here for talking about point of view shots. In Branigan's schema, POV structures include a "point/glance" shot (the shot of someone looking) and a "point/object" shot (the thing being looked at). If the point/object follows the point/glance, it is a classic "prospective POV." Retrospective POV shots, on the other hand, are POV pairs that begin not with the subject looking (the point/glance) but with the thing being looked at (the point/object). There is a fascinating epistemological act that takes place with a retrospective POV shot: we must re-intend a previous shot (i.e. summon it in memory) in order to understand the point/glance. Retrospective POV shots thus, in almost all cases, require the imposition of a consciousness onto something that

the conventions of cinema (specifically, the retrospective POV shot), and its subsequent re-intention of the semiotic field, to represent the supernatural: in other words, aligning this privileged category of unnaturalness with the constructedness of cinema and cinema with the supernatural.

In this shot of the monkey-ghost we learn of another consciousness at play in the construction of this scene, and a clue to why the previous frame was unbalanced: what we might have taken to be an objectively neutral scene (or the memory of Uncle Boonmee) is blended with another alien intelligence. The ambiguous status of this event—is it a memory of the buffalo, the man, or the monkey-ghost?— points to a more profound ambiguity: if memories in this film persist across a chain of beings, what is the status of memory in each instantiation? Does memory only exist for a human form? Or is memory only ever half-human?

Another possibility: I wonder if this memory on screen is the memory of the monkey-ghost, who perhaps for the first time in this depopulated jungle, has encountered *man*. The significance of this strange moment—the monkey-ghost meeting man—is the confrontation of a consciousness (in the shape of a monkey-ghost) that is for the first time confronting the form (man, in the shape of the buffalo keeper) that it will one day take. It is an historical moment, in other words, like the birth of images or the birth of cinema, of the sudden encounter with a new kind of mediation. Perhaps it is only in the shape of the human that the monkey-ghost will then be struck with the power to remember backwards—to remember all of these past lives. Here we have the soul in the fullness of its anticipation of being and a reminder of the curious power of cinema to explore the phenomenon of the integrity of consciousness through a cinematically ambiguous point of view. We have also established, early in the film, a complicated sense of what kind of consciousness the *camera* might represent in this film. And indeed, after Huay-the-ghost appears, it is the camera that materializes next.

At the Table of Hungry Ghosts

Still a bit shocked, Boonmee gently asks Huay if she has come from the afterlife to take him away with her. She shakes her head—she has no motive, or purpose: rather, she was simply and irresistibly drawn to him. Boonmee is on the anticipatory edge of death and rebirth, and the

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seemed objectively neutral, uninflected by thought. See Edward Branigan, *Point of View in the Cinema* (Berlin: Mouton Publishers, 1984).

presence of a transmogrifying soul attracts another twilight being: Boonsong, Boonmee's long lost son. Boonsong appears trudging up the steps to the patio as if he's rising from a grave, his red eyes glowing: the creature-design and makeup plays on the edge between hypnotically evocative special effect and low-budget movie monster schlock. Boonsong is a monkey-ghost—half man, half animal, all cinema—and he proceeds to tell the story of his creation. It was Boonmee's love of photography, of all things, that began Boonsong on this hybridized adventure between species.

While using his father's camera to take pictures of the jungle, Boonsong discovered in one of his photographs—a discovery made not in the jungle, notably, but in the half-light of the darkroom (we are seeing this as a flashback now)—a monkey-like blur leaping from the treetops. The image is not particularly incriminating: only an imaginative child who had never seen a blurred-in-time photograph would sense something supernatural in the black and white shapes—and indeed, Boonsong mentions that this monkey-ghost he has now become is the sound he heard rustling in the imaginary jungle of his childhood. Boonsong's obsession with this creature drives him to abandon his photography—we learn that the eyes of these monkey-ghosts, so cinematic, are painfully sensitive to light—and to take one of these monkey ghosts as a wife. He thus becomes one himself, an expression of the transformative power of commitment triumphing over intractable genetics—and, also, in his abandonment, a subtle rebuke to realist photography.
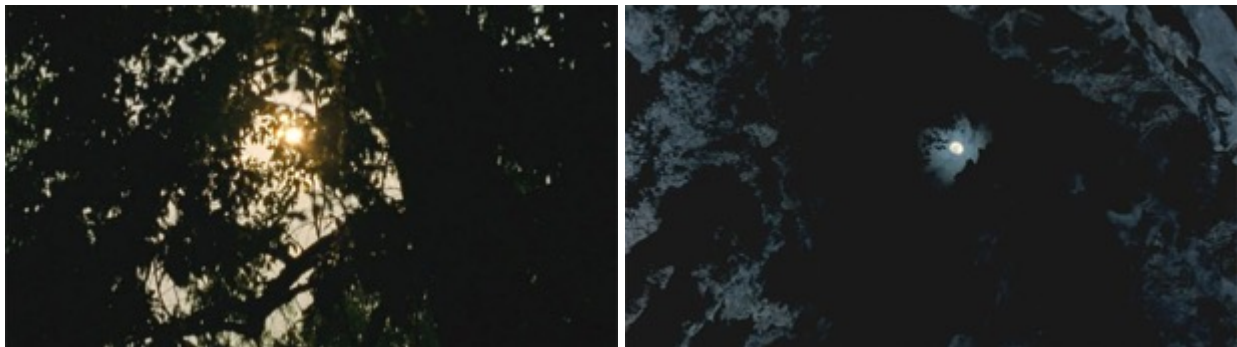
Fig. 39: Day/night, life/afterlife

One of the most striking images in this flashback sequence is used to represent Boonsong's transformation from human being to monkey-ghost. We see the sun (figure 39) through the trees progressively getting dimmer. This image artfully and succinctly summarizes a translation of being from one medium to another—from day creature to night creature, from

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son to shadow. This image also represents the complete abandonment of photography: Boonsong has entered into a world where there is no longer enough light to produce an exposure. He sees the world differently now, and just as he left the "evidence" of the monkey-ghosts "in the unexposed film" he also disappears from record. The significance of this image is re-acknowledged when Boonmee is dying and looks up through a fistula in the cave at the moon. *We* see the moon, but Boonmee cannot—he wonders aloud if it is too dark to see, or he is blind. This last 'glimpse' of heavenly light compels Boonmee's final story: his dream, a dream shown to us completely through still photographs (more on that later).

If the memory of the event at the beginning of the film is the memory of the water buffalo, we are granted the possibility that the water buffalo saw the monkey-ghost. The event we witness thus depicts Uncle Boonmee, as a water buffalo, running away from its domesticators, charging into the jungle, and then stopping short at the sight of a strange creature. By the dress of the water buffalo's tenders we suspect that this scene is set in Thailand's ancient past, but the jungle, the water buffalo, and the monkey-ghost are all timeless. We are invited to occupy the consciousness of a water buffalo, an animal, onto which we can project a key difference from ourselves: the animal has no sense of the supernatural as something that breaks from the natural. And no sense of the temporality that breaks 'primitive Thailand' from contemporary Thailand. We may also remember that Huay—and Boonmee is most struck by this—is frozen, as a ghost, at the age when she died. If photography is a phenomenon that allows us to capture evidence of the supernatural and bridge the temporal, we might pause to realize that in the world of *Uncle Boonmee*, photography is a nonsense category of experience—the 'magic' of photography is *already* in the physics of this world.

In Jonas' account of the image-event we experience an interface between the material world and the immaterial *eidos*. An image is an image because it demonstrates an "ontological incompleteness." The beholder of this phenomenon experiences, in that effacement, the "felt irrelevance" of the material specificity and history of that image and, in resonance with that experience of 'outsideness', (re)discovers their own time-boundedness (i.e. their susceptibility to being captured in a photograph). The trade-off, for the beholder, is the ability to consider an image that is a freed from the "flux of things" and from the "flux of self." Jonas does not discuss the image-event of photography and how it might be different from painting, but Rudolf Arnheim's own efforts to return ontological incompleteness to what he perceived as the

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tendency of photography to *excessive* mimesis gives us a clue to what is involved. Arnheim made the argument on aesthetic grounds that the photographic image (moving or otherwise) is most artistic (most effective/affective) when it most creatively differs from the world it captures (black and white image-making and lack of sound were all positive aspects of the medium to be exploited in Arnheim's account). Hugo Münsterberg made a similar argument on psychological grounds, arguing that there is a great psychological relief from our world promised by the cinematic world, very much in line with what Jonas discovered in the ontology of the image, but only if the "givenness of reality" discovered in the photograph is creatively reworked. Münsterberg writes in *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* (1916) that movies "tells us the human story by overcoming the forms of the outer world, namely, space, time, and causality, and by adjusting the events to the forms of the inner world, namely, attention, memory, imagination, and emotion" creating the possibility of a unity that does not lead outwards, but thanks to a cinematic world, gains "inner freedom," and expresses "the victory of mind over nature."[186] Jonas, of course, given the intention of his study, does not see the divide between inside and outside as neatly as Münsterberg wishes it to be in the cinema, nor would Jonas characterize the victory in terms of "mind over nature." Rather, Jonas is most interested in how that internal image becomes external once again, and, of course, what next evolutionary state of mediation is possible. Perhaps the lesson in Boonsong's experience is not that the photograph needs to be divorced from the world (through the imposition of some human consciousness, detectable as Arnheim argues, in some visual, creative disruption of raw photographic reality) before it can be real. Perhaps we must begin our role in the image-event not from our place as spectators of an image, but, like Boonsong, from our place already inside the image. What must be effaced in the photographic image-event in order that we might vicariously experience the presence of the *past*, is our disbelief.

But that said, what exactly is this "art of photography" that Boonsong announces so portentously (and *bitterly*? Do I detect some critique of his father's pursuit of photography? Or is this slight sneer directed more towards art?), and what is the relation between pursuing art and the transformation that Boonsong endures? There is a hint of the artistic act in Boonsong's transformation, or at least a fantasy of art: something art-like in Boonsong's dedication to

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[186] Hugo Münsterberg, *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study*, trans. Allan Langdale (New York: Routledge, 2002), 148.

complete self-abnegation in the face of radical becoming. But, ultimately, in this film at least, Boonsong remains a haunting, half-dead presence. Unlike Boonmee's experience with Huay, there is no reconciliation in this film: the monkey-ghosts who arrive to witness Boonmee's end appear un-individuated, as duplicates, multiple prints. Unexposed and latent, Boonsong, the man-monkey-ghost-son, may be a work of self-created art, but he is only the idea of a photograph.

The Fairy Tale

Through the odd fairy tale sequence in the middle of the film we are introduced to yet another version of ontological indeterminacy: in this case, a 'story within a story', another flashback to an ambiguous 'past life' told in the style of a fairy tale about a princess, a soldier, and a catfish. To *past life*, *current life*, *natural life*, *human life*, and *supernatural life* we can now add *fictional life*. The sequence is bookended by two shots—the first bumper is of someone sitting in a hammock at twilight (could be Jen or could be Tong—it's very hard to tell); the second bumper is of Jen serenely swatting bugs with an electrified swatter. The film transitions from day to night, indicated by a series of shots taken from inside the house looking out in the jungle, and then a twilight shot of the jungle where smoke is curling from behind some low bushes (perhaps a return to the fire that opened the film?). Suddenly we are in the jungle and might detect a subtle shift: the jungle is now lit as if through a heavy gauze—objects are shadowless; light leaks from everywhere. A princess on a litter is carried by nearly naked soldiers. Through the only unambiguous POV shot in the entire film, we see a bejeweled hand push aside the heavy lace that obscures the litter, reach out and touch the shoulder of a soldier. Without looking, he places his hand delicately upon hers. Of course, from another perspective, the POV shot *is* ambiguous: is this Boonmee looking out through the princess' eyes? Is that his bejeweled hand or another character we haven't met yet?

The princess is soon alone beside a pool at the bottom of small waterfall. She looks into the water and sees her gaunt reflection pebbled by a brown scale-like rash suddenly replaced in a shimmer (a cheesy dissolve) by a peach-faced beauty. The princess stands indignantly and turns to face her lover—the soldier—who has quietly come up behind her. Unable to believe the reflection, and his love, she sends him away. She wants to be alone with her irredeemable ugliness.

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Situating this sequence in proximity to Jen's consciousness makes sense, thematically, after considering an earlier scene when Boonmee informs Tong that Jen was a great beauty in her youth. Like Boonmee's soldierly nationalism, beauty is identified in this film as a marking condition of a life—beauty, and its presence or absence, is a way that a life is divided into *lives*. More significant than the roles we play—student, soldier, husband, uncle—phenomena like beauty, or profound patriotism, define a true ontological field. In other words, the statement "I was once beautiful" communicates at a different register of ontology than "I was once a farmer" or "I was once a king." And just as nationalism expresses a temporal distance through a latent manifestation of guilt (this is how Boonmee 'relives' his *past life* as a solider), beauty is preserved in time through the expression of regret (especially if that beauty fails to be photographed or fails to come across through photography).

While the princess sobs and sings by the pool, an impudent catfish calls to her and

Fig. 40: The 1m47s of nearly abstract bubbles that end the sequence.

proclaims her to be beautiful. She wades into the water, begging the catfish to turn her reflection into reality—an echo of Boonsong's own transformation into an image. The princess begins to strip off her clothes and drops her jewels into the water as an offering. Up to her neck, she surrenders onto her back, pulls open her long soggy skirt, and invites the catfish between her legs. As the princess' body is pushed and pulled by the tumescent catfish, the camera disappears underwater where fish swim indifferently around the princess' jewelry, the interspecies sex at the surface creating no visible effect on the deep currents of the pool. The camera prowls this underwater world until we see nothing but bubbles. Apichatpong here is parodying a cinematic ellipsis—the camera panning away (or dissolving) from the censored event—but to such an extreme that it takes on a surprising signification.

This fairytale, like the water buffalo scene that opens the film, is similarly structured around a human/animal encounter. But instead of retreating at the end to the viewpoint of the monkey-ghost, the camera achieves its most overtly autonomous objectivity. Deep inside this richly mythological sequence, it's as if to represent this strange event the camera strives towards

a reduced syntactic density.[187] The bubbles—I can't help thinking of Shakespeare's fascination with bubbles as the "shape of nothing" or the presence of absence[188]—and the thick gurgling sound they make overwhelm all else. Both the water buffalo scene and this scene, ultimately, are about escape—or, in other words, the *form* of escape. Boonsong, too, is present—physically—but absent from Boonmee's life. He's crossed over to a way of being that Boonmee can only hope to understand but cannot share.

This scene, like all of these scenes about attempting to understand the supernatural in the fullness of their frustrated wish to expose themselves, is about skepticism. Even though the princess sees her reflection in the water and her lover tells her she is beautiful, she does not believe it. We know—or think we know—that she is, in fact, ugly. But she has no outside verification and we can't provide it. There is a moment while the princess is singing, a very strange moment, when she begins to sob visually, but the singing continues, as if suddenly let loose from the diegesis. The princess is split from herself, from her reflection and projection, just as her voice is split from her mouth. In a sense, these cinematic disjunctions anticipate the nearly abstract 'bubble symphony' that ends the sequence. At the bottom of this ontological indeterminacy is the desire to push cinema to the limits of the representable. From this vantage, death appears as a form of transformation and escape, too.

In all of the scenes so far discussed, we encounter a tension between the unfolding of a simple event—a buffalo runs away and is recaptured, a young man relates the story of his obsession and his withdrawal from his family, a young woman drowns herself because she feels unlovable—all presented as fantastical and all imbued with an extra potential for significance

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[187] I am referring to Nelson Goodman's concepts of "syntactic" and "semantic density" as a way of thinking about how artworks can create a sense of meaning through signification and/or reference. A poem, for example, is semantically dense (a lot of meaning is packed into a small space), but syntactically a poem might exist on the page as only a few lines of text. An abstract painting, on the other hand, might signify very little and thus be semantically sparse, but its riot of colours, lines, and shapes presents a complex cluster of spatial relationships—in other words, it is syntactically dense. Thinking about syntactic and semantic forms of communication can help film studies edge away from talking about images being more or less abstract when they depart from traditional photographic verisimilitude. In cinematic narratives, when syntactic density is reduced to the point that we actually notice a lack of visual information, semantic density will most often begin to increase. Of course, an image can be both syntactically and semantically dense (relative to other images we might deem conventional) as well: though, in that case, we are likely verging on something closer to allegory. Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 1978), 67-68.
[188] See, for example, *Richard III*, Act 4, Scene 4: "A dream of what thou wert, a breath, a bubble"; *As You Like It*, Act 2, Scene 7: "Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel/Seeking the bubble reputation/Even in the cannon's mouth"; and, *Macbeth*, Act 1, Scene 3: "The earth hath bubbles, as the water has/And these are of them. Whither are they vanish'd."

thanks to the cinematic remains that exist in proximity to the consciousness 'telling the story'. Liberation, in all three cases, is certainly a theme, but perhaps what best links them is an appreciation for what must be given up in order for a transformation to commence. The princess gives up her virginity to the fish in exchange for her freedom from an idea about beauty (and reality) that controls her. Photography must be abandoned for Boonsong to escape. Following this theme, it makes sense that Boonmee, once confronted with the threat of losing his connection to Huay at the moment of his death, would put his generation-long attachment to the world to the test once again, and head out into the jungle.

The Death of Uncle Boonmee

Boonmee leads Jen, Tong, and Huay to a cave: walking through the jungle of the water buffalo (we wonder) and passed the pool where the catfish waited for the princess (perhaps) and into an ancient place of sandy floors and luminescent walls that he calls "a womb." Small cave paintings of crocodiles dot the walls and stalactites climb towards the ceiling. This was where he was born, he says. The camera, like Herzog's in *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, is handheld and meandering. Boonmee can't remember the life that was born here; all he remembers is this place. This little aside might remind us of something Huay told us much earlier: "ghosts are attracted to people, not places." This need to return to a place, returns Boonmee to the moment before he became an endlessly reincarnated spirit haunting the world. Before people and before consciousness.

      Boonmee reiterates the skeptical theme: as he dies, and as we see the moon through a large canyon breaking into the cave, Boonmee wonders if he's blind and can't see, or if the world has just gone dark. To represent his own state of certainty in the face of emphatic ambiguity, Boonmee tells the story of a dream:

> Last night, I dreamt of the future.
> I arrived there in a sort of time machine.
> The future city was ruled by an authority able to make anybody disappear.
> When they found 'past people' they shone a light on them.
> That light projected images of them on a screen from the past, until their arrival
> in the future.
> Once these images appeared, these 'past people' disappeared.
> I was afraid of being captured by the authorities because I had many friends in
> this future.

I ran away.
But wherever I ran, they still found me.
They asked me if I knew this road or that road. I told them I didn't know.
And then I disappeared.

Astonishingly, to accompany Boonmee's story are a series of still photographs, edited one after the other, and filling the entire frame (we don't see the borders of the photographs). The photographs are of young men in combat fatigues, teenagers in street clothes, all standing in open fields, in wooded areas, or by outdoor bodies of water.

The text that Boonmee speaks resonates clearly with the themes of the film we've already explored. His ominous warning about the power of the authorities to make people "disappear" by projecting their lives upon them, very directly calls to mind the film of *Uncle Boonmee* itself and the bizarre creature of light and shadow and that the cinematic golem that is Uncle Boonmee is trapped in a film designed as a mechanism to make him disappear. Perhaps this is the significance of the fact that it is Huay—the ghost—who is ultimately responsible for ending Boonmee's life. The cost of creating a world where Huay, the ghost, can materialize (and euthanize) is the inevitable evaporation of the main character (and thus, with the main character gone, the film must end, too). Jen can only muster a distracted, delayed half-exhalation of surprise in the face of Huay's calm euthanasia.

But the series of photographs (all take from *Primitive*), far from illustrating Boonmee's dream, presents a different set of emotions than the 'main text' seems to carry. The playful but posed images—including some of a person in a monkey suit reminiscent of the monkey-ghost—seems like the photostream of a slightly perverse game of teenage make-believe. But perhaps the most notable emotion communicated in these photographs—so far not really clearly expressed in this slow and meandering film—is *boredom*. Is boredom the consequence of a world *without* past lives?

Fig. 41: The photos within the flashback within the dream

One photo stands out in particular: the four boys with jackets over their shoulders watching a fifth boy with his knee on the groin of a sixth boy lying, shirtless, on the ground. The fifth boy has a camera to his face, pointing at the boy on the ground. Especially coming after the military images, we can't help but detect a submerged violence here. But more notable, to my mind, is the presence of the camera in the image. Is this the camera that took these pictures? Well, no, not all of the pictures, obviously—who then is taking the picture we are looking at? These pictures seem so far from Boonmee's dream story—and the world of the film so far—that it's as if they exist in accordance with their own private and vaguely sinister intentions. In this cave—Plato's *and* Freud's?—Boonmee's death, dream, and last words, rediscovers the cinematic fact of the indistinguishability of the "I" in these images (these photographs and the film itself). Do we identify with the camera, the character, the story, or everything all at once? The theme of the indeterminacy of being is thus taken to the photographic basis of cinema, and runs aground on an ethical question: who is responsible for these images (who made them and who accepts their consequences)? If not Boonmee, then who? Like Boonsong, Boonmee disappears before we can get an answer.

After the Funeral

After Boonmee's funeral, Tong is trying to fall asleep under mosquito netting in a courtyard of the temple. He can't sleep. He shows up at his Aunt Jen's hotel room looking for company. He showers, changes his clothes, and seeming restless, sits down on the edge of the bed to watch

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TV. Now bored, he invites his Aunt to go out for dinner. She agrees. They finish getting ready and Tong looks suddenly shocked. A POV shot reveals that he and his aunt Jen are still sitting on the edge of the bed watching TV. We cut back to Tong and Jen—Jen seems not to notice, or not to care. We cut to a wide shot. Tong and Jen stand doubled in the same frame—another wink, not unlike the arrival of the ghosts, to cinematic tricks of the past. Tong and Jen leave.

Cut to a restaurant and karaoke bar. A loud pop/rock song makes conversation impossible. Jen and Tong, though they likely have nothing to say to each other, sit quietly, disassociated from themselves, alone with their thoughts. We cut back to the hotel room where the two are still watching TV—if Jen's thoughts have now turned to her double sitting locked in

Fig. 42: Super-imposed, supra-self

front of the television, it is a kind of non-thought. We might be tempted to think that the film is trying to tell us something about the unknowability of other minds, about being alone and alienated, even when together. But in the patient accumulation of quietly pulsing moments of consciousness, this moment—invested with a kind of secular magic (from the latin *saecularis*, meaning *of a generation*)—seems more properly a moment absent of consciousness. And as we've learned so far in this film, these moments of dead, dying, or absent consciousness— though riddled with skepticism—are pregnant with the possibility of transformation. In this

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case, the imminent transformation is the end of the film. And, thus, perhaps like his wife, Boonmee's haunting of this world becomes a condition of his rebirth.

In this brief sequence, a stylistic flourish already active in the film reaches its most complex form. There are only two other scenes in the film that clearly structure around simultaneity—an oddity for a film set at a country house and following multiple characters. The first scene takes place in the daytime, at Boonmee's honey shack. Boonmee needs to prepare for his afternoon dialysis. Jen walks away from Boonmee to pick a tamarind, and encounters a friendly yellow dog—this scene plays out in long shot. At no

Fig. 43: Scenes sustained by multiple 'authoring' consciousnesses: Jen and the yellow dog (above), Boonmee offscreen; Tong and the TV (below), Jen and Boonmee offscreen

point is there a reverse shot to remind us of Boonmee, but the banality of Jen's actions, and the relentless long shot and long take, keep the other 'thread' of the scene—the one offscreen—vibrating. Jen returns to Boonmee and, after a conversation, offers him some fruit—Boonmee teases her about the dog slobber, and thus the two threads of the scene are brought back together (i.e., we are reminded that Boonmee was watching Jen the whole time). The second scene begins with Tong and Jen watching TV at Boonmee's. Boonmee calls Jen into another room—he is about to announce his decision to journey into the jungle—and Tong stays behind. We follow Jen into the other room, but cut back to Tong. Presently, Tong is called to follow, too. Of course, in a sense, all scenes that include more than one individual, and all stories that include

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more than one character, are 'split scenes'—scenes influenced by and formed by multiple independent consciousnesses. But *Uncle Boonmee*'s patient and elliptical style makes each scene a stand-alone event, and these events tend to be limited to a specific setting (e.g. in an early scene of Tong and Jen and riding the bus). These two exceptions I've mentioned—one with the yellow dog; the other with the medium of television—resonate with the final sequence, an example of a sequence split between two spaces (the bar and hotel room) but occupied by the same two consciousnesses in both spaces. And with that conflation, the film ends. Because the soundtrack has been overwhelmed by music (the sonic equivalent of those bubbles), there is no possibility to say anything more. The film seems to be *waiting*, and indeed, it is an open question if it is waiting for something—anything—to *change*, or if it is waiting for a response to a question we have yet to fully divine.

Synthesis: Consciousness, Nature, World

The goal of a post-materialist cinema might best be described as mediating the ineffectiveness of our two partial monisms to 'divide the labour' of explaining our reality and to 'resist the urge' to expand one-side of the dualistic split into a single totalizing monism that purports to explain all of reality. To do otherwise is to submit to a partisan situation where one monism, taken to a logical extreme, always opens the door to the other (this is why Jonas considers them *partial* monisms: they are, in fact, mutually sustaining). Jonas describes both of these situations using cinematic metaphors. In the way that materialism argues that the world is "pure extension," it creates the condition whereby we go looking for "pure consciousness which has no share in it … which no longer acts but merely beholds" (20). And from this idealist perspective of pure consciousness, reality turns into a "series of points juxtaposed in space and succeeding in time" (20). A psychophysical cinema would need to counter this tendency to abstraction. We have already noted the psychophysical tendencies of cinema and its utopian promise to represent a higher reality by offering to *combine* the two pure realms of extension and consciousness. But in this combination of these two realms we should not expect a concentration of purity—the product will not appear as an ideal, modernist balance of form and content. We should expect something much muddier.

The concept of mind in Jonas's philosophy is central to his understanding of an ontology of the organism that connects human beings with all organic life, and it is central to his ideas

about reality. Jonas makes two key points: 1) The phenomenon of *mind*, if the concept is at all understandable, is necessarily common to all organic matter; and 2) the concept of *consciousness*, the way we tend to understand it, is an abstraction. Jonas explains this position by first playing devil's advocate, and wondering if, in fact, our philosophic reflexivity and sensitivity to life has only been made possible because of our newfound sensitivity to lifelessness. He writes:

> Is there not a contradiction here? Has not the discrimination of the lifeless and the living first made possible the distinct articulation of what is peculiar to life? And has this not benefited the 'spirit,' which as it were drew to itself what there was of life in the universe and concentrated it within itself as 'consciousness'? If matter was left dead on one side, then surely consciousness, brought into relief against it on the other side and becoming heir to all animistic vitality, should be the repository, even the distillate of life? *But life does not bear distillation*; it is somewhere between the purified aspects—in their concretion. The abstractions themselves do not live. (22, emphasis mine)

This very well may be the crux of Jonas' thinking: *life does not bear distillation*. And yet, our philosophy, our technology, our anthropocentrism all conspire to discover 'life' in its purified and concentrated form. Jonas argues that this idea of purified life is anti-life, anti-organic. He leaves that assertion theoretically unproven. Instead, he charges ahead in *The Phenomenon of Life*, as we have seen, with exploring the messy contradictions and confusion inherent to the encounter of life with the philosophizing, the world-making, and the image-making human animal.

Jonas divides modern ontology into two monisms—idealism and materialism—because both, in their way, describe the fundamental non-organic worldview in which we currently function. In this worldview, again, the organic is merely a subset—a particular organization—of general matter. And thus *life*, as a concept—and as a vitalistic 'life-force'—is more-or-less limited to our human inner world. Humanness is the last bastion of life, especially as 'outside' nature becomes reshaped and genetically modified, even as 'humanness' (as a concept) is radically problematized by neuroscience and data-driven sociological modeling. An aesthetic challenge for a post-materialist cinema then—and a challenge I think *Uncle Boonmee* tackles— is to connect the existence of *mind* that Jonas sees in organic life—*life* that exists *outside* us— that is latent in this outer world, and connect it with our inner world: thus reversing the flow of

life described by Kracauer's "umbilical cord." A cinema that is 'aware' of contemporary ontological contradictions would show, on the level of its engagement with the cinematic, the phenomenon of *mind* as a temporal process that dissolves the organic inner mind and organic outer mind split, while leaving intact the physical and non-living world as the context wherein the organic ekes out life and finds expression. In this approach, mind is not separated from nature, but nature is critically separated from the world in order to emphasize a metaphysical solidarity amongst organisms and to maintain the sanctity of at least a spatialized sense of liberation and freedom.

Kracauer's model of film materialism is dependent on the realization—and this realization happens within a cinematic circle—that certain cinematic subjects, once discovered on camera, are able to manifest a potent 'kind of life' and become the building blocks of an ideal cinema. This task set forth by Kracauer, though it is one first envisioned from within the desert of industrial and militarized Europe and not the jungles of Thailand (or settings like it), is relevant because it draws our attention to the need for sensitivity to subjects that express life not in its *distillation*, but in its forms of figuration. It's worth pausing on the image Kracauer offers as explanation for his lifelong fascination with cinema, an image he remembers from the excitement he felt venturing back into the world after seeing his first film (and to my mind one of the most beautiful passages in film studies):

> What thrilled me so deeply was an ordinary suburban street, filled with lights and shadows which transfigured it. Several trees stood about, and there was in the foreground a puddle reflecting invisible house façades and a piece of the sky. Then a breeze moved the shadows, and the façades with the sky below began to waver. The trembling upper world in the dirty puddle—this image has never left me.[189]

The puddle is the medium that reflected the city, but the presence of consciousness here—in this image devoid of the people who actually live in those houses—entangles both the young burgeoning cinephile remembering this moment *and* the "several trees" almost forgotten in the background (trees not reflected in the puddle but, we can assume, wavering in the same wind that troubles the surface of the water). A cinema alive to the possibilities of post-materialism

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[189] Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, li.

would, I'd argue, be capable of representing this connection of organisms through the material world in which they seek multiple forms of mediation.

Uncle Boonmee is a film that appears very much engaged in 'classic' realist film theory preoccupations of presence, absence, time, space, indexicality, and the real world. But we also see the twisting shape of a latent Jonasian critique of the 'living image'—i.e., the dead image granted, through interpretation and ontological extension, living qualities. After proclaiming that life "does not bear distillation" Jonas writes:

> In truth, we repeat, the pure consciousness is as little alive as the pure matter standing over it—and by the same token, as little mortal. It lives as departed spirits live and cannot understand the world anymore. To it the world is dead and it is dead to the world. (22)

By addressing the question of 'consciousness' in a densely self-reflexive cinematic world, *Uncle Boonmee* presents a vision of the supernatural that is uncannily in line with Jonas' critique of the concept of 'consciousness' that emerges after the advent of dualism. A testament, I think, to the relevance of cinema to ontological investigation and to Apichatpong's sensitivity to both the multiplicity of being and to multiple levels of reality. Especially in the ghostly finale of the film—the 'split' scene of the doubled Tong and Jen, one 'reality' oppressively determined by a syntactically dense audio field (the karaoke bar); the other by a similarly overwhelming (though implied) visual field (the TV in the hotel room)—*Uncle Boonmee* is able to tap into the aesthetic of a dead world and a dead consciousness, strangers to each. The film meets its limits in an attempt to represent 'pure consciousness' as a living thing on the cusp of spiritual rebirth and discovers in the process a tendency towards abstraction (the reduced syntactic density of the long 'bubbles shot' and the oppressive soundtrack that ends the film, as examples), that separates essence from consciousness and leaves consciousness as a fact to be encountered and essence as a question to be pondered. If cinema is able to help us imagine post-dualism beyond the "solidified alternatives," it is beginning with exactly such an acknowledgment of its own limitations. The true limitation to our thinking post-dualism, of course, is not death, really, but the *living* body and all its many forms, figures, and pre-figurations.

Conclusion: Mourning, Sickness

The idea of a 'feeling of reality' is important not just for 'realist' art that strives to summon just such a feeling or even a post-materialist cinema that wishes to trouble the boundaries of reality. The feeling of reality is not only aesthetic—it's also the criteria often used for evaluating a mentally healthy relationship to the world. There is a long history in psychotherapy and neuroscience that looks at the failure of the capacity in the mind to 'feel real'. For example, Cotard's syndrome, identified by the French neurologist Jules Cotard in 1880, is characterized by the sensation of being dead and the suspicion that some objects are not real. This loss in the brain's ability to 'feel real' results in a dualistic mental state that Jonas would likely appreciate: some patients, because they no longer feel real, begin to suspect that they are immortal. For many sufferers identified by Cotard, this lack of faith in reality manifests as a religious crisis and a sense of damnation and self-disgust.[190]

For Jonas, it is our collective and persistent mis-characterization of the metaphysical reality of the human body—our inability to imagine it outside of abstractions, our inability to think through it without demeaning it—that ultimately leaves us blind, culturally and philosophically, to the imperative of our responsibility for life. As he writes,

> The living body that can die, that has world and itself belongs to the world, that feels and itself can be felt, whose outward form is organism and causality, and whose inward form is selfhood and finality: this body is the memento of the still unsolved question of ontology, 'What is being?' and must be the canon of coming attempts to solve it. These attempts must move beyond the partial abstractions ('body and soul', 'extension and thought', and the like) toward the hidden ground of their unity and thus strive for an integral monism on a plane above the solidified alternatives. (19)

The "hidden ground" Jonas mentions as the target of a post-dualistic investigation, or something like it, is a frequent image when discussing difficult art films: it helps describe the feelings that seem beyond language, the thoughts of things—like consciousness or self—that *exist* but are understood as being *inexpressible*. In interviews, Apichatpong comments frequently about his hesitation to say more about certain topics—partially, I'm sure, because his intuition seems to

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[190] A.W. Young and K.M. Leafhead, "Betwixt Life and Death: Case Studies of the Cotard Delusion," in *Method in Madness: Case Studies in Cognitive Neuropsychiatry*, ed. P.W. Halligan and J.C. Marshall (Hove: Pyschology Press, 1996), 155.

be that art does best when it nurtures a certain degree of public ambiguity, but also from an intriguing moral tentativeness. "I can't say this," he blanches when addressing the 'Fairy-tale' scene. "It's a sensitive topic to speak about the desire to lose something in order to gain something else, like one's virginity to an animal."[191] Speaking of his responsibility to history: "I could have gone to the older generation who experienced the hardship and brutality firsthand. But I felt that I didn't have a similar background as theirs … I didn't want to talk about it directly in *The Primitive*."[192] Or, most intriguingly, Apichatpong's feelings around class: "I can't deny that I am from a different class than my characters. This is more the issue. How to present work that speaks well about different class but isn't typically ethnographic: this is something I am still struggling with. I feel like I'm still at the beginning of figuring this out."[193] When talking about the power of photography to reveal something of the human, to make consciousness present to us in a way new in history, this kind of ontological discomfort is always apt. It's

Fig. 44: The first known photograph of a human being, taken by Louis Daguerre in Paris, 1838. The man getting his shoes shined is in the lower left.

worth remembering that the very first recorded photograph of a human was made by accident thanks to a moment of class unconsciousness: an early test photo taken by Louis Daguerre from his Paris apartment window revealed, in the lower left corner, a man getting his shoes shined. Everyone else who may have been on the move that day, over those few minutes, including the shoeshine, were ghosted away as the photograph's duration extended beyond the temporality of pre-photographic human beings. The human body posed a problem for photography, it seems, from the very beginning.

These admissions of the filmmaker are resonant because they help contextualize another set of experiences that the quiet patience of this film renders mysterious: the experience of *other*

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[191] Chua, "Inverview with Apichatpong Weerasethakul," 47.
[192] Ji-Hoon, "Learning About Time: An Interview with Apichatpong Weerasethakul," 50.
[193] Chua, "Inverview with Apichatpong Weerasethakul," 45.

bodies, and their capacity to elicit both sympathy and, for lack of a better word, *disgust*. Disgust, distaste, discomfort, even disbelief: it's there when Uncle Boonmee blanches at the tamarind from Jen because of dog slobber. So, too, when Boonmee's dialysis bag is emptied onto the cave floor and Tong flinches back from the thin stream marking the end of Boonmee's life. It's there in the line about men from Laos "being smelly." Roong, the teenaged daughter of Jen, teases Tong about his body odour and his lemongrass soap—"you smell like Tom Yum soup." It's there when Jen seems so disturbed by Boonsong's story that she excuses herself to sit further from the group. The face masks worn in the fields to protect from pesticides and worn again during Boonmee's dialysis (and seen frequently in the shots on the television Tong, Jen, and Roong are watching at the end of the film) are clear indexes of, if not disgust, at least discomfort and body-awareness. Disgust, of course, is also present when Boonmee admits to Huay that he was embarrassed by his body when she materialized, that his first thought was to how much he had aged, how sallow his skin. And most notably, we can detect a degree of reticence in the film about Boonmee's corpse. When Boonmee dies, his body is shot from high above, as if (like the water buffalo) it is slipping into the off-screen (fig 45), half in shadow, before fully 'disappearing'—thanks to a cut—into a shot of the jungle, followed by a cut to his funeral. This progression of shots is, in a sense, a reverse of Huay's dissolve-in arrival: Boonmee's body just disappears into the background of the world.

Boonmee's sickness is coded as something both transcendent and foul—as Boonsong says to his father when he arrives, "there are many spirits and hungry animals waiting. They can sense your sickness." Seeing the world differently might well feel more like disgust than like some sudden unaccountable freedom. If that is the case, if it is even partly the case, our hermeneutics should be sensitive to it. Disgust is, after all, a sign of the union of consciousness and the body, an experience of the meeting of the mind and organic matter. We are all, for instance, capable of voluntarily imagining something that involuntarily makes our skin crawl. Disgust is also, of course, an important—though dangerous[194]—engine of morality. Bioethicist Leon Klass has written about "the wisdom of repugnance," arguing that when it comes issues

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[194] c.f. Martha Craven Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law* (Princeton, N.J. ; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004). Nussbaum advocates for a shift away from discussions of disgust in legal contexts.

like human cloning, utilitarian arguments will always stumble upon slippery slopes, and it is disgust that will reveal uncrossable boundaries.[195]

The organic metaphysics of Hans Jonas attempts to create a kind of filter that helps us isolate, out of the miasma of a slipshod philosophy shell-shocked and elaborately evasive of death, the experience within us that *feels alien to our own world*. He does not want to transcend that feeling, but rather to understand its source, its value, and the potential of that fact to isolate thought as the medium that bridges the thing/place that is me and the world-at-large. As I write this dissertation in a broken-down turn-of-the-20th century triplex on the corner of an industrial neighbourhood in east Montreal, there is an ash tree out my window, 25 feet tall, split into four trunks, maybe 40 years old, not yet budded out. Though here in the city it is mutated by environment and domesticated, much like I am, it still signifies 'nature' to me. I remember years ago, in the early spring, I was in the McGill library and overlooking a beautifully groomed, but still dusty and moldy, early spring campus, perched on the edge of nude Mont-Royal. I was suddenly struck, viscerally, by the maple trees. I was disgusted by how they appeared to be twisting out of the earth. I felt embarrassed by this tentacled cancan line of alien and misshapen bodies.

Fig. 45: Regarding the corpse of Uncle Boonmee

[195] Leon Kass, "The Wisdom of Repugnance: Why We Should Ban the Cloning of Humans," *The New Republic*, June 2 1997.

The moment in *Uncle Boonmee* when the ancient and yet utterly contemporary monkey-ghost stares back out of the jungle gives me the same feeling. Call it the problem of ontological disgust, or, to slightly misappropriate Cavell, let's call it a kind of "ontological restlessness." It is a form of intense subjectivity. Unlike all that is beautiful in this film and which I call beautiful with the expectation that others will agree with me, I *expect* no one to share this particular experience of disgust—though I do think my disgust is expressible and legible. Disgust is an organic response, and it is most often the organic that incites it: the feelings of sublimity we might feel when we witness a great tear in a landscape match the horror we feel if we witness one in a body.

Fig. 47: Blow-up of the first human to appear in a photograph.

Fig. 46: The image that Boonsong would not show to anyone

It would be a mistake, I think, to claim for *Uncle Boonmee* a privileged transcendence of this point of view of ontological disgust—but the film does manage to fully occupy this state: with horror, with pity, with humour, and (unlike my experience of those maple trees) real tolerance. Jonas' moral philosophy of life attempts to show how this sense of the alien is a sign of the kinship of mind between all organic life. The goal of this dissertation is to discover how cinema has the potential to negotiate exactly that gap between myself and my alien and untrustworthy mind. There is something in the aestheticization of nature that paradoxically exposes the ugliness of nature, and in the sudden moral crisis enacted by being disgusted with that which should include you (disgusted by that to which one should belong), a deranged version of nature is revealed that we are just beginning to understand, that is just beginning to be felt. A version of nature that is changing, unavoidably, the way we see reality, and which films like *Uncle Boonmee* are grafting onto the medium of cinema.

In the final chapter of this dissertation, we will combine questions of organic spatiality, animal consciousness, mechanical purposiveness, and a sense of a diffuse and relational subjectivity to embark on a long-from analysis of *Melancholia*, a film about self-hatred, the end of the world, and what feels real.

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CHAPTER 4: *MELANCHOLIA*:
THE NON-HUMAN AND THE INHUMANE

Introduction: Two Minds

The last act before the end of the world will be an act of criticism. Or at least this is how it seems to Lars von Trier's Justine (Kirsten Dunst), who marshals no rage and suffers no whimpering in the final moments before a mysterious planet collides with Earth. Blessed with a surprising affinity for the very motion of the universe, cursed with awful sensitivity to the pretensions of the minds that mediate it, Justine, at the end of all things, passes a sober and pitiless judgment. "The Earth is evil. We don't need to grieve for it."

Melancholia is about a lot of things: motion, emotions, cinema, art, the delusion of life, and the certainty of death, to name a few. But it's most certainly also about *art*, the bedfellow (or obverse, or antagonist, or host-body depending on your art philosophy) of *criticism*. And art is found in this film to be something contemptuous. Why critique art at the end of the world? Because, perhaps, art can aptly stand-in for the world-as-we-know-it; art can stand in for the human capacity for self-delusion in the face of overwhelming cosmic insignificance. And so, faced with the end of the world, someone can say, as Justine does near the end of the film, "How about a song? Beethoven's 9th? Something like that," and we should take her sarcasm seriously. We are spurred to take the critique seriously in a way that we may not take von Trier's film seriously, in a way that we may not take the world-as-we-know-it seriously.

Following upon Justine's judgment, *Melancholia* poses a surprisingly specific question (though the answers it compels resist specificity): how shall we comport ourselves at the end of the world? It is a philosophical question denied the freedom of reflection; it is a practical question asked under such pressure of time that no consequences will be incurred. It is a question that draws distinctions between many categories of people: the religious and the secular, the idealistic and the opportunistic, the romantic and the melancholic. Von Trier's insight, and the reason for this film (or so he admits in his director's notes[196]), is that this last category of people, the melancholic, are surprisingly well adapted to moments of catastrophe. As the world becomes out of joint, von Trier believes, the melancholic becomes very calm.

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[196] A long and very candid interview with Lars Von Trier makes up the bulk of the film's press kit and has been quite influential to the reception of the film. Lars Von Trier, interview by Nils Thorsen, March, 2011.

Because they can act, and they can reflect—in a way that only the depressed can—they become the potential vector through which the end of all things can truly be represented. This promises an intriguing narrative experiment: what kind of story tells the end of the world through the eyes of someone with nothing to lose? And, for our purpose, another: what does the melancholic mind mediate when she suspects that the end of the world, unimaginably far beyond her control, might, nonetheless, be her fault?

Justine, the depressive, indeed discovers an eerie and profound affinity with the end of the world, though her interior life—which through much of the film exists as a tantalizing, intimate mystery—becomes increasingly remote. Her sister, an upper class homemaker named Claire (Charlotte Gainsbourg), isn't nearly so adept (in a petulant stand for her own bourgeois values of striving for the bright-side, Claire tells her sister, "It's easy being you. You just imagine the worst thing in the world"). Claire doesn't evade the decision of how to comport herself—in this she is unlike her husband (played by Kiefer Sutherland) who kills himself as soon as it becomes clear that the world is about to end—but her desperation and panic leaves her existentially unprepared and trapped in a kind of existential limbo. In the final moments, Claire grasps at straws: for a glass of wine on the terrace, some nice music, for her family to be together. Uncreative, certainly, but hardly unethical; Justine, however, is repulsed by Claire's suggestions.

The film truly culminates—in a culmination that ends all culminations—in a strangely potent tableau set at the moment that Melancholia, a giant rogue planet, collides with Earth. It depicts Justine, Claire, and Claire's young son Leo (Cameron Spurr), sitting on a golf course inside a kind of skeletal teepee made of a dozen sharpened sticks. This teepee is called by Justine and Leo a "magic cave" and its construction was borrowed from a game the aunt and nephew used to play. Ambiguous on multiple levels, this final sequence seems designed to frustrate interpretation. Nearly (or maybe entirely) allegorical, the depressive, her despairing sister, and the innocent boy act out some subtle and inscrutable final interpersonal drama on this cosmic stage. We see Claire take Justine's hand, Leo close his eyes, and a surprisingly intense smile pass over Justine's face. These three wait alone—both cast-offs and final avatars for the human race—as Melancholia destroys the horizon, the magic cave, our triad, and the camera itself (definitively ending the film).

Fig. 48: The final image of *Melancholia*, at the moment when Claire (on the right) let's go of the hands of her son and sister.

For Steven Shaviro, Justine's depression is of a nearly transcendent kind, "unqualified" he calls it—a state of *being* as ineluctable as the arrival of the mysterious planet that causes the end of all life on earth.[197] Justine's depression gives her a perspective upon the end of the world that saps from it the potential for sublimity and personal meaning. Shaviro argues that her gesture of creating the magic cave is not merely a consolation to a little boy who is not capable of conceiving what is happening but is her way of creating a space in which she can share her apartness and aloneness with both Leo and Claire. There is no communion in her communication—her depression makes that impossible—but in a kind of paradoxical abdication of Nietzscehan willing, her final gesture is triumphant and a stirring example of a way to relate to the world that transcends petty subjectivity. Shaviro sees in the teepee a "beautiful semblance," an example of disinterested beauty overcoming subjectivity-affirming sublimity.

Rupert Read is even more enthusiastic about the positivity of the ending but takes a very different interpretative path to arrive there. He sees Justine's depression throughout the film as a potentially seductive nihilism that though an effective engine of critique in a self-deluded bourgeois world, is a philosophic stance at the end of all things that ultimately must be overcome. Read sees Justine's final smile to Claire as a generous embrace of the *present*, and

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[197] Steven Shaviro, "*Melancholia*, or, the Romantic Anti-Sublime," *Sequence* 1.1 (2012): 46.

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the fact that her back is turned to the planet Melancholia in the final tableau a signal that she has turned her back on depression and has embraced the world-as-it-is.[198]

The end of the film also draws its own distinctions between audiences. To my mind, Justine's final smile takes its impression from, and cannot escape, the network of petty and often mean-spirited interactions that pressure-crack the narrative of the film. Both Justine's smile and her construction of the "beautiful semblance" are the product of an intense process of self-reflexivity and self-awareness that cuts to the very core of what makes this film a film. Her position in the final tableau, with her back to Melancholia, betokens to me Justine's complete alignment with Melancholia, her complicity in—and responsibility for—the end of all things.

If nothing else, this film is a reminder that the end of the world will make many interpretations possible. How does such a mandate affect the representative power of a film so concerned with transgressing boundaries of meaning, especially in the case of a film which, as we will see, speaks to many as an avant-garde example of eco-conscious cinematic storytelling? What does embanked ambiguity imply for a film that has been taken up as a powerful example of a non-anthropocentric imagination?

In this lengthy interpretation of *Melancholia*, I go looking for a metaphysical structure that might explain this film's idiosyncrasies and unexpected (and expected) turns. My entry point will be what I see as the philosophic self-reflexivity of the film represented allegorically through the interpersonal and psychological problem of making oneself understood to others. I then attempt to account for the strange allegorical mode and disinterested mood of the film, arriving at an interpretation that uncovers some important ambiguities that a Jonasian metaphysics anticipates and helps clarify.

Critical Response: Looking on the Bright Side

By merging a disaster film (which is self-aware by virtue of the fact that in the context of apocalypse, in the context of temporal austerity, everything must account for itself), with a unique portrayal of the intense and painful self-awareness of the depressive, von Trier has adapted his *enfant-terrible* sensibility and iconoclastic 'post-cinema' filmmaking style to a work that has become something of a touchstone for film scholars thinking about media and the

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[198] Rupert Read, "An Allegory of a 'Therapeautic' Reading of a Film: Of *Melancholia*," *Sequence* 1.2 (2014): 18.

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environment. A popular success amongst art-film goers and Cannes film festival attendees, the film appeared at #3 on both *Film Comment's* 2011 best of the year critical survey and Metacritic.com's year-end aggregated ranking. Beyond the critical acclaim, the film has also generated a healthy amount of scholarly grappling with its mysterious affect, and, in particular, how that affect might provide insight into a pre-apocalyptic world grappling with serious issues of climate change. This latter tendency is a bit odd: *Melancholia* is a complex film and does not easily work as an ecological-responsibility parable—what kind of salutary message for environmentalists might issue from a film where death comes so arbitrarily?

Adrian Ivakhiv writes in *Ecologies of the Moving Image* that *Melancholia* is a privileged example of a kind of eco-conscious film that "in and through the image … seeks release from the image."[199] This "release" is from our cumulative, barely sustained denial of environmental devastation—a false image—and takes the form of a wish to both escape and to change reality, to replace reality with an image of what reality *could* be. Justine's disgust in the self-importance of humanity becomes a positive affirmation of non-anthropocentrism, and her embrace of critique signals an emergent vision of the human that goes beyond the narcissistic bedazzlement of humanism. In other words, the whimpering end of the world depicted in *Melancholia* can be seen as the consequence of the constitution of the world-as-we-know-it as a false image. *Only* in the context of apocalypse, *only* when the self exceeds utility, can a new self-awareness emerge.

Ivakhiv holds up *Melancholia* as exemplary of an eco-philosophical cinema that "raises deep questions about the relationship between humans and nature and generates affective images of possibilities that are perhaps best imaged as *moving* images."[200] When Ivakhiv writes that this kind of limit-of-thought cinema "generates affective images of possibilities," he means to suggest that if *Melancholia* succeeds in being affecting (i.e., it generates surprising and alive emotions), and indeed we can point to unique moments that seem to function (using a term I take from Steven Shaviro) as "machines for generating affect,"[201] it is because the film has worked in a salutary and progressive way to inculcate both an acceptance of the inevitability of human extinction *and* has released a kind of creative potential (to do what, exactly—politically, therapeutically, philosophically—is not yet clear). Lofty praise, to be sure, but how else can we

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[199] Ivakhiv, *Ecologies of the Moving Image: Cinema, Affect, Nature*, 347.
[200] Ibid.
[201] Steven Shaviro, *Post Cinematic Affect* (0-Books, 2010), 9.

account for a film that takes as its main topic one woman's horrific depression and as its conclusion the arbitrary end of all life, and yet inspires critics like J. Hoberman to leave the theatre feeling "light, rejuvenated, and unconscionably happy"?[202]

The catharsis some viewers experience might be inherent to the disaster film genre itself, especially its big budget Hollywood variant (has *schadenfreude*, tinged with masochism, become our dominant cultural mode)? We can extemporize one theory and argue that because the big blockbuster disaster film itself is decidedly environmentally unfriendly, the mass worldwide consumption of these blockbusters becomes a kind of socially accepted, low-impact nihilism. For Shaviro, seeing the zeitgeist high-jacked by an apocalypse on screen—famous places, famous people, and the norm-core masses are all equally victims—delivered as cinematic spectacle "is in itself intensely gratifying: we see destroyed, before our very eyes, that 'immense collection of commodities' after which we have always striven, upon which we have focused all our desires, and which always ended up disappointing us."[203] But though *Melancholia* includes its own wry appraisal of capitalist realism (more on that later) and indeed finds some nasty pleasure in the tidiness of the obliteration of all first-world problems (etcetera), the apocalypse on screen is unlike anything else in the genre, and not quite like anything we've seen before.

In accord with Shaviro, Ivakhiv also responds strongly to the film's aesthetic choices, in particular to the figure of Melancholia itself, the rogue planet that threatens earth. He writes that "seeing this killer of planets—not in the frenetic guise of a Hollywood action-packed adventure, but in the slow and deliberate grace of its arrival—makes extinction thinkable and affectively imaginable in a way that only cinema can. It is as simple and as powerful a strike at the anthropocentric world view as has ever been cinematically conceived."[204] This last notion—that the film achieves, if not a sustainable non-anthropocentric view, at least a critique of our prevailing, human-centered reality—is philosophically compelling and profoundly intriguing aesthetically. But isn't the kind of cosmic grandiosity we see in the film—there are gorgeous, balletic images of planets in *Star Wars* and *2001: A Space Odyssey*, too—a conventionally aesthetic experience of the sublime? Is *Melancholia* a delivery mechanism for contemporary

[202] J. Hoberman, "Cannes 2011: Lars Von Trier's Melancholia. Wow," *LA Weekly*, May 18, 2011, http://www.laweekly.com/arts/cannes-2011-lars-von-triers-melancholia-wow-2370976.
[203] Shaviro, "*Melancholia*, or, the Romantic Anti-Sublime," 8.
[204] Ivakhiv, *Ecologies of the Moving Image: Cinema, Affect, Nature*, 344.

feelings of awe in the grandeur of the universe? How can this sensation create a positive, even progressive non-anthropocentric affect?

Steven Shaviro does the legwork here to account for some of *Melancholia*'s unusual tonality and affect by positioning the film in *contrast* to sublimity. Edmund Burke argued in 1757 that the sublime—a response to the world based in fear, vastness, magnificence and tension—was an aesthetic category to be distinguished from beauty.[205] While Burke put his finger on an aesthetic category suited to the Romantic era, Immanuel Kant recognized the seeds of something more modern, something more psychological, and critiqued Burke for not going far enough to understand the experience. "Provided we are in a safe place," Kant writes, imagining a viewer surveying a storm coming over the sea, or night falling on a mountain range, then what terrifies us can "raise the soul's fortitude above its usual middle range [and] allow us to discover in ourselves an ability to resist which is of quite a different kind, and which gives us the courage to believe that we could be a match for nature's seeming omnipotence."[206] Though *Melancholia*, arguably, grants us such a safe and omnipotent vantage in our theater seats, Shaviro rightly argues that such a sensation is undermined in the film, even subverted. *Melancholia* privileges a sensation of "disappointment," and successfully substitutes—through a figural inversion I will discuss in detail—the "omnipotence" of the soul with the specific disgust of a single woman. Justine's unusual experience of this conventionally sublime event— and the ways that the film makes it difficult for us to remain in a "safe place"—makes it possible for us to "become aware of a universe that is not centered upon, or necessarily correlated with, humankind."[207] Shaviro sees the film as presenting a contemporary version of aesthetic grandeur that has more in common with "speculative realism" and non-anthropocentrism than the rationality-affirming Kantian sublime.

The word "sublime" comes from the latin "sub" and "limus" meaning, roughly, "before the limit." The word perfectly draws attention to the awe and awefulness we experience when confronted with limit cases for thought like imagining the end of all life. The human mind—as the expression of something both collective and individual—must rise to the occasion or

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[205] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. Adam Phillips, Oxford World's Classics (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

[206] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Pub. Co., 1987), 120 (261).

[207] Shaviro, "*Melancholia*, or, the Romantic Anti-Sublime," 37.

compensate, sometimes extravagantly, for its lack. The Romantic goal to reinstate the secular/spiritual estate of the human after its instrumentalization during the high-rationality of the Enlightenment made concepts like the sublime irresistible.[208] And it's no surprise that filmmakers and critics would be drawn to the concept today, though much more sensitive to the anthropocentric implications of Kant's description of the experience. Read focuses his analysis on what he sees as Justine's transcendent generosity at the moment of sublimity. Richard Grusin expands on Shaviro's read, but argues that in the final moments, the film achieves a state of allegorical mourning for the medium of cinema itself that is nothing short of sublime.[209]

The more adventurous and speculative writing about *Melancholia* takes up what might be called the particular contemporary challenge of representing the unimaginable: not the formless infinite, but the increasingly manifest factuality of the definite. The metaphysical status of the individual becomes an open question in the context of global extinction, and the threat of utter cosmic insignificance an opportunity to liberate a conception of identity from conventional ideas of significance entirely. *Melancholia* is as much about a crisis of imagination as it is about the unhinging of our material world.

Does von Trier in *Melancholia* dare us to defend art, and is it worth destroying the world to ask the question? The film is merciless with the pretensions of art, and it verges so close to self-parody that screenings are sometimes met with nervous laughter.[210] On the other hand, the exhilaration some feel watching—I felt it; so did my viewing companion—might come from a suspicion that beauty must be disarmed before it can be believed in, and that the art of

[208] See Jerome Stolnitz, "On the Origins of 'Aesthetic Disinterestedness'," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 20, no. 2 (1961).

[209] Richard Grusin, "Post-Cinematic Atavism," *Sequence* 1.3 (2014).

[210] Trevor Link has an oft-cited blog post on *Melancholia* in which he discusses the film from his own perspective as suffering from severe clinical depression, and how profoundly therapeutic he found the experience even in spite of the laughter of audience members around him. He writes, "By creating an exteriorization of what is inherently, tragically a self-destructively interior process, a film like *Melancholia* allows a depressed person to draw strength from these images: at least in them, the truth of the world as imagined or feared by the depressed mind is made real, finally, rather than continuing to plague him or her as a terrifyingly palpable, yet elusive, phantasm. And in this final sequence of *Melancholia*, it is Dunst's character Justine who remains calm and has the capacity to comfort the young boy Leo, son of Justine's sister Claire. Finally, we [the depressed] are useful for something! At last, the part of us that is ugliest can serve to create rather than destroy: I can't think of a single image in the cinema of 2011 that brings me as much peaceful contentment as the "magic cave" Justine creates for the three of them out of sticks. It is an act of writing onto the real world that which terrorizes so many people from the inside, invisible and too often merely dismissed. This image comforts me because it suggests that in the face of what appears as utter hopelessness, there is a safe place, a sanctuary, where we can retreat and even draw others in for protection." Trevor Link, "Depression, Melancholia, and Me: Lars Von Trier's Politics of Displeasure," *Occupied Territories*, 2011, http://occupiedterritories.tumblr.com/post/13114178124/depression-melancholia-and-me-lars-von-triers.

disarming can be the product of a dare. The way that Christianity is a dare. The way Jesus dared Thomas to believe him, and doubtful Thomas took the dare right up to the messiah's wounds and discovered that no amount of proof would ever satisfy the world-as-we-know-it. The film is self-reflexive in a way that verges upon *self-hating*. It is self-hating in the way that, for example, the faithful rarely feel worthy of what they believe in. It is self-hating in the way that the extreme depressive feels irrevocably broken when they cannot locate the source of their disappointment in themselves or in the world.

Tone and Affect, Form and Content

How to describe the tone of *Melancholia*? A post-human meditation on Enlightenment themes and bourgeois self-delusion? A post-modern chamber drama that concocts a love triangle between a bride, her jilted husband, and a mysterious planet? A feminist atonement for the reckless experimentation of *Anti-Christ* (2009) that shifts the cosmic animosity of Man and Woman to the burning resentments of two very different sisters? Or maybe we need to focus on the apocalypse itself and recognize how it systematically undoes all discussion of themes, and meaning, and upsets petty hierarchies of significance?

Let's begin with the narrative of the film itself and the curious stylistic choices von Trier makes in its telling. The film was shot all digitally on Arri Alexa 4K cameras and, other than in the overture and in the two helicopter shots of horse riding (we'll come back to these), the cameras were entirely handheld, often by von Trier himself. Von Trier's working method is to shoot scenes without any rehearsal or blocking and at times with only the vaguest idea of a script. Thus, the actors *and* the filmmakers both encounter the profilmic space for the first time together. Multiple takes are done, notes are given to the actors in between takes, and there is an emphasis on improvisation for both the actor and the camera. As a result, the raw material is fractured, continuity errors abound, and the editing makes no attempt to hide the seeming haphazardness of the storytelling. The picking of framing is also indecisive and tentative— frequent focus changes and focal lengths occur within a shot—and the composition is almost *aggressively* awkward. But, that said, this approach to storytelling (especially in the age of faux-documentary TV series like *The Office*) is also, at the present moment, curiously conventional.

To some viewers, it might just seem like an amateur wedding video shot with a $150,000 camera.[211]

Shaviro calls the style of *Melancholia* an example of "post-continuity." He first developed this term in his book *Post Cinema Affect*, a study of the "structures of feeling" of the neo-liberal West through interpretation of some 21st century moving image texts. In coining the term, Shaviro is responding to a blatant stylistic trend present in many Hollywood blockbusters: the eschewing of logical continuity in favour of raw sensation, especially in action scenes.[212]

Because art films (think, of course, of Eisenstein) have been playing around with continuity since the beginning of cinema, Shaviro isn't arguing that the techniques are new, just that their wide acceptance—the norming of post-continuity styles, you might say—most certainly is. Shaviro characterizes post-continuity in *Melancholia* like this:

> Aside from the Prologue, the camera's presence is quite palpable and physical, due to the excessive "movement or mobility" of the hand holding it. *Melancholia* is an exceedingly *haptic* film (as Laura Marks might say). The camera always seems to be in the midst of the action, even though it is not contained within the diegesis, and its perspective cannot be identified with that of any protagonist. The result of this is to blur the distinction between the action of the story, and the action of the camera that is telling the story; or between the movement of the actors within the frame, and the movement of the frame itself. In classical film narrative, space is still Newtonian: it is a fixed and rigid container, which remains the same no matter what goes on within it. But in many recent films, including *Melancholia* and other works by von Trier, space is Leibnizian and Einsteinian, rather than Newtownian. That is to say, it is dynamic and unstable, or relativistic and relational. We no longer experience space as a container; instead, we feel it as something in ferment, its shape continually inflected by the camera that presents it, as well as by the bodies, forces, and events that unfold within it. There are no fixed points in this space, but only vectors: moving lines of ever-varying speeds and directions.[213]

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[211] I make this claim based on personal conversations with a range of viewers and the near total lack of commentary in popular criticism on the difficulty of the film's style.

[212] While David Bordwell sees this progression as consistent with a model of "intensified continuity," Shaviro is alive to the more sinister aspects of Hollywood's abandonment of rationality. He quotes a writer from *Wired* magazine examining recent experiments in cognitive mapping and how these developments are of intense interest to blockbuster Hollywood filmmakers looking to maximize profits: "Michael Bay, with access to my innermost circuitry, can really get in there and noogie the ol' pleasure center ... I'll soon be reporting levels of consumer satisfaction previously known only to drug abusers. My movie going life will, literally and figuratively, be all about the next hit." Qtd in Shaviro, *Post Cinematic Affect*, 144.

[213] "*Melancholia*, or, the Romantic Anti-Sublime," 16-17.

Shaviro's insight into the unusually evolving relationship between camera and diegesis is entirely correct, but his approach is a bit misleading. It is not, for example, true that the perspective of the camera cannot ever be attributed to one of the characters in *Melancholia*, nor that space is fungible: much of the film, to my mind, is dedicated to mapping coherent spaces in order to insert consistent viewpoints. We'll be looking at the relation between camera, identification, space, and allegory later in the chapter. Suffice to say, and to keep in mind when parsing the plot of the film, Shaviro's sense of the unusual ontological uncertainty that defines the relation between character and camera is indeed manifest at multiple levels in this film; and, yet—and to paraphrase what David Bordwell argues this mainstream-turn towards haphazard continuity portends—the style may also be in the service of *intensifying* a sense of reality.

  Melancholia is divided into three distinct pieces: a very striking 10-minute pre-credit overture or prologue that through a series of super-slow-motion tableaus—set to the lushly romantic "Prelude" from Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*—recounts the last few moments on Earth for Justine, Claire, Claire's son Leo, and Justine's horse Abraham. The last shots of this sequence—from a celestial vantage—is of a ghostly blue/white planet crashing into our planet. The rest of the film is divided into two halves, both identified by a simple white-text-on-black title card: Part One is called "Justine"; Part two is called "Claire". It might help the reader to get a sense of the film's tone to know that the inspiration for the sibling rivalry that splits the film comes from the project's intriguing inception as an adaptation of Artaud's *The Maidens*.[214] The lines of influence of this genealogy are mostly lost in the final film, but suffice it to say that *Melancholia* bears a family resemblance to both theaters of absurdity and cruelty—it is, after all, a film that begins with a wedding and ends with apocalypse. It is also the kind of film where the estrangement of a daughter is signaled by the absurd fact that everyone in her family— except her—speaks with a plummy British accent.

  Part One is set on the evening of Justine's wedding reception, held at the posh lakeside home/hotel and golf course owned by John, the husband of Justine's sister Claire. Foreshadowed by the bride and groom's late arrival to the reception, Justine's marriage to Michael (Alexander Skarsgård) is doomed not to last the night. After speeches by Justine's bitterly resentful mother (Charlotte Rampling) who does not hide her contempt for the entire

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[214] Penélope Cruz brought the Artaud project to Von Trier initially. See Von Trier, "Longing for the End of All."

institution of marriage, and her buffoonish, attention-seeking father (John Hurt) who seems to indulge his fatherliness to a parodic degree only in order to abdicate it, Justine's mood takes a turn. Throughout the night, Claire and John, with increasing irritation, attempt to keep the party on course by covering for Justine's (and her mother's) increasingly erratic behaviour. The wedding reception shambles along while Justine flits in and out of the party, slogging through with a smile on her face, disappearing to take a bath, helping her nephew Leo to bed and then falling asleep, running outside to both look at the stars and urinate, failing on two occasions to connect with her increasingly concerned (and clueless) husband, having awkward and mechanical sex on the golf course with her boss' nephew, and publically quitting her job. The film is quite artful in how it stages and choreographs the relation between the split 'inside the wedding march' and 'outside all things' settings for this section of the film, effectively drawing out—over the course of an hour of screen time—the ineluctable pace of the party and the quietly powerful transgression of turning away to ignore it.

By dawn, everyone—including Michael—has left. Justine goes to sleep by herself in the library. Awakened the next morning by a stiffly magnanimous Claire, the two head out for an early morning horse ride. The two sisters come to a small stone bridge and Justine's horse, Abraham, refuses to go any further. Justine looks up to the early morning sky and notices, portentously, the absence of a star in a constellation she had seen at twilight when she and Michael first arrived at the reception.

Part Two begins several months later. Justine has fallen into a deep depression and Claire has invited her to stay at the mansion. A rogue planet called Melancholia—previously always hidden from earthly view behind the sun—is now visible in the sky. Scientists predict that within a few days it will complete its "flyby" of earth before disappearing once again. While Justine is convalescing, Claire glances skyward in nervous anticipation and surfs the internet for dissenting opinions about the trajectory of Melancholia's flyby. John, an amateur astronomer, dismisses her anxiety, patronizingly forbids her to do anymore internet research on the subject, and readies his telescope for what he assures her will be the most glorious astronomical event of human history. As the family prepares for the arrival of Melancholia, Justine slowly emerges from her near-catatonia, still leaden and affectless, but subtly more responsive to the world: she privately revels in a freak snowstorm, eats jam greedily with her fingers, and—immediately before setting her eyes on Melancholia for the first time—brutally

beats her horse Abraham. Claire follows her sister one night out to the woods where she spies Justine lying naked near a pool beneath the light of the mysterious planet. The day before the flyby, electric power around the world goes out, the air becomes thin (in a nice analogy for the conditions of a panic attack) as Melancholia steals some of earth's atmosphere, and animals behave very strangely. Claire's anxiety is at its peak—she buys poison for her family should suicide become necessary—but for the sake of her son she tries to participate in her husband's wonder. Though Justine assures Claire that the Earth is doomed (in a harrowing speech that indicates the possibility that Justine is uncannily and increasingly connected with the unhinging world), Melancholia does indeed flyby as predicted. The family's relief is short lived, however, and the next morning the planet reverses course and heads directly towards the earth. John discovers the inevitable first, and quietly slips away and kills himself in the horse stable. Claire deduces the truth by using a crude astronomical instrument created by her son Leo, finds John's body, releases the horses, and in a desperate and terrified tantrum rushes off with her son into a sudden hail storm. Denied any escape, even from the grounds of the golf course, she and Leo soon come back to the mansion where she and Justine discuss how best to face the end of the world. Leaving Claire in tears, Justine goes off with Leo to find sticks to create a "magic cave" where the three will wait for the collision.

There is something dishonest (or at least untrustworthy) about the form of *Melancholia*, and as such it is hard to untangle how seriously we are meant to take the 'reality' of 'the end of the world' storyline. Not that there is enough evidence to suggest that the events of the film are the imaginary and subjective products of any one of the characters (e.g. in a Shyamalanesque twist ending we discover that the end of the world was the projection of someone mentally deranged)—if anyone is to be considered delusional in the cosmology (and politics) of the film, we're meant to think it's the audience, ourselves, or anyone who has *not* acknowledged that the world is ending, every day, all around us. No, our low-level uncertainty about the 'reality' of the two storylines comes from a few textual clues concerning Justine's affinity for the catastrophe, and the audacious warping of figuration that von Trier discovers by forcing an analogy between the end of the world and the beginning of a marriage. In other words, the extremity of 'the end of the world plot' functions in the film to both destabilize our sense of how seriously to 'take' the reality of that storyline, and paradoxically provides the necessary scope to allow the

ordinary and mundane little chamber drama to escape our suspicions that it, too, is not meant to be taken too seriously.

The theme of discovering a vantage from which we can separate reality and subjective interpretation, and form and content, and the skepticism inherent in such a task, will be the central preoccupation of this analysis. This ambiguity goes all the way down in *Melancholia*. On the one hand, the bubbling, jittery nervousness of the end of the world, seems to be registered first by the style of the film (jittery, nervous), then the audience, then the animals, then Justine, etcetera. But what if, as we shall see, it is Justine's melancholy that calls forth the end of the world, and what if the style is attuned to the shudders of that melancholy, and it is the quaking of that style that sets planets on an apocalyptic collision course? This unrepresentable and terrifying correspondence between inner and outer is also a concern that Justine shares: is the existence of the melancholic the world's expression of its own inherent sickness, or does the melancholic make the world sick? Does she cohere with or correspond to the nature of the universe?

Any sense of the 'realistic', or a sense of 'realities', in *Melancholia* is, of course, contested. Like the nature of the threat posed by Melancholia (the planet), it is the 'realness' of Justine's melancholy—especially for bystanders like Claire and John—that is at issue: where did it come from, why does it persist, what does it want? Does it exist at all? If it were not a threat, would it exist at all? The narrative presents a complicated figurative connection between external universe and inner life, but also a philosophic one that the film allegorizes by its very form. By focusing on the theme of a potential sympathy of the universe with the mind (and vice versa), and the potential sympathy of the film style with the mind (and vice versa), our attention is brought to how clearly the dramatic content (i.e. the story of the failed marriage and the story of the sisters, Justine and Claire) is not just an affective reiteration, in miniature, of the end of the world plot, but has its own, mysterious, irreducible integrity. The 'realistic' interpersonal drama of the film is structured around a repeating scenario: the expression, avoidance, frustration, engagement, and never entirely suppressed presence of the possibility of *compassion*. This pattern elevates 'compassion' to scrutiny and pulls from its underside a number of anchoring themes: the progress of self-awareness, the question of knowing the mind of another, the difficulty of communicating one reality to another, and the difficulty of sharing a

world. In other words, interpreting actions as *compassionate* takes place in the same atmosphere of skepticism that is inherent to uncovering significance in *Melancholia*'s form.

That compassion should exist in *Melancholia* is a tribute to both the tenacity of the concept and to the difficulty of imagining a world where compassion is so alien that it is denied even a claim to possibility. As a filmmaker often accused of misanthropy,[215] von Trier seems exactly like the kind of artist who would want to stack the deck against the positive and fuzzy human feelings; if he couldn't banish them from a narrative, he would intentionally cripple his story to demonstrate what a crutch feelings like compassion are. If that is merely a caricature of a pseudo-post-human artist will be the burden of our analysis to show. But where to begin discussing a film that, from a certain slant, seems so thoroughly ironic, so untrusthworthy while at the same time, to critics like Shaviro, seems so curiously earnest and authentically felt? The film's philosophic disenchantment with the world does point us to one ineluctable, stolid *fact*: Justine's unhappiness. On that score, if no other, the film is unequivocal and gives us at least that much vantage to go looking for the dangling hooks of a rising compassion.

Compassion and Bridging the Space Between Us

Justine doesn't start the film unhappy; or if she is unhappy, she begins the film by dissembling. The ethics of this dissembling—for the sake of her new husband, perhaps, or maybe for herself—are unclear, just as they are unclear when, at the end of the world, she plays a game of make-believe with Leo rather than readying him, the best she can, to accept sudden death (in a sense, the final tableau is an affirmation of relativism: at the end of the world, to each his metaphysical capability, and so follows 'truth'). The theme of dissembling and semblance is yet another of *Melancholia*'s self-reflexive themes, an implication that the glamour of the moving image and the felt affectiveness of the story are not meant to be trusted. There seems to be a line between storytelling and self-delusion important to the moral impulse of this film that few, if any of us (the film implies), are able to negotiate. And, unfortunately for Justine and Michael, it slashes through their wedding day.

After the malevolent and mysteriously sublime overture, we meet Justine and Michael, smiling and happy, beaded together by little private jokes in the back seat of a long, white

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[215] See, for example, Richard Brody, "Lars Von Trier, *Melancholia*, and the Remarks," *The New Yorker*, October 1, 2011, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/lars-von-trier-melancholia-and-the-remarks.

stretch limo that—as we see in an overhead shot—is approaching a very narrow and winding gravel road. We cut to the back seat and watch the newlyweds jostled back and forth as the driver tentatively and unsuccessfully attempts to negotiate the turn. They call out suggestions to the driver, but he can't hear them. As they survey the distances out the window and attempt to reconstruct what the driver might be thinking, the car lurches pathetically forwards and backwards. Later we will learn that that the driver is so tentative because he is driving a borrowed car, and he's in such a bad position—literally—that he is willing to give over responsibility just enough to entertain the hope that Michael, and then Justine, might be able to negotiate the curve. It's only a small example of the larger theme of the attempt to understand other minds, but, in effect, we begin the film with a mysterious 'driver'—an easy metaphor for the filmmaker, if we like—who seems to be floundering, and whose intentions baffle us in view of the space where he is baffled, but for whom we withhold summary judgment (out of confusion if not out of indulgence). In the end,

Fig. 49: The limo is unable to negotiate the narrow turn

Justine and Michael are forced to walk the rest of the way to the mansion. This is the entryway to the location that will contain the entirety of the film[216]: though the guests will abandon this wedding, and, finally, Michael will too, we will be stuck here until the fiction ends.

Justine and Michael trudge up the driveway at twilight, laughing and flushed, fully responsive to this unexpected indulgence in their couplehood. Justine has her shoes in her hand and her poof of white lace bunched up to her thigh; Michael's body remains stiff and put together, but his eyes are bright with an almost puppyish enjoyment of Justine. As they close the distance between themselves and the mansion, Justine's sister Claire and Claire's husband John are sailing towards them on a puff of indignation. "I won't even bother saying how late you are," Claire says by means of extending herself to Justine forcefully but charting a non-confrontational trajectory (for reasons of expediency perhaps), as Justine and the camera rush forward (awkwardly, hand held, with a bit of a zoom) to quickly close the space between them.

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[216] The outside world represented by 'The Village' accrues a portentous symbolic resonance by virtue of being absent. Goods, services, and poison (in the form of the pills Claire buys) all arrive at the estate, but there are no shots outside of it save for a brief moment—another frantic concatenation of space—when Claire is driving, seemingly back from 'The Village', a blur of green out her window.

The distance is breached with Justine's kiss on Claire's cheek and then Michael's kiss and frank apology. Claire then goes on to explain how resentful she is about being put in the position of fighting for the success of the wedding (John, priggishly, chimes in about how resentful he is about spending money on it), and, contradicting herself, she explains that Justine is two hours late.

What we won't likely detect on first viewing is what Claire knows more fully than either of the two men: that Justine, because of her nearly secret sadness—because of her melancholia—is already wavering on the idea of this wedding (and it is the bride's goodwill, or lack thereof, that is most fatal to a wedding, most exposing of the fiction, which is to say: it is unfairly her fault if it goes badly). Claire suspects, or at least is now squaring off to the possibility, that Justine's melancholy is coming, and that Justine (in the way that melancholics can) 'willed' the delay into being, that the forces fouling Justine's world were either invited by arrogance and selfishness or permitted by laziness. Claire asks, "Do you want this?" Justine agrees with a bit of fire: "Yes, of course." Claire suspects that Justine has already begun to self-sabotage.

From visualizing this closed space between the four standing in the driveway, to shedding off the men to focus on the intimacy of the two sisters, the decoupage next gives way to Justine, alone, turning to look at the sky. We have the film's first POV shot: we see from Justine's perspective the space in the constellation Scorpio (where else?) where Melancholia, the planet, will appear. In the reverse shot of Justine we might catch Claire in the background looking a bit exasperated again. Justine is left alone in the shot for a moment as she observes the sky, bird sounds appear faintly on the soundtrack, and in a quick response to the call of her name, Justine exclaims, "Oh, we have to say hello to Abraham." She turns decisively from the open door of the mansion and is off to say hello to her horse—our introduction to the animal space, foreshadowed by the bird calls, that defines much of this film—dragging her new husband with her in pursuit of a private ritual tangential to the public ritual in progress. John and Claire follow her without much protest.

We, the audience—shooed along by the camera—are following close behind, too. And perhaps we can indulge Justine because she is a bride and it is her wedding day and we are likely already on her side and detect the toxic falseness of the bourgeois ritual in progress (this is a von Trier film, after all). And, as we learn about Justine's melancholy, we will indulge her

because we recognize that her way to rejoin the world is long and difficult and at least she is making the effort, at least she is acknowledging that the world—at least Claire's world—is open to her if only she both internalizes and expresses the appropriate wish, if she replaces her secret sadness with a private desire—contractually granted—to be 'realistic' and part of the real again; as such, her connection to the world and its expression as a compulsion to visit her horse—however socially inconvenient—will always win our indulgence. What else can we do when confronted with someone who lacks everything we—the functional, the objective, the audience—fear to lose?

Is Claire demonstrating compassion in the treatment of her sister: by helping her with the wedding (to establish a public sign of Justine's capacity for normalcy?), by indulging her, and then berating her, by never completely giving up on her? "Compassion" comes from the Greek meaning "co-suffering" and while Claire seems to suffer *something* it's certainly not the case that she suffers as Justine suffers—indeed, to do so, would mean not just *being* Justine, but also sharing her world, sharing her reality. As we follow this story to the end of the world, we discover that what separates Claire and Justine are fundamentally different realities, and the contradictions between them seem world-defining if not world-destroying. William James, in his very influential *The Varieties of Religious Experience* confronts the psychological problem of "the divided self" by describing two kinds of personality and two realities:

> At the close of [the last chapter] we were brought into full view of the contrast between the two ways of looking at life which are characteristic respectively of what we called the healthy-minded, who need to be born only once, and of the sick souls, who must be twice-born in order to be happy. The result is two different conceptions of the universe of our experience. In the religion of the once-born the world is a sort of rectilinear or one-storied affair, whose accounts are kept in one denomination, whose parts have just the values which naturally they appear to have, and of which a simple algebraic sum of pluses and minuses will give the total worth. Happiness and religious peace consist in living on the plus side of the account. In the religion of the twice-born, on the other hand, the world is a double-storied mystery. Peace cannot be reached by the simple addition of pluses and elimination of minuses from life. Natural good is not simply insufficient in amount and transient, there lurks a falsity in its very being.[217]

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[217] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York, London etc.: Longmans, Green, and co., 1902), 166.

This, it might be said, is James' way of adducing that there is a materialist way of being that cannot help but be happy if the equation balances; and another way, a way of life that is irreducible—that is a division by zero. Justine, it would seem, is exactly the kind of twice-born James is describing. Perhaps more intriguingly, the "rectilinear" vs "multistoried" simile perfectly describes the two architectures in *Melancholia*: the single-story, horizontal horse stable where John chooses to commit suicide, and the vertical mansion where Claire first goes looking for John and where instead she finds Justine. As the world ends, Claire's suffering intensifies and Justine's diminishes. Unlike Justine, who in the pre-apocalypse world, never felt a coherence between her inside and outside, Claire, as a privileged member of the upper class, is constantly encouraged to see a correlation between the material bounty of the world and the worthiness of her interiority. Now, with the *world* betraying her, she has lost that indicator without discovering what that interiority was. By the very end of the film, it is now Justine who cannot share Claire's suffering, and when Justine is called upon to show compassion, she vacillates, ultimately choosing a different tack of dealing with/connecting with her sister. Is there a moment, though, on their two trajectories, when their suffering overlaps, or at least equalizes, and they might have a chance of communicating? I have an idea of when that might be, but let's continue following the oscillation of sororal power dynamics, the true motivating force in this film.

The problem of communicating ourselves to others is one of the animating philosophic questions of the 20th century, one version of Kant's "scandal" of philosophy. The minds of others also take their place as unknowable 'things' outside of us, though with the added complication that our ability to know anything of these other minds is limited by what they deem to show us—or are capable of showing us.

The skepticism we might feel about other minds, of course, begins earlier—or it should, anyway—with skepticism about our own mind, what constitutes feeling, sensation, self, and our relation to what exists outside us. In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein challenges us to consider carefully what we mean, if anything, by 'knowing a sensation' and, especially, when we try to communicate that sensation.

> In what sense are my sensations *private?*—Well, only I can know whether I am
> really in pain; another person can only surmise it.—In one way this is wrong, and
> in another nonsense. If we are using the word "to know" as it is normally used
> (and how else are we to use it?), then other people very often know when I am in

pain.— Yes, but all the same not with the certainty with which I know it myself—It can't be said of me at all (except perhaps as a joke) that I *know* I am in pain. What is it supposed to mean—except perhaps that I *am* in pain?

Other people cannot be said to learn of my sensations *only* from my behaviour,— for *I* cannot be said to learn of them. I *have* them.

The truth is: it makes sense to say about other people that they doubt whether I am in pain; but not to say it about myself.[218]

Wittgenstein is talking mostly about physical pain here and not the subtler, and therefore doubt-inducing, pain that plagues Justine, but the problems faced by the melancholic in this regard—in which they may even doubt their own pain (and thus their own sanity), in the tangle of smothering thoughts that compel them to try and *know* their pain—are of the same complexity. Wittgenstein is problematizing the notion that our sensations can be private, and that we know them in any deep or intimate way that is hard to communicate. For Wittgenstien, they are not complicated sensations—but, rather, our expression of them is fraught with the sense that they are complicated because we cannot accept that our expression of sensations is limited to what makes sense in the public language game where "pain" (as a thing to be discussed) exists separate from the sensation in one's body.

Of course, we don't need Wittgenstein to tell us that it is difficult to know the mind and heart of another, especially when we are called upon to be kind, and especially when we are expected to be kind to someone who seems selfish. In Claire's case, she knows that Justine is unaccountably sad and thus cannot be entirely responsible for her actions—but Claire is caught in a skeptical position and can never be entirely sure of what Justine might be feeling, nor can she escape her tendency to misread Justine's expression (particularly her happiness) as forms of dissembling. Which is another way of saying that Claire is forever suspending her judgment of Justine in order to leave open the possibility of compassion; this state of indecisiveness also makes it possible for Claire to avoid confronting the possibility that she, Claire, is unkind and unsisterly. In other words, Claire is avoiding being self-reflexive; she is avoiding being philosophical. Claire's lack of judgment about her sister stands in contrast to Justine's definitive

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[218] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953), 89 (§246).

judgment about the world ("it is evil and deserves to be destroyed" she says). Justine's claim though—which she characterizes as *knowing*—isn't precisely philosophical either.

Wittgenstein's emphasis in his philosophy on the problematic relation between words, concepts, and their philosophic complexity points to the necessity of considering our decisive claims about anything—and, in a sense, *being* skeptical can be decisive—*in terms of relation*. This insight is the occasion for Stanley Cavell's powerful and meandering, career-long examination into the ways that human minds express themselves to each other *and* express themselves to themselves. If we place emphasis on the need to be relational in our philosophic thinking, while at the same time avoiding indecisiveness, we can see better how the sisters are failing to *relate to each other*, how their commitment to each other is not enough to save them from skepticism, from their inability to be companions. Cavell calls the companionable state, the salutary state of philosophic honesty, the possibility of *acknowledgment*.[219]

"Acknowledgment" has the distinct advantage over 'compassion' of being necessarily self-reflexive in a potent way, as well as encompassing the everday-ness and the ordinariness of the other mind—discovering that other mind in the surprise of secret familiarity, not in the revelation of its exceptions. Cavell argues quite persuasively that to acknowledge another human being—and to acknowledge their pain—begins precisely from the skeptical prison of the self. A condition like depression or melancholy, because it cuts to the heart of reality, is fundamentally ontological. If *Melancholia* is a cinematic-world that straddles the gap between compassionate relations, then its peculiar kind of self-reflexivity—in particular, its ontological mode discovered by the thematic choice to end the world—might exhibit the kind of Wittgensteinian-influenced *acknowledgement* that Cavell holds onto as a bulwark against the kind of skepticism that is absolutely thick in von Trier's film.

Critical Moments: The Problem of Compassion

The problem of compassion in *Melancholia*, of course, is not limited to the relationship of the sisters—we can trace its influence upon every interaction. In one sense, of course, *every* human interaction is predicated on something like compassion, but *Melancholia*—partially because of the slightly absurdist naturalism it adopts—challenges us to observe characters acting in nearly

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[219] Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, 123.

caricatured ways of inhumanity. As the potentially defining lack that makes the absurdity and unreality of the narrative possible, compassion as a concept is given negative form by the film.

We'll start with the mysterious figure of Little Father (Jesper Christensen), John and Claire's soft-spoken manservant. Greeted by Justine with warmth, Little Father bustles around the edges of the frame guiding the progress of the reception, quietly indulging the silly pranks of Justine's father (Big Father?—played by John Hurt), and unobtrusively gathering the luggage of Justine's mother after John throws it out the door in a vindictive fit. Little Father's quiet busyness suggests an infinite patience and a keen appreciation of the family's patterns. That he is taken for granted by Claire and John is starkly demonstrated on the day of Melancholia's flyby when Claire expresses her surprise that Little

Fig. 50: Little Father (Jesper Christensen, on the left), Justine (on the right); In the background: Claire on the left, the wedding planner (Udo Kier) on the right.

Father hadn't come into work. Justine replies, plainly, that he probably wanted to spend the day with his family. Claire seems surprised by this news and also a bit wounded—she needed Little Father's assurance, even his presence, so she could know that everything was going to proceed as normal. *Melancholia* is the third film in our study that seems to go out of its way to avoid any discussion of religion or God despite being about exactly the questions that religion is most engaged in answering, but I'm pretty sure that Little Father is a none-too-subtle stand-in for God in this film. Von Trier's sarcastic suggestion that God—theologically speaking, the source of all compassion—would be absent on the day of Armageddon because God would rather be with his *own* family, a family you have never met or have cared to imagine, is quietly devastating.

We'll also note that the last time we see Little Father in the film is at the moment John berates him for daring to help John carry his telescope—"never touch the instrument," John hisses (John doesn't need any help to *see*, he thinks). John, of course, is the character most clearly lacking in compassion and also the neediest of acknowledgment—not of his personhood,

but of the *facts* he uses to define his personhood (like the splendor of his 18 hole golf course[220] and the extent of his largesse). In this need, of course, he belies a lack of faith in facts. John prides himself on his rationality and commitment to hard-headedness and is especially hard on the women in his life whom he regards as irrational: he openly despises what he sees as the selfishness of his mother in law, thinks Justine is spoiled and incompetent, and seems incapable of not declaring his thoughts whenever they occur to him. Even his patronizing efforts to save Claire from her anxiety about Melancholia seem, in the end, like he has displaced his own fear onto her in order to clearly identify it, for himself, as irrational. He then proceeds to manage Claire's anxiety by pantomiming compassion, by displacing his fear rather than talking about it, and by refusing to acknowledge both her fear as legitimate and his own fear as factual. Not surprisingly, the thinness of John's pride—or perhaps his all-encompassing and totally misguided faith in himself—becomes evident when he discovers the truth about the threat of Melancholia and immediately, without a word to anyone, kills himself with Claire's pills. John's bottomless selfishness (and faith in appearance) is perfectly, horrifically, expressed by how carefully he covers up his theft of the pills (Claire has to look twice before realizing the pill bottle, still exactly where she left it, is now empty) and, worse, because he took every pill for himself. Von Trier's aesthetic interest in such an irredeemably awful character is hard to parse—but John's comeuppance, and the revelation of his unequivocal cowardice, brings its own nasty satisfaction. In other words, the film includes the possibility that people get what they deserve and that, for some, compassion is wasted—even by the audience. It seems as if von Trier intends it as a sober lesson for the depressives in this world who, despite the chiding of the functional realists, are *actually* engaged in reality as it is unfolding (or, at least, it seems to be an example of where von Trier's sympathies lie).

Justine's father is similarly self-deluded, similarly a man who insists upon his identity while making clear that his identity is contingent upon those who are responsive to his needs. He arrives to the party, absurdly, with two women named Betty, a circumstance he finds endlessly amusing, even calling his own daughters Betty (the Dadaist twinning of Betty mimics the twinning of the sisters, the two halves of the film, the two planets, and the problem of the "divided mind"). He is sweet and affectionate to Justine, but his outsize performativeness only

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[220] Perhaps von Trier's most effective, and eerily disturbing joke, in *Melancholia* is the fact that John's golf course, despite his pride and his incessant rehearsal of the undeniable fact, is actually 19 holes.

make his declarations of love seem self-flattering. Justine asks him directly to stay the night at the mansion—she needs some paternal warmth—and he agrees, but then later informs Justine via a self-pitying note that he's decided to leave. His toast to the bride focuses on how Justine looks—not, for example, what she means to him—and then, bizarrely, he asserts that "there is nothing more I can say without referring to Justine's mother," which he does not want to do, except to inform everyone that she is "domineering." Why can't the father talk about the daughter without talking about the mother? This is the opportunity for Justine's mother to interject on her own behalf.

Abandoned by her father's evasive caddishness, Justine spends most of her wedding interacting with her unctuous boss, Jack (Stellan Skarsgård), a vaguely malevolent and jealous figure who, mysteriously, is also a good friend of her new husband. Jack's toast, as the best man, focuses not on Michael, but on Justine as his best employee (he admits, in thematic accord with the film, that he is "playing a double role"). During his toast, Jack projects an ad on a screen so the guests can see what Justine is working on—it's a restaging of Pieter Bruegel the Elder's 1567 allegorical painting *The Land of Cockaigne* with underwear-clad female models in place of the original figures of the clerk, peasant farmer, and soldier—as a way of both celebrating Justine and goading her into coming up with a tagline for his ad campaign. He will torment her all evening for a tagline, even swearing that he'll fire his nephew Tim if Tim can't get the tagline out of Justine before the evening's end. As is the case with the portrayal of

Justine's father, there exists the possibility that Jack is just being playful and that to indulge him is to win his intimacy. We might even surmise that Justine, who has just been promoted to art director, is adept at playing exactly this game. But the film doesn't give us much beyond this caricature of an employer who discovers his role as a father figure to his favourite employee threatened on the evening of her wedding

Fig. 51: *The Land of Cockaigne*, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1567

and acts out a perverse show of his power. Some alchemical electromagnetism released by this wedding ritual—and in this effect it is like the end of the world—has peeled back the veneer of relationships that had once appeared mundane, had constituted a reality, but now, paradoxically, are revealed to be only caricatures of relationships, relationships slowed way down.

Casting Stellan Skarsgård, the biological father of Alexander Skarsgård (who plays Michael), as Michael's boss is a sly bit of filmmaking, invoking a kind of extra-textual patriarchal conspiracy aligned against Justine. Michael's mistreatment of Justine is much less malicious than his friend's, but far more damaging. The film seems clear about Michael's good heart and intentions, but, when it comes to Justine, he is at best out of his emotional and moral depth; at worst, willfully ignorant. Michael seems dimly aware of Justine's melancholy and this is where his claim to compassion lies. He might even claim that he is able to love her *in spite of* her melancholy. But his conscious comfort with evading reality—we get a sense of that in his goofy reply to the 'guess the number of beans in the bottle' contest: "Two million and two"— makes him ill-suited to be what Justine needs: someone who can validate both of her contradictory assertions about herself: that she is both sick and sane. He is incapable of understanding that Justine is not consistent—and, thus, to be present to her, he must struggle against being safely in her orbit and, every day, be crashing into her—that he must have the strength to be either forceful or tender, willful or receptive, as required, in order to acknowledge her, to be responsive to that inconsistency. He *consistently* gets this wrong; Michael can't read her. His confidence that his wedding present of an orchard farm would make Justine happy is clearly misguided. We can't be sure if he completely misread her about this orchard, or if his presentation of kindness—as a gift that could not be refused—was simply ill-timed. Several times over the evening, Michael consciously eyes Justine (we see him lurking in the background of several shots, out of focus) and communicates his willingness to join her. But, unintentionally, by asking for permission he is asking something of her that he should know better that she can't offer: a stable version of her true self that he claims to love and can grant him sanction to help her. Justine's version of reality is not shareable because it is not stable, and as such, she might suspect that it is also devoid of love.

Justine's mother objects to the word "domineering" in the father's speech but she doesn't directly refute it. Instead, she addresses the institution of marriage. Gaby comments on Claire's ability to put on a good party and closes with "I just have one thing to say: enjoy it while it lasts. I, myself, hate marriages." But Justine's frustrated connection with her mother seems like the most honest failure or relation in the film. A moment when both women escape from the party to, coincidentally, take separate baths, suggests a kindred spirit, or, perhaps, a kindred melancholy at different stages of personality. The last person Justine sees before going

to bed alone on her wedding night is her mother, seen from afar and through a window, greeting the dawn with a yoga prayer (a surprisingly spiritual gesture from a woman whose contempt for marriage ceremonies seems atheistic). That her mother seems like a distant traveler far ahead along Justine's own path, echoes an earlier scene in which Justine looks to her mother for support:

> GABY
> What do you want in this place? You have no
> business here. Nor have I. Your sister it seems
> is somewhat bewitched by you.
>
> JUSTINE
> Mom. I'm scared.
>
> GABY
> You should be. I'd
> be scared out of my
> wits if I were you.
>
> JUSTINE
> No. It's something
> else. I'm
> frightened, Mom. I
> have trouble walking
> properly.

Fig. 52: Mother and daughter: talking without facing each other.

> GABY
> You can still wobble I see. So just wobble the
> hell out of here. Stop dreaming Justine.
>
> JUSTINE
> I'm scared.

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GABY
We all are sweetie. Just forget it. Get the hell
out of here.
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The key to reading this scene, of course, is in the staging and the expressions on faces. Justine's mother is facing away from Justine when she speaks these lines. Thus, we the audience are given the vantage to study her face that Justine is denied. To say that we might see a determined commitment to tough love on her face—her eyebrows knit slightly in a moment of maternal sympathy for her daughter, and flatten, almost cartoonishly, into decisiveness—is reasonable, but hardly unequivocal. All to say that in the character of the Mother we are invited, if only through a crack, to separate being from actions; in other characters, especially characters like John, form and content are indivisible.

Justine's mother at least seems to understand Justine's melancholy, and we might even suspect that she is the vector for this prehistoric sadness, that it was her curse to pass it on. Gaby just isn't willing to entertain the idea that Justine's desire for a marriage, for love, or for companionship is anything but a kind of self-delusion. No matter how sincerely Gaby believes she is helping Justine, she does not indicate—beyond the level of a shared terrain of sadness— the legitimacy of Justine's desire. Gaby is applying her own philosophy to her daughter and in her inability to put it aside to entertain Justine's, she's just as close-minded as John, just as unaccepting of the idea that there might be a reality other than her own—indeed, while *she* may not be domineering, her totalizing philosophy is. All Justine wanted was for Gaby to name her sadness, not to locate or banish it.

So, what exactly is the nature of this melancholy that Justine's mother seems to understand but won't acknowledge? Certainly, it seems we are expected to see that the toxicity of Justine's family relationships—and maybe human relationships in general—offer little or no potential for succor, but is the *family* the cause of the original trauma? Justine's sadness is first apparent only after her mother's speech and exacerbated with each encounter thereafter. But for every hint, for every good reason for sadness in *Melancholia*, there is no way to trace a cause and effect. Indeed, for those witnesses to Justine's melancholy, the limit to their compassion is the expectation that there *is* a cause to be revealed and that the cause can be treated or solved.

Justine holds within her a secret sadness, and at one level we know it is sourced in her anxiety about the end of the world, but we also know—in the strange warping of categories of figurative and literal—the end of the world is only an outsized metaphor for what she really knows is coming: her melancholy. Of course, though it attains presence—an overwhelming presence— the thingness of her melancholy, its nature, is one of flux. Her melancholy exists separate from herself, and as such is deviously in common with the people that surround her. Here we see most clearly the aesthetic logic of von Trier's hybrid merging of the Romantic with the Melancholic, and the Naturalistic with the Allegorical—his characters waver in and out of realism: specific in their cruelty; allegorical in their caricature. They thus embody, like cinema itself, a degree of remove from the world they constitute. For von Trier, we might surmise, the medium of cinema is melancholic (and, for von Trier, it soaks up that tint from the world itself). The reality of cinema is alienated, its architecture multistoried, and must be "twice born" through critique.

The End of All Things: Three Different Interpretations

And what of Justine's own capacity for compassion? When her sister comes to her in a state of terror, Justine twice rebukes her. The first time, Justine is calmly eating the chocolates that Claire parcels out onto the pillows of her houseguests. With an almost otherworldly calm, Justine tells Claire: "the earth is evil. We don't need to grieve for it." "What?" Claire exclaims. "Nobody will miss it," Justine replies. Claire is devastated: "But where will Leo grow up?"

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JUSTINE
All I know is life on earth is evil.


CLAIRE
There may be life somewhere else.


JUSTINE
But there isn't.
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CLAIRE

How do you know that?

Justine goes on to demonstrate her knowing-ness by
revealing to Claire the results of the bean lottery.

CLAIRE

What does that prove?

JUSTINE

That I know things. And when I say that we are alone,
we are alone. Life is only on Earth. And not for long.

Claire and Justine are interrupted by the arrival of Leo. When next they meet, John is dead,

Claire knows the truth of the imminent apocalypse, and Claire has just put a gasping Leo to bed

after her tantrum on the golf course. Claire takes Justine's hand, leads her out of Leo's

bedroom, and the two sit in the parlour. Claire is discussing her plan.

CLAIRE

I want to be together when it happens. Maybe outside on
the terrace. Help me Justine. I want to do this the
right way.

JUSTINE

You better do it quickly.

CLAIRE

A glass of wine, together. Maybe.

JUSTINE

You want me to have a glass of wine on your terrace?

CLAIRE

Yes, will you do it, sis?

JUSTINE

How about a song? Beethoven's 9th? Something like that.
Maybe we can light some candles. You want us to gather
on your terrace to sing a song, have a glass of wine,
the three of us?

CLAIRE

Yes. That would make me happy.

JUSTINE

Do you know what I think of your plan?

CLAIRE

No. I was hoping that you might like it.

JUSTINE

I think it's a piece of shit.

CLAIRE

Justine, please. I just want it to be nice.

JUSTINE

Nice? Why don't we meet on the fucking toilet.

CLAIRE

No. Let's not.

JUSTINE

You're damn right let's not.

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CLAIRE
Sometimes I hate you so much, Justine.
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On the one hand, Claire appears as another bourgeois caricature; her terror, and her desire 'to do the end of the world right' and for things to be "nice" is easily derisible, especially in comparison to Justine's existential righteousness. Did Claire really think Justine would "like" her plan? Is this a sign of the degree to which she does not understand her sister? Perhaps, but there is also a kind of patience Claire exudes here that speaks to a real history between these two sisters: Claire's expression of harshness here is neither played as a cathartic overcoming of repression—a chance to really speak her mind—nor a panicky lashing out. It comes, I'd suggest, out of exhaustion with a pattern. Justine's reality may not be stable, but to Claire, it is eminently predictable. Claire has learned to respond predictably as well—even when her language is as harsh as it can be, it is not meant to be transgressive of their sisterhood.

Justine leaves Claire crying and steps outside to find Leo observing Abraham (a saddle still on his back—thus still wearing, like many characters in this film, the trappings of their sociability) calmly eating the lawn. "I'm afraid that the planet will hit us anyway," Leo says, breaking away from his almost hypnotic revelry in the placid horse. Justine hugs him and consoles him directly, promising to make a magic cave out of sticks that will protect them from the crashing planet.

Fig. 53: The final communion

Why does Leo receive from Justine the assurance that Claire is denied? Why is this childish gesture of avoiding the truth more palatable to Justine than Claire's desire to embrace the end by aestheticizing it? That is likely unanswerable—besides the obvious answer that her sympathy simply extends to innocence and balks at those who should know better (but that would presume that in von Trier's cosmology innocence indeed exists)—but we can ask a slightly different but related question: does Justine achieve any peace, any self-understanding, any grace, any closure in this final act? Does she achieve something like compassionate understanding; perhaps an unmediated version of the 'togetherness' that her sister craves?

Let's start with a (relatively) simpler question: is there something cruel in Justine's make-believe game with Leo? The idea of saving someone by deceiving them, of course, is a major theme in the film. The kindness Justine shows to Leo gives us a moment to wonder if it is so very different from John's pandering treatment of Claire or even to imagine a conspiracy theory whereby world governments—in an act of compassion or grim practicality—have knowingly perpetuated the false theory of the 'flyby' in order to avoid mass panic. It's not an easily answerable moral question. But in the case of Leo, we can at least observe the results. If anything, at the end of the world, *all* actions achieve a final result.

We are given no reason to believe—considering what we can make of Leo's calm demeanour at the moment of impact—that he ever becomes cognizant of his Aunt's deception. Indeed, for Leo, the coming of Melancholia must seem exactly like the ultimate magic-event his Auntie promised. And, indeed, Leo goes to his death in the full assurance of his Aunt keeping her word. The film ends at the moment of impact, at the peak of the magic-event. On a strictly material level, the capacity of Auntie Justine to fulfill her promise would seem, in a roundabout way, like a positive conclusion. And on a material level, of course, the end of all things brings about an end to suffering.

The hope beyond hope for audience members like me caught up in Claire's terror and Justine's occult competence, is that our characters find some way to escape the end of the world, that the crisis can be averted—either literally or metaphysically (a figurative escape would be too depressing). And in one sense, Justine's fiction concocted for Leo is a patronizing, pandering fiction concocted for all of us. If all art—including Beethoven's *9th Symphony*—is part of the same self-deluded and narcissistic human betrayal of the real, if art can be reduced to the kinds of fictions we devise to soothe and distract ourselves from our childish fear (this would be the critique of organized religion, too), then the end of the film, like the end of the world, is indeed a trenchant critique of art. The benefit of this thorough, totalizing critique, is that it provides an escape valve for the uncharacteristic earnestness von Trier demonstrates in this film—indeed, the last target next to the last of this critique is *Melancholia* itself. In a sense, the film's embrace of the *possibility* of redemption, even a patronizing one, at the last moment is its most nihilistic gesture: i.e. it suggests that even the most vicious attack on the pretensions and petty delusions of human beings, no matter how artful, cannot escape a whimpering submission to the remaining soothing fictions when there is no hope left.

Steven Shaviro is able to see this final scene—the three survivors sitting in the magic cave waiting for the end to come—in a much more positive light. But to arrive at that point requires a few interpretative steps. First of all, Shaviro understands Justine's depression as being of a privileged kind. The wedding interruptus, Shaviro implies, is an interpretative banana peel: just as Justine's relatives cannot understand her sadness, we too are drawn in to thinking that Justine's unhappiness is simply the result of her miserable family, opening up the possibility that if Justine could just get away (as Gaby commands), then she might save herself. Shaviro sees Justine's reactions to the petty and predictable hypocrisies of civil society as out of proportion and thus of another degree. He writes, "Her depression is ungrounded, self-producing and self-validating. It needs no external motivation or justification. It is just what it is: an unconditioned and nonreflexive state of pure feeling."[221]

Shaviro identifies Claire's state as one of "despair"—a state derived from a bourgeois frustration with her inability to control the world-for-us—while Justine achieves a "militant dysphoria." Shaviro here has in mind the omnivorous and oppressive systems of capitalism that appropriate all dissent and critique; a system imagined by the majority as so total and inescapable that only a truly radical being offers any true perspective. Justine's dysphoria is of this radical kind, and allows her, at the end of the world, to experience the apocalypse as validating her own emotions and allows us, the audience, to experience a glimpse of a consciousness that can confront the "truth of all extinction." Shaviro here is calling on a speculative realist position that authentic philosophic work (including that which can out-think capitalism) must accept that the end of all life has already happened and is a necessary step in non-anthropocentric thinking.

Sympathetic to Justine's position, mesmerized by her embodiment of a cutting-edge philosophic position, Shaviro argues that

> The [magic cave] at the end of *Melancholia* turns upon two figures in particular: that of the teepee, and that of the child. Like many other viewers of the film, I find these figures moving and comforting … By turning to Leo, and then by bringing Claire as well into the circle of the magic cave, Justine is able to share with them — or at least to communicate to them — her very sense of apartness, withdrawal, abandonment, and disinterest. And this sharing extends to the audience as well. The teepee and the child are figures, we might say, of a certain counter-identification. They allow for a kind of negative "universal

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[221] Shaviro, "*Melancholia*, or, the Romantic Anti-Sublime," 47.

communicability”: a communication without communion, a sharing of apartness, an experience of the extinction of all experience.[222]

Though Shaviro, through a rehabilitation of aesthetic disinterest, has found a way to think about the conditions under which Justine can communicate her apartness, Rupert Read still finds Shaviro's ending too bleak. In his "therapeutic" reading of *Melancholia*, Read argues that the narrative of the film traces a trajectory for Justine, one that sees her depression in the film as a state of world-denying selfishness, one that is overcome in the last act as she becomes aware of the tenuousness of life and the imperative to embrace life. Read sees in Justine's final smile a profound generosity, a moment of welcoming both Claire and the audience into a circle of generative possibility:

> The climactic moment is the wonderful – *wonderful* – smile that Justine gives Claire. The smile that tells that she is having, at last, what might be called a wonderful life, even amidst the real and psychical horror. It is a smile of love, of genuine connection, genuine being-with, at last. She looks authentically into another's face, for the first time able to do so and offer something authentic that isn't (only) sad.[223]

Read goes further and finds a redemptive, iconic image that includes the audience in its final configuration: "At this point, we can perhaps start to dialectically synthesize what is needed [to save our world from ecological destruction]. Claire's caring nature, her passion for life to go on, for her child to have a future; with Justine's calm, her refusal to pretend, her presentness. The sisters are together, perhaps, one person waiting to be born, waiting to be the child, the future. This is where you (the viewer)

Fig. 54: Justine's smile. Claire's eyes are closed and she is turned away from her sister.

[222] Ibid., 48-49.
[223] Rupert Read, "An Allegory of a 'Therapeautic' Reading of a Film: Of *Melancholia*," *Sequence* 1.2 (2014): 16.

come in."[224] In other words, while Shaviro sees in the final figuration the ascendancy of Justine's role as critic, Read sees her as emerging as a positive example.

It's important to note that the final tableau is entirely created by Justine. Stepping into the role of the artist (just as she does when she rearranges artbooks in John and Claire's study), Justine very deliberately places the bodies inside the magic cave. Leo is on the left, Justine is in the middle, and Claire is on the right. Justine's back is to Melancholia and Claire is placed in a position where it makes it impossible for her not to see the approach of the planet. It's a small point, but wouldn't it have been kinder of Justine to place Claire with her back to Melancholia so Claire could focus on her son? Is kindness and justice simply too much to ask of the artist? Is this something to be learned from *Melancholia*?—that the artist exists, *must* exist, beyond such concerns? Is that defensible?

Justine asks Leo to close his eyes, which he does obediently and seriously. Justine and Claire each hold one of Leo's hands. Justine looks directly at Claire whose eyes are full of tears. Claire alternates between closing them tight and looking at Leo; she avoids Justine's gaze but suffers the irresistible flitting of her attention towards the roaring planet. And yet, Claire, very deliberately (without panic) reaches out to take Justine's hand. Justine smiles and looks directly at Claire. Claire cannot meet her gaze, caught as she is between her own terror (signaled by the compulsive shutting of her eyes) and the planet crashing towards them. As in the scene when Justine is speaking to her mother and her mother is facing away from her, we are given a privileged look into a face granted a vague compassion that it cannot parse.

Von Trier's editing is merciless. It is implied that Justine's smile to Claire goes unnoticed by Claire, as distracted as she is by Melancholia. We cut from an unusually intimate, shallow focus, profile shot of Justine (a shot used to indicate the camera's alignment with her subjectivity) in which she smiles, back to a close-up of Claire shot with a wider-angle lens with none of the soft and intimate shallow focus of the shot of Justine (see Fig. 54). Even crueler, von Trier refuses to grant Leo a final look at his mother. Claire is looking intently at her son when she first gets into the magic cave, but he does not meet her gaze, and perhaps before he can, Justine asks him to close his eyes. In the end, Justine closes her eyes too, aligning herself with Leo, the little boy and his imaginary game, and leaves her sister to panic in the final moments before impact. The ellipses in these final moments may be consistent with the style of

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[224] Ibid., 11.

the film so far, but they are also fundamentally dishonest—the roar of Melancholia is omnipresent on the soundtrack and carries over each cut seamlessly, suggesting a continuous temporality. The emotional gaps are a product of the camera's almost autistic indifference to the ebb of emotions and its appetite for an unbroken flow of sensation.

The last four shots first separate the three into separate frames before combining them with the planet for the final shot of the film. The first of the final four is of Leo with his eyes still shut. The second is of Claire, sobbing. The penultimate shot is of Justine, her eyes tired—they are losing their connection with her sister. Justine takes a few subtle breaths, as if she is counting down. Finally, Justine—who has been so intent on keeping her sister in the circle—closes her eyes. And

Fig. 55:   Claire succumbs to despair in an earlier scene, alone. Leo is just offscreen

then, the final wide shot—no longer handheld—as perfectly composed as the shots from the opening tableau: Melancholia is obliterating the horizon, our three characters, and finally the camera itself. As the planet roars towards the camera, Claire lets go of both Leo and Justine and covers her head. Claire's sudden aloneness shouldn't surprise us. In an earlier scene when she takes Leo and flees across the golf course before becoming stuck in a hail storm on hole 19, she falls back on her hands and the camera pushes in, isolating her further, her son forgotten for that moment offscreen. In its effort to get close to its characters in the final moments of the film, the camera continues to discover them in moments of utter abandonment. Can we read this ending as anything other than a grim confirmation of what we likely already *know*: we are all, ultimately, alone?

Cavell suggests one way that art intervenes on behalf of a mind in the throes of metaphysical isolation, or at least, one way that art offers the *possibility* of escape:

> We don't know whether the mind is best represented by the phenomenon of pain, or by that of envy, or by working on a jigsaw puzzle, or by ringing in the ears. A natural fact underlying the philosophical problem of privacy is that the individual will take *certain* among his experiences to represent his *own* mind—certain particular sins or shames or surprises or joy—and then take his mind (his self) to be unknown so far as *those* experiences are unknown. … There is a natural problem of *making* such experiences known, not merely because behavior as a whole may seem irrelevant (or too dumb, or gross) at such time, but because one

hasn't forms of words at one's command to release those feelings, and hasn't anyone else whose interest in helping to find the words one trusts. (Someone would have to *have* these feelings to know what I feel.) Here is a source of our gratitude to poetry and this sense of unknowness is a competitor of the sense of childish fear as an explanation for our idea, and need, of God.[225]

This possibility Cavell mentions of addressing the mystery of other minds might be sustained on the margins of *Melancholia*, and though the film might hint at a "gratitude to poetry" (or cinema) it also maintains a measured distance. In the end (as another example of the complex anxiety in the film around the power of sight), Justine finally eschews vision altogether. I understand the closing of her eyes as both a gesture of pure *knowing* and an ultimate embrace of delusion—it is impossible to separate the two in the allegory. She turns her back on the actual beauty of the world (including its destruction) in place of the beauty of this artifice she has created with Leo. The question of not knowing one's own mind, never mind knowing the mind of another, is evaded.

It is the unpredictability of cinema's appetite for representation and signification that, it would seem, is overwhelmed in the final tableau. Justine's centralized position in the tableau, directly aligned with Melancholia's trajectory, signifies that Justine has deliberately revealed her melancholy, summoned the great killer of worlds, and wiped all away in a great act of creative destruction. She has, as her mother told her, found a way to "get the hell out of here."

It is Claire who sees the terrible beauty of Melancholia's approach. And as she witnesses its approach to the earth, in stolen glances, her body is wracked with spasm. I find this bodily spasm the most powerful, disruptive quality of this allegorical tableau—the slow motion of the overture is punctured here by Claire's very rapid, involuntary motion. The camera has stilled in this shot—its schizophrenic, time-shifting, ADD no longer indicative of a body; the camera is merely a perspective (and one about to be obliterated). Claire's body is the residual vibrations of this incessant motion. I think it is Claire's abject terror that we respond to onscreen; if there is any thrill in this particular moment, it must lie in our relation to Claire's abjection: either in sympathy or in vengeance. In a sense, this is von Trier's answer to both Claire's (and perhaps our own) question of how one defends art: or, rather, *who* defends art. In the end, the

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[225] Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (New York,: Scribner, 1969), 265.

disinterested lives of the bourgeois will be a quivering, abject body while the artist—in this case, allegorized by Justine—will demonstrate their belief in art up to the very end.

But what does it mean to choose art? Is Justine truly proclaiming its value, or is it merely the least of all bad options? What kind of art is being defended? In von Trier's depiction, it would seem, the art to be defended is the art that passes judgment. If this judgment is then a *just* one—if it is informed by a capacity to be humane, if it is an expression of compassion, if it signifies an authentic wish to acknowledge the other—is not forthcoming in this film.

Is this a blind spot in *Melancholia*? On the one hand, propelled by the momentum of its freely roaming camera, the film seems invested in the power of cinema to capture passing feelings, to create connection in faces—the power of cinema to be, as Roger Ebert memorably put it in the 2014 documentary *Life Itself*, "an empathy machine." These powers are unpredictable and linked to the presence of contingency in cinema. Von Trier's reticence to create a network of glances between mother and son, and the intensity of Claire's sudden, and terrible, final isolation suggests a structuring reticence to embrace the potentially wild (and easily mocked) powers of empathy.

I am struck by the ease with which Claire's subjectivity is so easily overwhelmed by the force of the final allegory (signaled, not least of which, by how little attention the character receives in the analyses of the film I've cited). Is there a reactionary instinct in von Trier's film to manage or constrain the influence of a compassionate or empathetic force upon narrative and upon interpretation? If so, this might be one explanation for the surprising presence—and contested nature—of allegory in *Melancholia*. While Claire's final convulsions might signal—to our perverse relief—a reality beyond Justine's subjectivity, there is nothing smaller than an entire planet crashing into the horizon demanding our attention.

Allegory, Depression, and Self-Consciousness

A great deal of time is spent in *Melancholia* mapping a complex series of relations that define minds more or less closed off to one another—minds inhabiting competing versions of reality. I've offered my 'read' of these relationships as one viewer's condensed response to an exceedingly complex series of signs. All the main characters 'read one another' and the caricatured limitations of these interpretations should give us pause to consider the conditions by which we 'read' anyone. The unexpected emphasis on allegory in *Melancholia*—a

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deliberately inscrutable type of figuration—re-enforces this problem of reading at the level of the film itself. It is also through allegory—and, indeed, the wedding sequence itself can be seen as an allegory of a woman's last chance, and failure, to find union with the world—that Justine's melancholia is, for the most part, represented. This conceptual knot of representing the world, representing one's self to others in order to be read, and *reading* a representation, are all linked to the melancholic mood of the film.

Fig. 56: A frame from each shot of the overture

A.O. Scott gets at one of these semiotic links in his New York Times review: "To the extent that the destructive potential of Melancholia is a metaphor for [Justine's] private melancholia, it is perfectly apt. One of the chief torments of serious depression is how disproportionate and all-consuming the internal, personal sorrow can feel."[226] In other words, Justine feels as if her world is ending just as, indeed, the world is ending. The figurative representation of sadness—e.g. 'I'm so sad that it's like the world has ended'—has been made literal. But this literalization only continues the frustration of Justine's ability to represent her sadness to others. Just because the world is now literally ending doesn't mean that her sadness is now 'in proportion'—she has merely lost one of the major means to represent it.

Melancholia creates all kinds of abnormal effects on Earth, like shortness of breath and difficulty moving, that are very close to the physical effects of depression. In this sense, the end of the world, as imagined by von Trier, is an analog for depression, a depression that comes to everyone. But the actual ending of the world, the moment of impact, is only so if we

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[226] A.O. Scott, "Bride's Mind Is on Another Planet", review of *Melancholia*, by Lars Von Trier, *The New York TImes*, November 10, 2011. https://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/11/movies/lars-von-triers-melancholia-review.html.

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follow the logic of depression all the way to suicide. And it is here, in the threat of a melancholy from which there is no coming back, that the film's tangle of the figurative and literal bear down most heavily on the depressive who attempts to separate their anxious and exhausting lack of feeling from a real absence in the world, to separate the end of ill feeling from a literal end of all feeling. It is self-consciousness let loose from semiotic connection to the world that opens the melancholic to the possibilities of allegory. The pre-apocalyptic world is not really a privileged space in which the melancholic can reveal her experience to someone else. She needs other figurative devices to create that shared space.

The disjunction between signs and referents in the world of the melancholic is horrifically expressed during the scene when Justine sits down to her favourite meal, chosen by her sister. Justine, fully in the grips of depression, puts a fork of meatloaf into her mouth, trembling. She starts to cry. "It tastes like ash," she says. The family looks on horrified. Justine is very literal here: *to her* it tastes like ash. This is not a judgment, but the *way* she experiences this food, and the disjunction terrifies her. There is no recourse to happiness, no stability in the things that make her happy. Is this a flaw in her or in the world?—Justine cannot know, no one can tell her otherwise, and she copes by entering fully into an allegorical world.

Starting with the very striking Overture of the film, a pervading sense of horror, astonishment, and the blurring of the boundaries between the figurative and the literal define *Melancholia*. Stylistically adventurous, the overture is a series of tableaus—the camera is locked down, composition is precise—in which the action is super-slowed to the point of

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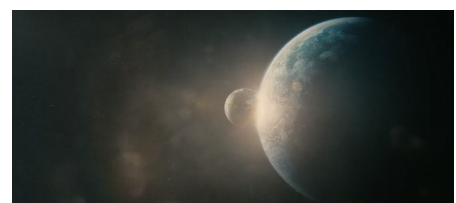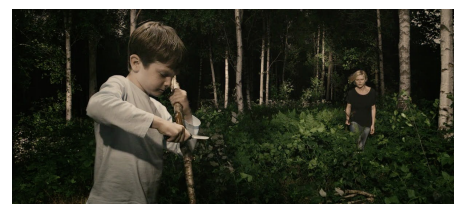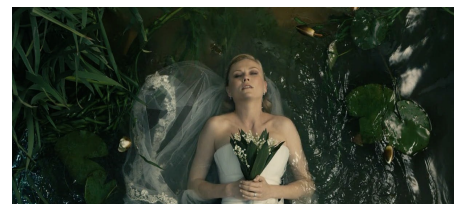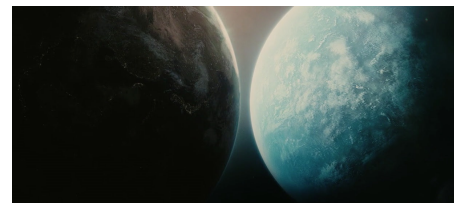
becoming almost a still photograph. But while beautiful, it is not really a form of aestheticization. Images like birds falling from the sky, double shadows, and feet sinking into earth signify the *literal* derangement of the physical world, not the poetic transformation of reality by the imagination of an artist attempting to represent a depressive state. It is also a surprising nod to the fact that the primary 'artist'—before human beings appropriated and complicated the concept—is the universe itself. We can call it a non-anthropocentric aesthetics: a state in which flights of figuration are explained merely as unusual—though beautiful and creative—material phenomena.

But at least three of the images in the overture—marked as existing outside of the temporal sequence depicted in the 'realistic' section of the film by the presence of Justine's wedding dress—appear clearly allegorical (in these images, semiotics trumps astrophysics). The first allegorical image shows, in long shot, Justine, Leo, and Claire standing in a line, facing the camera, on the lawn in front of the mansion. Above Justine's head is Melancholia, above Leo is the moon, and above Claire is the sun. This geometric equivalency suggests that Leo, the moon, small, vulnerable, and not full (waning) reflects the light of Claire (the sun), and also suggests that it is the Earth (missing in this triad) that may or may not shadow him. We will later learn that Melancholia was invisible to earthlings because "it hid behind the sun," i.e. Justine's sadness was made possible by Claire's maternal protectiveness. Indeed, von Trier seems to be establishing an allegory that's less a traditional moral parable than a model of co-dependence, represented by a series of spatial metaphors. Ultimately, it's hard to escape the idea that the entire overture is allegorical (and thus not 'real' and thus positioning the film itself as a metaphor for the impossibility of crossing out of our individual realities). This is the beginning of the curious skepticism that the film discovers in the cinematic representation of the extreme, disproportionate self-consciousness that accompanies severe depression.

The remaining two allegorical images—the two other images that have no equivalent in the 'real' narrative portion of the film[227]—include one of Justine (again, in her wedding dress) in long-shot struggling towards screen-left, as if against an invisible force, through a sparse woods tangled in long root-like strands, and another of Justine floating on her back in a pool of water. The latter image is clearly an homage to the painting *Ophelia* by John Everett Millais

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[227] The image of the burning bush would be an easily justifiable 'literal' image were it not also one of the most famous of all allegorical images.

that we see later in the film, and is allegorical in the sense that, retrospectively, we know that this is the same pool where Justine communes naked with Melancholia, the place where, following the logic of figuration, she takes her place as Melancholia's bride.[228]

The former, of Justine struggling with the long vine-like strands, is explained explicitly in the film at the moment that Justine gives her depression its fullest, most conscious expression. Claire finds Justine asleep in Leo's bed. "I'm just taking a little nap." "Don't nap, it's your wedding. You're not even halfway through yet." "Yes. You're right. I have to pull myself together. I'm … trudging through this … gray yarn. And it's pulling into my legs. It's really heavy to drag along." "No, you're not," Claire says consolingly, but firmly. "I know you hate to hear it." "Don't say a word to Michael." "Do you think I'm stupid?" The 'internal' image of the bride trudging through gray yarn—an image already visualized for us in the overture—draws our attention to the very texture of the real here: under Justine's hand is a gray knitted blanket (this is the same blanket Leo will be bundled up in the night he is taken outside to be present for Melancholia's fly-by). The cinematic 'drawing attention' to something material (in this case, the blanket) while simultaneously treating that material object figuratively—thus doubling the primary cinematic experience of the "presence of absence"—creates a wildly unstable semiotic tension peculiar to cinematic figuration. Much of *Melancholia* exists in a state of uncertain relation between the seemingly allegorical and the seemingly real.

But this is not to say that this state of uncertainty is sustainable. The *desire* for an equivalency between images and reality—for a way to image the inside, to represent what cannot be represented—is what provokes, in a sense, the sudden allegorical turn 20 minutes into the 'realistic' section of the film. Justine is once again hiding from the reception in the library when Claire confronts her (and, also, re-establishes their sororal conspiracy) about how cold she is being to Michael. "But I'm not," she pleads. "I smile and smile." "You're lying to all of us," Claire snaps as she leaves the room and Justine in tears. Justine leaps up to a row of artbooks held open on a bookcase and all showcasing examples of abstract, modernist art—pieces like Malevich's *Suprematist Painting: Eight Red Rectangles*. Grabbing each book in turn Justine

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[228] Ophelia, in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, goes mad after the death of her brother and drowns herself in her wedding dress. She is a character who is both a victim of the madness of "something rotten in Denmark" and also its most perceptive observer.

unerringly replaces the abstract paintings with early-renaissance allegorical paintings including *The Hunters in the Snow* that we see burned as the third shot of the overture[229] and *The Land of Cockaigne*, the inspiration for the ad Justine is meant to write a tagline for. *The Land of Cockaigne*—the title is a reference to a mythical 'land of plenty'—depicts in a wheel spoke like arrangement figures of sloth, gluttony, and licentiousness. The connection between a critique of the 'land of plenty' and a critique of this mansion by the lake is clear, but the resonance of *The Hunters in the Snow* to Justine's situation is less so. This famous painting of a group of hunters, and their dejected dogs, returning after what by all appearances was not a successful hunt to a snowy hill overlooking a frozen valley full of pastoral winter activity is a favourite for kitschy Christmas cards—and if we believe that the hunters will find warmth and fellowship in the village, its Yuletide message makes sense.

Fig. 57: Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist Painting: Eight Red Rectangles*, 1915

But other commentators see the contrast between the hunters and civilization more critically.[230] The hunters in the painting may also exist in an uneasy and distant relation to the community through which they are returning, and their gaze—and ours—pass on beyond civilization to the frigid and looming mountains. With this in mind, we can see Justine's act of bourgeois artbook culture jamming as a rejection of superficial beauty and as a plea for a morally engaged art. I think it is significant though—and an insight into her melancholy—that Justine expresses here a *need* for art. And, more particularly, an allegorical art that expresses a truth directly—art that is meant to be effaced in the deliverance of its message (unlike an ad, which is meant to disappear in the smoke of warm feelings to reveal only the product and the viewing position of a self-reflexive

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[229] Many commentators, including Manohla Dargis in her excellent shot by shot analysis of the overture, point out that this particular painting by Breughel already has a rich cinematic heritage: it is featured prominently in Tarkovksy's *Solaris*, another film about loss and the fullness of the cosmos. Manohla Dargis, "This Is How the End Begins," *The New York Times*, December 30, 2011, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/01/movies/awardsseason/manohla-dargis-looks-at-the-overture-to-melancholia.html.

[230] Huddart and Stott discuss the environmentalist significance of Bruegel's wintry landscapes and how it depicts a brief period in European histories of particularly brutal winters, brutal enough for climatologists to call the period from 1400 to 1850 "The Little Ice Age." Commentators look to works like *The Land of Cockaigne* for hidden themes of environmental anxiety. It is also a painting that has become increasingly used by climate change deniers who use the "The Little Ice Age" as an example of the "naturalness" of cycles of extreme weather. David Huddart and Tim Stott, *Earth Environments: Past, Present and Future* (John Wiley & Sons, 2010).

consumer who understands themselves as a subject capable of, and self-identifying with, that feeling and that product). In other words, this reloading of the images in John and Claire's library so that they might signify beyond the surface is Justine's response to Claire's criticism that she is "lying to all of us." Less of a critique of John and Claire's socially-sanctioned hypocrisies, Justine, as the harbinger of the end of the world, proclaims at this moment that, in fact, she feels (and believes she is being) utterly transparent. As we will see, the nature of allegory—in the way it discards the vehicle that gives it form—yields a form of representation that is less mediated, more transparent, than any other.

Von Trier has described his "sloppy" filmmaking style in *Melancholia* as an attempt to balance out the high Romance of Wagner's music.[231] His interest in allegory in the film is similarly disruptive: the heyday of German allegory, as explained in Walter Benjamin's *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, was at least two hundred years before Wagner's late-Romantic mood. In Benjamin's analysis, the dominant mood of the Baroque allegorical plays he was analyzing (to, among other things, craft a pre-history of Romanticism) was melancholic. This mood was in curious contrast to the state of suffering that is dominant in Greek tragedy (perhaps Claire is in the tragic mode) and the revelatory mood that is dominant in Romanticism. The melancholic appears in these Baroque plays as a figure who finds contemplative satisfaction in the detritus of life and history. This contemplation is inspired by both the recognition of the truth that life is transient, but also in the "protest of life" against such

interpretation. Benjamin places the emergence of this theme as a response to the secularization of the world that proceeded from Protestantism, a general lack of faith in the historical march towards a redemptive judgment day. In other words, this melancholic mood was sustained by the frustrated deferral of the apocalypse.[232] Justine's rearrangement of

Fig. 58: Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Hunters in the Snow*, 1565

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[231] Von Trier, "Longing for the End of All."

[232] "Melancholy betrays the world for the sake of knowledge. But in its tenacious self-absorption it embraces dead objects in its contemplation, in order to redeem them … the persistence which is expressed in the intention of

the detritus of high capitalism in an act of metaphysical critique is intriguingly consistent with such an allegorical mode.

But how does this help us understand Justine's depression? One benefit for Justine to claim allegiance to an allegorical world while in the center of the sensorial world of high capitalism is that it makes it possible for Justine to understand her sadness as not contiguous with her *self*. Rather, she is able to think of herself as a substitution for something else, a vessel through which sadness is expressed (if she saw herself as a symbol for, say, revelation of a higher truth, her *self* would be fused with that truth, her sadness would be essential). In other words, by taking the allegorical turn, the disconnect between her inside and her outside is not a flaw of her own doing but a fundamental property of the universe. She thus comes into possession of a secret by relinquishing a hold on her identity, by giving her identity over to allegory (i.e. *she*, Justine, merely stands-in for something else).[233]

That Justine exists in tension with her identity is one of the main points of the entire wedding farce. At the center of the farce are the wedding toasts, a chance for Justine's loved ones to characterize her (Claire never gets this chance). Throughout the wedding, Justine is constantly referred to as physically beautiful. We also know she makes "beautiful speeches" and that she writes amazing taglines, but we learn nothing about Justine-the-person. This ambiguity contributes to von Trier's larger project of making a film that is, in a sense, *about* reading: reading intentions and interpreting nature (including the ultimate question posed to nature: is it benevolent or malevolent?). Because so much of this film is about indirect resentments and patterns of neglect, it calls for a piecing together of a larger picture where many pieces are

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mourning is born of its loyalty to the world of things." Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: NLB, 1977), 157.

[233] As explained by Susan Buck-Morss, writing about Walter Benjamin, modern allegory has its origin in scholarly attempts to understand ancient sign systems as 'natural images' crafted by God: "Not only Egyptian hieroglyphs, but also Greek myths and Christian symbols were looked to for deciphering the divine meaning of the material world." As this project progressed, unfortunately, it was discovered that the 'natural' symbols were so over-determined and laden with meaning that the quest for divine knowledge was overcome by semiotic arbitrariness. Vice and virtue could be represented by the same object. As we have seen, this is indeed what distinguishes the allegory: the lack of specificity of the vehicle. In response, allegoricists created dramas which resolved this problem theologically: the multiplicity of signs (and nature itself) were seen as Satanic, and allegoricists presented that knowledge of evil as stemming from self-delusion. The multiplicity of meaning inherent in allegory itself became an allegory for the sort of self-delusion which leads to evil and the Devil. This representation of the world allowed the allegoricist to turn the fact of contradiction between signs into a sign for its opposite: "the eternity of the one, true Spirit." And, thus, natural death was seen as something transitory, and transitoriness itself became an allegory for the Resurrection. Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989), 172.

missing. Following from the outlandish beauty of the overture however, and in Justine's rejection of Claire's desire to aestheticize the end of the world, the film does not point to a desire for a unifying image—certainly no Romantic Absolute—but a totalizing darkness. And, indeed, this is how *Melancholia* ends (before the credits). This is the logical conclusion to an allegorical imagination that is able to make opposites signify each other, that sees life as the beautiful vessel for universal sadness and that sees beauty itself as a sign for sadness. Which brings us to the allegorical presence of cinema itself.

I Wish You'd Watch It Through the Telescope With Me: Allegories of Cinema and Vision

Justine is pursued by two images over the course of her wedding reception (her compulsion to seek out a view of Melancholia is another kind of attraction all together). The first is the print-out of the ad she is supposed to caption. Her response to that pursuit, out on the farthest reaches of the wedding, out in the sandtrap of the golf course under the stars, is to have sex with the

coworker pursuing her with the image, quitting her job and her marriage nearly simultaneously. The second is a picture of the apple orchard that her hapless husband offers her as a wedding present.

Fig. 59: The print out of the advertisement Justine is meant to caption.

What are photographic images doing in *Melancholia* and why are they given such emphasis? On the one hand, the photographs seem well aligned with the theme of superficiality in the film. On the other, they seem to betoken two separate (but perhaps not so different) realities: Justine's work-life and Justine's imagined life-with-Michael. In contrast to the allegorical paintings, the photographs are mobile,

Fig. 60: A picture of the apple orchard Michael bought for Justine

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insidious, and appear as fragments. They are also often preceded by little speeches, always by men.

Michael's most successful moment of addressing Justine's sadness occurs immediately before he reveals the image of the apple orchard. He says, "I can see that you're not feeling well. I should've seen it already yesterday. I haven't been taking care of you lately. It's my fault." In this moment he seems to answer her desire to be addressed in the present. This requirement of being-in-the-present is a recurring theme in the film, especially at the reception where Justine's desire (like talking to her father) is constantly interrupted by the ineluctable march of the party. It is through glances that these moments are dramatized and actualized, and, indeed, *vision* is a key theme in the film. The number of references to sight in the film is almost dizzying: from one of Justine's earliest lines in the film, "well I can see it's not looking good," to the jilted wedding planner, played by Udo Kier, who spends most of the film refusing to even look at Justine (every time he passes her he puts his hand up to blinder himself), to the repeated proclamations of Justine's physical beauty, the act of a character looking is used to characterize, define, and expand space and relations. Intriguingly, Justine's powers of intuition are not presented as a power of "second sight", but rather simply as a form of *knowing*. In fact, sight seems to give Justine all kinds of problems. In the context of our discussion so far, we can read this as a subtle extension of a suspicion about cinema and part of a general skeptical stance towards art.

For a film so attentive to the mind of just two characters (though Justine emerges most forcefully), the film is unexpectedly promiscuous with point of view and plays surprisingly loose with any apparent limitations upon the camera. Perhaps because the handheld camera seems so familiar a trope in the context of a wedding reception, I am constantly struck by the times the camera achieves perspectives and access beyond the capacities of an embodied wedding videographer (or even two). That the camera can cut from a wide shot to a close up with no apparent gap in time should not surprise viewers of multi-camera documentaries (or even faux-documentary fictions), but von Trier's camera is deliberately contradictory: at times it emphasizes a seeming prescience about an event as it unfolds, other times it seems surprised (and thus rapidly adjusts its framing) by the unfolding of an event. Is the camera work deliberately unpatterned? Is its looseness another signal that there are themes and ideas admitted

into this film that will not cohere in accordance to traditional, established, or even predictable patterns?

The camera is at once an outside observer (often using zoom lenses to pierce crowd scenes looking for a single character) while at other times is given unrestricted and intimate access to private moments. I'm not able to detect any pattern to this variation: it's not like when the characters are calm the camera behaves itself and when the characters behave rashly the camera becomes spastic—not consistently, at least. But maybe we're over-thinking this. Maybe we should simply accept this particular camera-phenomenon on its face and think about the camera as a thing so unbounded, so in flux, that *at times* it is consistent with the set of freedoms granted an embodied camera (like Herzog's camera in *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*), while *at other times* it is consistent with the set of freedoms granted the camera of psychological realism (e.g. Scorsese's camera in *Hugo*). In a sense, the camera has its own split personality. And why should this surprise us? Why should we expect that our camera-narrator always be coherent? This realization about the role of the camera certainly complicates our ability to interpret *Melancholia*—in a sense it's like encountering an unreliable narrator in literature, except what we have here is a narrative camera that responds to unreliable laws of attention (in this skewing of attention from the drama to the world and back, von Trier's camera is not unlike Terrence

Malick's, just much more distractible and more ironic). Do these unreliable laws extend to the characters, too—just like how in the overture we saw both literal and figurative images? Is the camera, too, allegorical? We may read the camerawork as analogous to the disoriented and

Fig. 61: The camera returns before Justine does

distracted state of someone who is clinically depressed,[234] which seems true enough, but that must be a claim derived from the content of the film. There is nothing inherently "depressive" about these cinematic effects; but there is something self-conscious and more importantly, to my mind, something *intimate*. There is something closely aligned not with subjectivity, but the experience of *other* subjectivities.

After the overture, the camera stays quite close to Justine for a good ten minutes. So close that when she gets up to leave for a moment after her mother's speech, the camera is

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[234] Link, "Depression, Melancholia, and Me: Lars Von Trier's Politics of Displeasure."

waiting for her outside (in one of the few wide shots of the film). Justine walks off screen, as if she is exiting a stage, and then the camera cuts to a shaky shot of the mansion—Justine is nowhere to be seen—and then the camera suddenly swing-pans to the left as it picks up Justine driving away in a golf cart. For good measure, the camera also zooms in and goes out of focus as it tries to keep up with her. This is one of the few shots in the film staged as a joke (a bride attempts to escape her wedding by stealing a golf cart). In the next cut, the camera is right with her as she pulls the golf cart to a stop, so free with her that the camera even dares to move towards her as she squats on the green and urinates. Two POV shots of the stars follow Justine squatting on the lawn.

Next shot and we're back at the reception where Justine's empty chair is at the center of the frame. There is a brief series of glances and discussion before Justine arrives—this is the first time in the film that we've been this far from her. The camera then follows the wedding reception some more. Justine is rarely gone long. As she starts to feel worse, she will escape again, making possible a scene where we follow John as he goes looking for and then confronts (through a closed door) Justine's mother. The camera never really leaves Justine again until around the 55-minute mark of the film when, in one of the most astonishing gestures of the film, the camera cuts from a close-up of Justine in a moment of vulnerability—she has just has asked her father not to leave the party—to a high angle shot of Justine standing alone. This high angle shot is a very effective, almost classically impressionistic representation of her feeling of aloneness. But in the following shot we discover that the high-angle shot of Justine alone is not impressionistic, but is a retrospective POV from Michael's perspective. This amounts to an intriguing sourcing of Justine's dejection in the presence of the two primary male figures in her
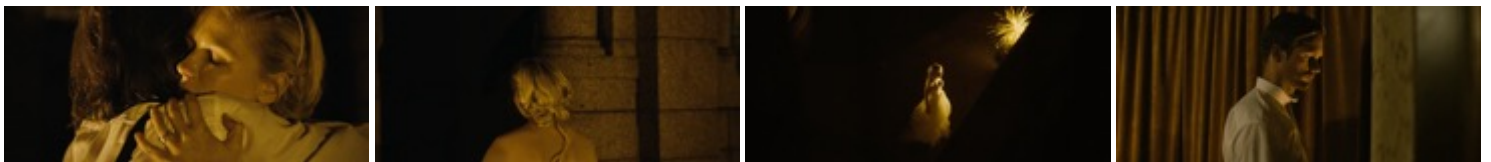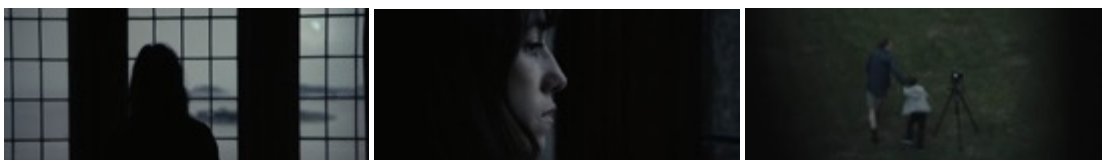

Fig. 62: In the above sequence, Justine says good bye to her father, and then we see her again from Michael's POV. Below, we see a similar POV sequence, much later in the film, from Claire's perspective.

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life. This intensely aligned POV shot (there are very few others in the film) is echoed in the second half of the film, this time with Claire looking out the window unhappily at John and Leo posing for a photograph in front of Melancholia. At times like these, the camera is able to jump quickly from perspective to perspective—quite a contrast from the camera that almost lost Justine on the golf cart.

On the one hand, it seems clear that von Trier is signaling the artificiality of his film, of this entire representation. Probably this is no better communicated then in the last shot of the overture when, seen from a spectral vantage, Melancholia crashes into the earth and a bright light pierces the screen creating lens flares across the image. Lens flares in space imagery are not so uncommon in film, (these flares of course, were added by the CGI artist), but this free-floating, objective space-camera actually looks *dirty*, as if the lens is smudged. Despite extremely playful gestures of indicating the camera like these, the characters in this film never break the fourth wall by addressing the camera (not even the way wedding guests always do in wedding videos), and thus the integrity of the camera's 'subject position' is left intact (as is the coherence of the world being destroyed). In other words, the *cinematic world* makes clear the artificiality of the camera; the characters do not.

Maybe 'artificiality' is not the right word here. It's doubtful that in von Trier's materialist/nihilist drama the word 'artificial' makes any sense. Rather, to my mind, it's more accurate to think that the style of *Melancholia* emphasizes certain qualities of the camera *as a camera*. The shakiness of a machine meant to be held by human hands, its awkwardness in relation to any given event (a camera is rarely in the perfect position, but it must be in *a* position), the dirty lens—these are qualities of camera-ness that exist to us modern audiences as legible qualities and thus carry with them their own presence apart from the narrative they might be in the service of communicating. What do qualities of camera-ness, along with the qualities we might associate with families, or domesticated animals, or vegetated landscapes, or depressives lend to the world of *Melancholia*?

The psychological realism of a gesture like a POV sequence is subverted in the film by the herky jerky, time-bending editing. We can see this especially clearly in the first meeting of Claire, Michael, Justine, and John—discussed earlier in the chapter—where there is a sense of two separate timelines (a main one and two asides) that are cut together as if constituting one simultaneous encounter. 180-degree-rule busting edits exaggerate the time fracturing. The effect

of starting on one side of a conversation and then jumping to the other side so that characters don't seem to be talking to each other but in opposite directions is so jarring—though not every viewer is likely to directly perceive it—that it raises the question (even subtly) of the camera's *capability*, the physical, ontological, limits of this camera-being. The surprising solution here, for the audience, is to either identify with the transcendent freedom of the camera to teleport to multiple viewpoints at once, or to suspect that there is more than one camera. The fun that von Trier has with jumping the axis both disorients us in space and emphasizes the freedom of the camera to cover impossible ground instantaneously—the synchronicity of vision presented here suggests, to my mind, most convincingly the existence of multiple cameras, and thus multiple 'objectivities' with which we might identify. The camera thus does not have transcendent sight—'the camera' is simply the name we give to the *multiple cameras*

we are asked to identify with that, in the aggregate, constitute the single 'perspective' we associate with accessing this narrative world. Following that logic, the 'camera' is allegorical for the mystery by which multiple perspectives cohere into one perspective: in this case, that one perspective is as much due to the conventions of cinematic narrative storytelling as to the insistence on the film of the prescience of the non-human world. The camera *knows* that the end is near just as the horses, just as the birds, and just as the weather

Fig. 63: Examples of moments when we are in a position to 'read' thoughts that are being withheld from others in the frame

knows. It is this last quality, especially, that reveals the camera's appetite for dramatic irony. The main reservoir of dramatic irony lies in the conspiracy of the camera—and the editing that motivates it—with the apocalypse. Even without the overture that "gives away the ending" there is no doubt that the camera is unsurprised by the end of the world (even if, once or twice, it is surprised by Justine).
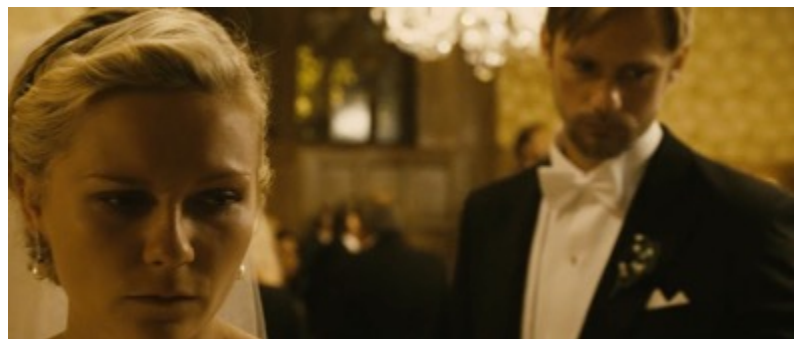
I think it is this sense of dramatic irony—the *knowingness* of the material world—that arches above the most overt allegories for cinema in the film: the telescopes, the distance-measuring steel that Leo invents, and the staging of Melancholia's flyby. The night of the flyby, the family gathers on the back patio to see the planet rise, spectacularly, over the horizon. The entire staging is a bit theatrical; more than a bit like a movie theater. In this case, the sun is projecting its light onto Melancholia (the screen), and the screen is illuminating the family (the audience) in a pale blue-green light. It is notable that Leo's eyes are closed for the entire spectacle—he's asleep—just as they are closed in the final sequence of the film. Justine sits in the back, while most of the focus is on John and Claire who are crowded around the telescope. So, what do we make of the presence of the telescope in the movie theater?

The telescope is a constant presence in the film—we see one beside Leo's nightstand, John is forever futzing with one, a key moment in the wedding programme involves a telescope, and when Justine first escapes from the wedding, the telescope looms on the horizon. A telescope is first and foremost a tool for collapsing distance, and in that capacity it is clearly resonant with the hippity-hopping camera positions territorialized in this film. This is in

Fig. 64: Watching the flyby

contrast to the distance-calculating 'steel' that is used to judge distance *from* an object (in that sense the steel is truly a narrative device, helping the audience count down to the end of the film and the arrival of Melancholia). Justine, of course, never uses the steel. Leo's nickname for her, Auntie Steelbreaker, seems to foretell her relation to this device.

Justine looks through the telescope only once, and long before the flyby, near the end of the wedding reception when the guests are lighting miniature hot air balloons and sending them skyward scrawled with terms of endearment. From a shot of Justine looking through the telescope, we cut to a masked iris-shot of one of the floating balloons. The shot is held for a long time; the implication is that Justine seems to be more than *looking*: she *sees* something. We cut back to Justine whose face—unseen by everyone else (except, perhaps, her mother)—registers a look of devastation we will recognize only later in the film when her melancholy is at its peak. She shuts her eyes (the degree of privacy-in-public granted by the telescope seems to

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me another of its cinematic qualities). We then cut to a series of shots moving through space, moving to distant galaxies, as if the implication that these little balloons travel far; or perhaps, that these little balloons summon Melancholia: that they leave as well-wishes and come back as oblivion. This sequence with the telescope is one of the moments I take to signal that Justine both recognizes the inevitability of her melancholy, but also welcomes it. Or, perhaps, that she knows now that she can't stop it, that Melancholia is coming, that it's happening again. This little corner of excessive beauty, incited by the glimpse through the telescope, is a reminder that, for Justine, beauty is an allegory for sadness.

To get to the bottom of the powers of the telescope, I want to bring in Stanley Cavell's discussion of the E.T.A. Hoffman 1816 story "The Sandman"—mostly because of a thematic coincidence: Cavell's discussion hinges on a magic spyglass and I want to make an argument about the self-reflexivity of the many telescopes we see in *Melancholia*.[235] In Hoffman's tale, the main character, Nathaniel, falls in love with a beautiful automaton—a robot—named Olympia, a love that is precipitated by his many viewings of Olympia, from afar, using a pocket spyglass sold to him by one of Olympia's makers. When Nathaniel discovers the truth about what Olympia is—he sees her pulled apart by her two makers—he becomes unhinged, and if not for the ministrations of his hapless fiancée Clara would have perished. All is set for Nathaniel to move to the country with Clara when, on their way out of town, they decide to climb a nearby church steeple. Clara points out a figure moving below (we learn later that it was one of Olympia's makers) and Nathaniel takes out his spyglass to see. But as he does so he accidentally glimpses Clara through the telescope and the sight of her drives him mad. He tries to throw Clara from the tower, but Nathaniel plunges to his death. Freud found Hoffman's story suffused with an intense sensation of uncanniness, and it features heavily in his 1919 essay "The Uncanny."[236]

Freud inherited 'the uncanny' from the psychologist Ernst Jentsch, who argued that the phenomenon is based on an uncertainty about our ability to distinguish the animate from the inanimate, the living from the dead. But Freud disagrees, arguing instead that what ultimately

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[235] Stanley Cavell, "The Uncanniness of the Ordinary," in *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

[236] Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, ed. Hugh Haughton, trans. David McLintock, Penguin Classics (New York: Penguin Books, 2003).

seals Nathaniel's fate is the threat of castration.[237] Cavell finds this position bizarre, even uncanny, and a sign that Freud is not taking seriously how intractable the problem of acknowledging the reality of others really is. Freud is so evasive about radical skepticism[238]—in order, Cavell argues, to treat uncanniness as pathological rather than philosophical—that he misreads/misremembers the end of the Hoffmann story, conveniently forgetting that it is Clara—like Olympia before—who incites Nathaniel's madness, and not a glimpse of one of the twinned father figures who created the automaton. Cavell seizes on this slip to offer his own argument about what is at stake in the uncanny: our skeptical stance towards the *ordinary*.

What is the significance of the fact that Nathaniel is driven to madness by spying two different women—or, rather, one woman and one woman-like automaton—in his spyglass? For Cavell, the spyglass acts as a kind of recording of past emotions. In the case of Olympia, Nathaniel had used the spyglass to distance himself from her (necessary to sustain his blossoming love and forestall the revelation of her artificiality), and to relive the rapture he felt when he first saw her. In the case of Clara, the woman who has cared for him and who he is just about to wed, seeing her up close and framed by the machine is a reminder of how she dismissed one of his poems (an insurmountable devastation, it seems, common to many young, male Romantics), a dismissal that provoked him at the time to accuse her of being insensitive to the higher things in life and to call her a "damn, lifeless automaton." In other words, Cavell argues that Nathaniel is reminded in the spyglass of Clara's "flesh and blood ordinariness." He sees her as a separate person, ultimately unknowable to him, a crisis that his infatuation with the automaton allowed him to evade. Cavell goes on:

> The glass is a death-dealing rhetoric machine, producing or expressing the consciousness of life in one case (Olympia's) by figuration, in the other (Clara's) by literalization, or say defiguration. One might also think of it as a machine of incessant animation, the parody of a certain romantic writing; and surely not un-connectedly as an uncanny anticipation of a movie camera. The moral of the machine I would draw provisionally this way: There is a repetition necessary to what we call life, or the animate, necessary for example to the human; and a repetition necessary to what we call death, or the inanimate, necessary for example to the mechanical; and there are no marks or features or criteria or rhetoric by means of which to tell the difference between them. From which, let

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[237] Ibid., 5.
[238] Cavell amplifies his point about the relation between uncanniness and skepticism by noting in the Hoffman story that when word gets out that Olympia, the object of desire for so many men, is in fact an automaton, that it becomes a crisis for the entire village: men lose faith in the veracity of their own feelings of love.

me simply claim, it does not follow that the difference is unknowable or undecidable. On the contrary, the difference is the basis of everything there is for human beings to know, or say decide (like deciding to live), and to decide on no basis beyond or beside or beneath ourselves. Within the philosophical procedure of radical skepticism, the feature specifically allegorized by the machine of the spyglass is skepticism's happening all at once, the world's vanishing at the touch, perhaps, of the thought that you may be asleep dreaming that you are awake.[239]

The overwhelming sense of the uncanny in *Melancholia* begins with the incessant forward momentum of the wedding (mirrored, in the second half, by the incessant forward momentum of the planet), and the clear, and palpable sense that it is unclear if we are witnessing human beings in the midst of human interactions or automatons of habitual resentment acting out old patterns. The way John compulsively reiterates in conversation the lavishiness of his 18-hole golf course is an example; the father's predictable insincerity is another.

John is clearly identified with the telescope and through his imprimatur the device exerts a strange influence on those who look through it. When Leo looks through the telescope at Melancholia, he agrees with his father: "it's amazing!" When Claire finally does (after John's begging), she agrees with him: "it looks friendly!" The telescope is a reminder of both our desire for cinema—to make the imaginary immediate, up close—and the myth (and *threat*) of everyone seeing, through the device, the same thing. Not surprisingly, Justine does not look through the telescope a second time. She has already had her vision of the malevolent wedding wishes; through the telescope, she saw them as becoming unbearable, as proof of her flesh-and-blood world about to disappear in flame.

Perhaps the most intense moment of the uncanny takes place before the 'screening' of the flyby on the back patio. Claire has noticed that Justine is becoming increasingly strange. While Claire demonstrates a stoic competence in the face of Justine's deep depression, she is out of her depth when it comes to, what appears to be, Melancholia's increasing influence upon her sister. One night, Claire goes out to the stable to check on the horses. The animals are becoming, mysteriously, increasingly agitated—clearly, Claire perceives this as a bad omen, a sign that not all is right with the oncoming planet. Standing on the back patio, Claire sees the amber moon and blue Melancholia equally bright in the sky (allegorical of the two sisters; an

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[239] Cavell, "The Uncanniness of the Ordinary," 158.

uncanny doubleness), when she sees Justine exit the house and head off across the lawn. Claire follows. Deep in the woods, Claire comes to a pool—on the farside Justine is lying in repose, strewn on a mossy rock, completely naked and bathed in the light of Melancholia. Claire stops in tracks. She appears stunned. She is frozen, nearly expressionless.

What menace or revelation is inherent to this scene? I'm tempted to see the scene as another example of a character confronting an image. In this case, we might argue that Claire has come face to face with the insuperable distance between herself and her sister. But if Claire is capable of ever judging her sister irremediably *crazy*—we don't know. Because, certainly, the terrible beauty of this scene—and its almost parodic naturalism—is also an affirmation of Claire's own mounting anxiety.

We can contrast this moment in the woods to another confrontational moment with an image. The second photograph in the film (after the advert print-out) is offered by Michael in the form of both a projection of the future and a photograph of the apple orchard he just purchased for his bride as a wedding present. Intriguingly, Michael's gesture seems to quote one of the paintings Justine selects (*The Woodsman's Daughter* by John Everett Millais depicting a serious little boy offering an angelically innocent looking girl a handful of strawberries while a faceless man, the Woodsman, presumably, toils in the background). Justine's fear of, we could say, *becoming trapped in a picture* is clear in the overture—the slow-motion movement of that overture suggests a struggle against idolization recast as a gravitational cataclysm. Michael asks Justine to keep the picture with her so she can look at it "whenever she is sad," so she can imaginatively project herself into that future. Michael, though good intentioned, is thus positing a solution

Fig. 65: *The Woodsman's Daughter*, John Everett Millais, 1851

to her sadness focused on the future, of taking an image and connecting it with a projected reality. For a depressive—and, in the film, as the melancholic bearer of the intuitive knowledge that there literally is no future—it is the wrong tactic: Justine needs the image to express the *present.* Michael's final misstep is to ask her to imagine a child in the idyllic apple orchard scene, a question Justine gently deflects. She leaves the picture behind—not to hurt Michael, I

like to think, but rather, perhaps, because the future is such a blank for her that the image in her hand is, too, utterly blank (in a nice bit of production design, the picture Michael offers is utterly unremarkable). There is no existential connection in it to the real. It is notable that unlike the allegorical images Justine selects out of the artbooks in the library, the image of the apple orchard is devoid of human beings. It is a point-and-shoot pastoral landscape, dominated entirely by scraggly apple trees. Michael hopes that the landscape will invite Justine to imagine herself—and a phantom child—into the space. There is no resistance to such a process—the image of the orchard is to be consumed without residue. I can't help but imagine what Justine may have seen in the image if Michael were standing in it.

The photographs both ask of Justine to commit to a particular reality, which she cannot, which she rejects, and, in effect, *she* is effaced. The in-limbo nether-world beside the pool, positioned for the gaze of Claire, where Justine communes with Melancholia is different: rather than being effaced, Justine is made strange, otherworldly, inhuman. And Claire, the viewer, becomes frozen: what is being demanded of Claire's reality is unclear, but Claire does not act, she doesn't even reject what she is seeing. This might be the power of Melancholia, but it is also the power of the tableau: if we accept that Melancholia is indeed both a kind of cinema screen (to be projected upon), and a camera, then in this tableau Justine is brought into an image that includes the apparatus of cinema itself. It is also a space in which Claire is included, not unlike the "magic cave" that ends the film. Here, roughly, we see the impetus to consider the apparatus of cinema as deranged (like the universe), defiguring, and as a means to overcome that ultimate strangeness to ourselves. Justine and Claire, however, remain strange to each other.

Crossing the Bridge

The fullest expression of Justine's melancholy is catatonia, the inability to move. In a harrowing scene, Claire holds her sister's limp and naked body at the edge of a bath tub that Justine cannot muster the strength to enter. In the mechanical failure of limbs there is something of the uncanny, too. This acediac stillness is in stark contrast to the excess of movement in the rest of the film. In between Justine's catatonia, and perhaps as a respite from the constantly jittery camera, and as an example of an entirely different way of moving through space, von Trier includes two gorgeously smooth, almost Kubrickian helicopter shots of Claire and Justine riding their horses. There are three other shots in the film in which the camera moves forward

following characters, but it is a much different camera that lurches after—it is so lead-footed that the characters quickly outpace the camera and the shot ends, in all three cases, with a last minute desperate zoom. These helicopter shots are utterly different. They are Romantic and sublime, summoning exactly the sense of mastery that Shaviro feels the film subverts.

Let's return to the wishful thinking that seems to buoy interpretations of *Melancholia* (including this one). I very much like Shaviro's description of how, in a sense, we might re-read the ending of the film as an allegory of how the depressive can reveal her truth: not her own mind, or her secret self, but the integrity of her apartness. This apartness, for Shaviro, is not a choice, but a natural condition of the universe, the experience of which transcends individuality. Phrased this way, it is not a psychological question but, essentially, a geometric/graphic one. As I've argued in previous chapters, Jonas makes the intriguing case that one benefit of the careful consideration of space is access to a means of teasing out a deeper sensitivity to a metaphysics we share with all organisms.

We've already mentioned the different metaphysical architectures of the film and discussed how the camera(s) gives a sense of multiple, even simultaneous viewpoints on the world of the film. This camera's facility with 'narrative' becomes aligned with a mysterious *knowingness* that is aligned with Justine, and, ultimately with the universe. The most portentous use of space to communicate this *knowingness* is the mystery of the un-crossable stone bridge. Though we don't know for sure—the bridge likely leads to The Village—it clearly marks some kind of outer limit of both the mansion and the fiction. In two separate scenes, Claire and Justine attempt to ride across the bridge. Though Claire can cross, Justine's horse, Abraham, balks. The first time it happens, Justine's attention is brought to the sky and the missing star that heralds Melancholia's arrival. The second time, Justine is just recovering from the severest point of her depression, and when Abraham stops, Justine starts to beat him severely with her riding crop, so severely that Abraham lies down and Claire comes rushing back to stop her.

We know that Justine has a deep connection with Abraham—she 'introduces' Abraham to Michael by saying, to the horse, "Look, I'm married. Michael's my husband now." How do we make sense of this beating scene? Is this the influence of Melancholia? When Claire, who is yelling at her to stop, turns to intervene, Justine notices Melancholia in the sky—for the first time—and stops the beating immediately.

Earlier I asked if there was a point when, on their two opposite trajectories (from autonomy to neediness), Justine and Claire were equally matched enough for compassion to become possible. If there is ever such a place and a moment, I think it is here in this scene. We have what the two women most fear in the same tableau, at a threshold where escape would still seem possible: for Claire, it is her fear of Melancholia; for Justine, it is in the moment when she expresses, unequivocally, the inhumane (her less-than-humanness, proof that she has no right to live). It is a moment, like Claire's spasm at the end of the film, that the organic body asserts itself, as a means for communication, over language. But if there is a potential for recognition here between the two sisters, it is displaced, immediately, onto the great pale-blue planet in the sky.

Following the allegorical logic of the film, it is not surprising that Justine—the melancholic—would achieve a deep connection with animals. As Benjamin writes, "For all the wisdom of the melancholic is subject to the nether world. It is secured by immersion in the life of creaturely things, and it hears nothing of the voice of revelation. Everything saturnine points down into the depths of the earth."[240] Indeed, though she often looks skyward, Justine's revelry in Melancholia is most certainly a gaze inward. And in that gaze she both recognizes and does not recognize herself. Is her beating of Abraham a way of doing violence to herself? Is beating her beloved horse on the same plane of alienation as eating meatloaf and tasting nothing but ashes? It's not clear, except to say that in a film full of vicious and petty betrayals of trust this beating of a horse is perhaps the only unequivocal example of inhumanity. This is where we find the limit of Justine's sadness: the place where, in Benjamin's account of the destabilizing effect of allegory, that Evil is let into the world.

This space of allegory gets even more complex. We revisit the stone bridge again when Claire is trying to 'escape' to The Village on the golf cart and the golf cart stalls out, right where Abraham stopped. This, of course, is also a call-back to the scene of the limo and its failure to negotiate a turn, rocking back and forth in a dreamlike absurdity. We might interpret this figuratively and wonder if Claire has now truly acknowledged Melancholia, and, as such, her *knowingness* makes certain actions (like returning to Justine) much clearer. But a more important insight is embedded in this moment. It very much seems like we are seeing an argument about the ontologies of 'horse' and 'golf cart' here, and I don't think it is made

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[240] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 152.

possible by an elevation of the inanimate into the realm of the animate. In this moment, the true cosmology of *Melancholia* is revealed: by philosophic intention, by virtue of allegorical storytelling, or by the nature of the camera, this moment makes intuitive sense because it reveals a coherent materialist imagination. In this film, the horse and the golf cart are equally susceptible to the occult powers of Melancholia. As such, the film posits 'nature' as all that is in opposition to the human: the animals and the planets are equally inscrutable and equally indifferent to the human. Just as the world is about to become utterly devoid of life—the riddle of life, in Jonas' terms, is about to be solved forever—the forces governing an organic being like Abraham and an inorganic thing like the golf cart are shown to be equivalent. Following this, Justine's 'sympathy' with the universe should be understood as expression of her merging with the physics of the universe. Justine has become a planet; her animation an expression of gravitational forces, not an expression of will and certainly not significance. There is a fairy tale quality to this orphaned kingdom, and a fairy-tale presence of some occult force that is utterly anthropocentric insofar as it manipulates animal and machine to equal effect in order to define the limits of the human protagonists. Or rather, it would be anthropocentric, if it weren't clear in this film that life itself is a kind of perverse illusion.

Is there a truly positive non-anthropocentric vision in the film? Dominic Fox describes "dysphoria" as a state of existence in which "the distinction between living and dead matter collapses. The world *is dead*, and life appears within it as an irrational persistence, an insupportable excrescence."[241] This is how Jonas, as we discussed in the context of *Uncle Boonmee*, discusses the conditions of materialism, that dominant philosophy of the partial monisms that define our modern, vacillating relationship to the world and ourselves. Does the dysphoric then act as a literalization of that which is only philosophically implied? Or are they the modern manifestation of this philosophic confusion? Is there revolutionary potential in the dysphoric, as Shaviro wants to argue on Justine's behalf?

In light of the whole network of signs we've sketched, the small circle of space defined by Justine's 'magic cave' seems less and less like a sanctuary and more like an ironic capitulation to materialism, a space in which the animate becomes confused with the inanimate. This uncanniness defines the planet of Melancholia itself: it too, we mistake for being animate.

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[241] Dominic Fox, *Cold World: The Aesthetics of Dejection and the Politics of Militant Dysphoria* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009), 70.

And, of course, following from this, cinema also appears uncanny. Is that, ultimately, what *Melancholia* thinks of its medium? That it is a thing that we are perennially meant to misinterpret just as we are meant to misinterpret Justine, whose *look*—the opening shot of the film—she withholds upon its close? In this way, the film clears a way for Justine to become an automaton in order to give expression to the one truth of the film, and the one truth available to art: that there is no redemption and there is no escape, only atoms and planets in slower and smaller orbits.

Conclusion: Two Minds

And yet, can we imagine an ending in which Claire and Justine escape the boundaries of the estate and discover a welcoming human community in the Village? Justine is adamant (in her calm, knowing way), as Claire tries to flee the estate, that, "This has nothing to do with the Village." But why is this so? Does Justine simply mean that the three of them will find neither solace nor sanctuary with the rest of humanity? Why not even entertain the possibility?

Trying to imagine an alternative version of the film brings into relief how clear (to the point of mystification) the film is about the limitations on possible universes: not only in the sense that the film posits that there is no other life anywhere else in the universe, but also because it is the shared plight of the depressive (no matter how hard she tries) and the bourgeoisie (no matter how bad the world gets) to be utterly unable to imagine a different world (or, more accurately, the possibility that the world might change). This, then, might be the metaphysical gist of *Melancholia*: it is limited to the minds, and caricatures, of its two heroines. There is no outside and thus, in Jonas' language, to "meet and answer" the question of the self "within an interpretation of total reality" (187) is moot.

But maybe, following the logic of this film, there is truly no need to discover what is *outside*. It is simply enough for the subject of this film—Justine—to become an object of her own attention. And perhaps the reason that "the Village has nothing to do with this" is because the real crisis to be addressed happened months before the end of the world.

The final interpretation I would like to offer—the final place this analysis can move after so many blind alleys—jettisons the anxiety of the end of the world plot all together and instead focuses on the anxiety of the end of the marriage plot. It's a move that again reveals the purpose of my analysis (and maybe it is a naïve goal): to discover in the film—this rare thing of

immense labour and creativity—even just a *single* example of an unambiguous good. Disappointed by my efforts to suss out some sustainable example of compassion between the sisters, and after being confronted by the many potential allegories of this film, I feel compelled to exercise my prerogative to, simply, not take the end of the world seriously. Instead, I see in this film's divided structure two compulsive repetitions, the second of which is merely an allegory for the first.

The first half of the film is about the apocalypse of a marriage. The second is a chance for Justine to act out, and perhaps correct, the failure of the previous repetition. Justine's re-organization of the key elements of her total image at the end of the world, her artist/critic like gesture of the "magic cave"—and more importantly, the people inside it—is, to my mind, supremely touching because it is a way, sourced in her individuality, of mending the believed-to-be irreparable rift between her and Michael that made their marriage impossible. In the final allegory, Leo—the innocent boy—is an able stand-in for Michael. And through the final release of Claire's terror, Justine has found a way to admit the innocent boy into the secret the sisters share about Justine's melancholy, a secret they could not share with Michael. The collision of the planet, the welcoming of the planet, represents this new, unpredictable way of being. By crafting with the little boy a fantasy of their own making, Justine posits an alternative to the life with Michael that she rejected under the threat of her approaching sadness. Following this interpretation, *Melancholia* truly becomes a film about loss and the retrospective coping with that loss. And now we can leave behind abstract ideas about the nature of *art* and *nature*, and move fully into the more ordinary, human possibility of crafting—even out of the dreams of being awake—an alternative reality. This is the imaginative/interpretative task we're asked to perform if we hope to make the claim that Justine is mourning the failure of her marriage, that *Melancholia* is *about* such mourning.

It is a form of resistance to be the attentive witness to loss, to be a humiliated witness *as something is being lost*. It is especially a form of resistance—in the sense that the limits upon imagination are things to be resisted—to be witness to a loss that happens so slowly and subtly that no one will ever notice what has changed, nor miss what disappeared. And, indeed, after the marriage is over, no one mentions Michael and the wedding again. Justine's only 'husband' in Part 2 is Abraham: the poor creature that precipitates her transition fully into animation through a moment of inhumanity.

There is still some not-yet-worked-out tension in this dissertation project regarding the potential for a progressive politics organized around ecological responsibility (beyond mere self-preservation), and the instinct to mourn a loss, and to record a loss that no one, otherwise, will ever miss. This instinct can seem counter-progressive because of how slowly it is forced to move, how enabling to the melancholic who possesses it. But to my mind the work of interpreters is only made possible when granted the opportunity to work at slower time scales, to work from a place of patience. There is patience required to record loss as it is happening around us (even if the time available to do so, as it in this film, is short). And this is an important task because to be convinced that things are changing as they must, is to capitulate to the logic of extractive capitalism and to become insensitive to one's personal responsibility for all the ways rapacity goes unchecked.

Beyond Justine's proclamation that "life is evil," it is the cold comfort she next offers—"no one will miss it when it's gone"—that I find most disheartening. She means this both literally (there will be *no one* to experience loss; this is the maniacal glee of the film's literalization of hyperbole inflecting her word choice) and as a general critique of human nature (she also reiterates the most suicidal of thoughts: "no one will miss me when I'm gone"). This final insight of hers might be a clue to exactly what is evil about life and its ruinous appetite for the new. The organism is subject to the logic of an appetite that will consume itself, that will, after much pain, imagine the end of its existence as an expression of fulfilment. But life's ineluctable auto-cannibalism is in a race with yet another organic force: there is a mourning instinct in life that can arrest time, warp time cinematically, and discover a logic beyond the clockwork counting down of materialist metaphysics—beyond the exigencies of a wedding programme and unbounded by the short-lived respite measured by a distance-calculating steel. Justine's insight into the evil of this world contrasts an appetite for the real that depends on the fullness of forgetting with the bodily desire for redemptive mourning sanctioned by a mundane philosophy of never letting go. We do know that Michael, in the off screen, dies too. If Justine's mourning of her failed marriage to Michael takes the form of self-knowledge or a suicide pact, it is—at the end of this analysis anyway—beyond what *Melancholia* is able to show.

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CONCLUSION

Images

In every film in this dissertation we've discovered a figure of what cinema might be or become. The monkey-ghost in *Uncle Boonmee*, the automaton in *Hugo*, the albino crocodile in *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, and Justine (not the woman, but her allegorical role as 'The Depressive') in *Melancholia*. Each figure—be it organic, mechanical, or fabulous—gives up its place for a moment (in the film, in the narrative, in the argument, as part of a whole) in order to become an image. We contemplate the image; the image contemplates us. We take its measure and it takes its measure of us. Which is to say: *through* the image of our contemplation, we contemplate ourselves, we take our measure. In this circuit of ontological acknowledgment, our own identification with the camera is tested, even threatened. And under threat, the moment is frozen in space; as a moment of fight-or-flight, it is open to time. Unusual cinematic artifacts, certainly, but eco-philosophical? In the language of this framework we can ask: do they signal some new degree of mediacy?

These four images-of-cinema take their shape despite misgivings about the suitability/sustainability of the cinematic medium itself and against a background of skepticism about the possibility of truth, communication, and redemption. In *Cave*, we looked at how aesthetics of movement can reconcile ontological questions; in *Hugo*, we looked at how grief can be

Fig. 66: Avatars of Cinema

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teleological; in *Uncle Boonmee*, how spatial ambiguities mirror emerging consciousness—each of these films put complex cinematic automatisms up against metaphysical structural problems, including the lingering problem of dualism. More than the first three films we've studied, *Melancholia* creates its allegory for cinema amidst both an overwhelming materialist imagination (signaled by the nature of the apocalypse, Justine's judgment, and the equivalency between inorganic and organic) and an idealist one (the skepticism of a depressive and the people around her). It's not surprising that we discover a sense of metaphysical isolation in the film that appears intractable. *Melancholia* fully thematizes what has been latent in all of these films and goes beyond representing our ontological out-of-placeness by making clear what's at stake when *we* become a medium.

Jonas too turns to the figure of the depressive to draw attention to the metaphysical relevance of *becoming a question*, becoming strange, becoming human. With the discovery of the image and with the discovery of media, the human animal has separated *eidos* from the world—and in the bargain, stumbled upon the linked concepts of *reality* and *falsehood*. But this process of mediation does not stop here: the human itself becomes a subject of objectification. He writes:

> The fateful freedom of objectification, which confronts the self with the potential sum total of the 'other', the 'world', as an indefinite realm for possible understanding and action, can and eventually must turn back, with its burden of mediacy, upon the subject itself and makes *it* in turn the object of a relation which again takes the detour via the *eidos*. (185)

Unlike the outside world depicted in cave paintings, this new eidetic form of the self is "different in kind from the whole realm of outwardness, for it concerns the self's *relation* to all outwardness" (185). The consequence to this objectification of the human, this "fateful freedom" he calls it, is the emergence of emotions especially suited to a dimensional increase of inner life. Jonas writes,

> Viewing himself from the distance of his wishes, aspirations, and approvals, man and man alone is open to despair. The German word *Verzweifulung* somehow renders the connection of despair with the twofoldness, the division of the self, that has come about with the transfer of the subject-object split to the realm of the subject itself, making it the quivering product of ever-mediating relation instead of an immediate possession. (186)

In *Melancholia*, this state of "ever-mediating relation" undermines the capacity of the subjects to sustain connections with others. The dramatic increase of mediacy first liberated by the discovery of the image and then vastly complicated by the discovery of the self, prompts Jonas to loop back around to the theme of death that opens *The Phenomenon of Life*: "Suicide, this unique privilege of man, shows the ultimate manner in which man becomes the object of himself" (187). Indeed, as we've seen, there is a specific kind of melancholy inherent to these images-of-cinema that signal the conditions under which the human can become an image to themselves. Specific, and yet unnamed, it is shared by all these films.

The 'human' that stands opposite this unstable medium starts to resemble a figure more than an organism. Part of the power of *Melancholia* comes from how it is able to represent the difficulty of living through the transmutation of figuration, of the trauma of symbols becoming allegories, of metaphors becoming literal. Jonas writes, "True man emerges when the painter of the bull and even of its hunter turns to concerning himself with the unpaintable image of his own conduct and the state of his self. Over the distance of this wondering, searching, and comparing perception there is constituted this new entity, 'I.' This is the new dimension of self-reflexivity" (185). The "unpaintability" of this image—and the remains of failed artifice that attends reflection upon the self—becomes a serious concern as this mediated self then turns to the rest of humankind in a search of yet another degree of mediacy. Jonas explains this cycle in terms not too far removed from the cinematic circle:

> Learning to say "I", [humankind] potentially discovers his own identity in its solitary uniqueness. A private objectivity of the self is thus in constant rapport with the public image of man and through its own exteriorization contributes to the continuous remaking of the latter—the anonymous share of each self in the history of all. In complete accommodation it may let itself be absorbed into the general model; in defeated non-conformity it may withdraw into its own solitude; in rare cases it may assert itself to the point of setting itself up as a new image of man and impose it on society, to replace the prevailing image. (186)

The belief that I am 'unpaintable' is, of course, belief in my uniqueness, belief in my suitability for immortality, and belief in my capacity for judgement. It is one I can renounce (or at least relax) when watching films like the ones in this study that do indeed assert their paintability, that go looking for images of themselves. This dissertation is partly inspired by the intuition that the self-reflexivity necessary for eco-philosophy—the self-reflexivity necessary to understand

all the ways that we *don't* wish the world to be saved—is beyond my ability as a thinker (and it might be beyond the capacity of most of us). To see that these films are able to present an image of themselves, in contest with what we believe is possible to be said persuasively within an art film, *matters*. In this dissertation we have four films that have discovered the means to present a stable image of cinema. By representing mediation, they are affirming our human ability to interpret: not to paint, but to point; to identify the emergence of new degrees of mediacy that are in the process of changing our ability to orient and be oriented. By representing a medium—and by revealing this medium in the context of their *whole*—these films have gambled that the resulting figure might reveal something about what it means to be alive.

The ante is ontological restlessness, uncanniness, and a sense of otherworldliness. Is this what we should expect from the emergence of a "new image" in contest with the "prevailing" one? Or, to put it in terms of the figure that Jonas will introduce later in *The Imperative of Responsibility*, are these images teaching us something about what it might mean to develop an "image of man"? This dissertation is about phenomenology and not ethics, about 'being in the world' and not '*how* to be in the world', but at the end of these analyses, after spinning the cinematic circle, I was hopeful to discover more than images of ambiguity. Are these images of media models for images of *potential*? I'm not so sure. Or, at least, I'm still not confident in the relation between aesthetics and reality and this uncertainty is, ultimately, the context in which I receive them.

Jonas' "image of man" seems to be one in contest with time: it is historical, anticipatory, and galvanizing. It admits into our metaphysics both the idea that the authentic human once existed and the notion that an authentic human, able to bring about utopia, has yet to be. And it deconstructs these notions just as readily: Jonas means for our metaphysics to be suspicious of any claim that our moral recklessness—like unrestricted scientific advancement—might be forgiven if it proves to be the price of a bet, even a winning bet, on a utopian future. That the ethics of the human follows for Jonas upon an *image*—and not upon an *idea* or a *criterion* or a *set of values* or even a *framework*—must be because he believes that ethical thinking occurs in relation to an idea of potentiality that is present and critical, not virtual and deferred. He makes this point, in a surprising way, near the end of *The Imperative of Responsibility*. After critiquing many versions of utopia (include Marxist and Nietzschean), Jonas permits himself a story about an aesthetic experience of art. He writes,

When I found myself, unexpectedly, standing before Giovanni Bellini's Madonna triptych in the sacristy of St. Zaccaria in Venice, I was overcome by the feeling: here had been a moment of perfection, and I am allowed to see it. Eons had conspired towards that moment, and in eons it would not return if left unseized: the moment when, in a fleeting "balance of colossal forces," the All seems to pause for the length of a heartbeat to allow a supreme reconciliation of its contradictions in a work of man. What this work of man holds fast is absolute *presence* in itself—no past, no future, no promise, no succession, where better or worse, not a prefiguration of anything, but rather a timeless shining in itself. *That* is the "utopia" beyond every "not yet," scattered moments of eternity in the flux of time. But they are a rare gift, and we should not forget over them the great tormented souls, to whom we owe perhaps even more (and something other than instruction about a "not yet"): in *them*, too, there is the ageless *present* of man. That there are yet things to come is indeed always part of what is and each time our task, but to read it into the testimony of the past for our benefit and edification, as if only we at last could lead it in us beyond itself and to its destination, as if it had waited for us, nay, had been "meant" for us in the first place—that is to rob it of its inherent own right, and ourselves of its true gift.[242]

In this passage, Jonas is using his experience of art to critique what he sees as a burdensome proposition inherent to any discussion of utopia: the doctrine of the "not yet." Specifically in dialogue with utopianists like Ernst Bloch, Jonas is refuting the idea that there exists in art— and, perhaps, all the seemingly important creations of human beings—a clear sign of a latent perfectibility in the human animal that runs in parallel to the grim history of human civilization. Jonas rejects any kind of interpretation that goes looking in art for an image of the "genuine human" that has yet to come. His "image of man" is not an ideal to strive towards—it is not a symbol—but something much more realist and mundane, something more documentary than impressionistic, something closer to a *photograph* of the human than a painting: an image of all our ambiguity, disappointment, necessities, and limitations. As Jonas says, "*Hope* we should, quite contrary to the utopian hope, that in the future, too, every contentment will breed its discontent, every having its desire, every resting its unrest, every liberty its temptation—every happiness its unhappiness."[243] He could add, for the sake of the hermenauts of realist art: every insight its banalization. "It is perhaps the only certainty we have about the human heart," he finishes.[244]

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[242] Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, 200.
[243] Ibid., 201.
[244] Ibid.

I take this to mean that Jonas is suggesting that this mundane "image of man" that he feels is necessary to bring structure to our ethical project is *bearable* because it happens to share a privileged temporality with the most exquisite (and rarest) experiences available through art. In his estimation, art and humanness share, unexpectedly, this "timeless" present, this "absolute presence", and thus the most we can ask of art is that it reminds us of a fact of our phenomenal existence—our asymmetrical responsibility to the whole of life. This responsibility cannot be remembered, really, but only experienced in its urgency. This experience does not happen often and the conditions of it happening are never clear. But it *can* happen, Jonas is saying, through artworks like the Bellini painting. The ambiguous conditions under which this aesthetic experience might be repeatable, the conditions under which it might be *ordinary* and self-assuring, is a reminder that mundane ethics are sustained by transformative *potential* not predictable fact.

Do our images-of-cinema fit these criteria? They are sublime; they are both familiar and unfamiliar; they remind of the beauty of the films they come from, and they remind of where the films are not able to go. But perhaps most importantly, these images-of-cinema are images of faces that are also *more* than faces. Of animals and machines, of fantasies, and, of the uncanny (Justine-the-depressive is human and more-than-human), these faces mediate between the idea-of-cinema and the idea-of-the-human by being hybrid, by being object *and* subject. By being so self-contained, they can both figure a medium and other the critic. And the encounter with the Other, according to Levinas in his tour-de-force meta-ethical phenomenology of the face is where ethics begins.[245] Levinas writes about this experience in terms that will already be familiar to the kind of aesthetic phenomenology I've pursued throughout this dissertation. The force of the Other "resists possessions, resists my grasp" and it "puts the 'I' into question." The encounter with alterity is so powerful that it ruptures linear, homogeneous clockwork time, in favour of "infinite" or "messianic" time: a "discontinuous" time of "death and resurrection."[246] Out of these faces, and their resistance to conceptualization, emerges a kind of "responsibility" that is beyond ourselves.

[245] c.f. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Martinus Nijhoff Philosophy Texts (The Hague; Boston Hingham, MA: M. Nijhoff Publishers; Kluwer Boston, 1979).
[246] *Totality and Infinity*, 284-285

Isn't this the "absolute presence" Jonas experienced? I think there is an additional warning about images embedded in Jonas' story of the painting. He explains in an odd footnote that when he cites a "balance of colossal forces" he is referring to a moment in Conrad's *Lord Jim* when the titular character presents "to his guest an artwork of *nature*, a rare and perfectly beautiful butterfly" (italics in text).[247] This footnote is as close as Jonas ever gets in writing, as far as I know, to indicating the phenomenology of experiencing beauty in nature (beauty does not come up at all in his discussion of the ontology of images). His quote, then, summons into his experience of art an admission of an aesthetic experience that must stand as the most mediated possible, one premised on destruction rather than creation: Conrad's colonialist lepidopterist and aesthete must kill every butterfly he finds beautiful. Lord Jim is, in effect, turning what was alive into a mere image. An aesthetic experience might indeed be identifiable by its ability to invoke the timeless present, but criticism—even on risk of interminability—cannot end the same way. The "absolute presence" possible both in art and in organisms is rarely self-evident and our pursuit of it for its own sake, as in the case of Lord Jim, leads us to the mere mirroring of ethics.

Fig. 67: Bellini's *Madonna with Child* triptych (1488)

As tempting as it might be to see a link here between the aesthetics of the face and the phenomenology of ethics, it's a difficult one to make. In *Totality and Infinity* (1961), Levinas is clear that ethics precedes both ontology and aesthetics, and that the Face of the Other resists the "cold splendor" of the image. But if it is not an aesthetic experience, what is it? Steven Shaviro tackles this question by contrasting Levinas to Whitehead. As Shaviro explains, Levinas' theory of "responsibility", incited by an encounter with the Other that exceeds all conceptualization (it is primal, pre-cognitive) is necessarily in contrast to self-enjoyment (which comes from encounters with the rest of the world, including art). On the other hand,

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[247] Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, 241n14.

Whitehead's idea of "concern" and "self-enjoyment" obtains in every event. As Shaviro puts it, "For Levinas, responsibility produces value. For Whitehead, it is the process of valuation that first generates any sense of responsibility."[248] Shaviro sees this valuation as fundamentally aesthetic, and quotes Whitehead: "at the base of our existence is the sense of 'worth'…the sense of existence for its own sake, of existence which is its own justification, of existence with its own character."[249] To take an ethical course, or, as Whitehead says elsewhere, to *see* the "beauty of a sunset," requires a resolute decision matched with a concrete experience.[250] All to say, that the encounter with the face might seem aesthetic—and, without a doubt, the rendering of the human face holds a privileged placed in art—but it also might be something more, something for which we don't have a fully-fledged vocabulary. And, indeed, when eco-philosophy moves towards ethics, the question of what we consider a face, and what we allow to become mere image, becomes paramount.[251]

The Bellini painting that so-moved Jonas, that gave him the experience of an absolute presence, is, intriguingly, more than a painting. Set in an ornate frame likely designed by Bellini himself, the painting seamlessly integrates the pillars of its frame into the architectural space it poses for its figures. The figures seem capable of joining us in the sacristy. In order to spectacularize this dimensionality—but to do so subtly—we catch a glimpse of the outside

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[248] Steven Shaviro, "Self-Enjoyment and Concern: On Whitehead and Levinas," in *Beyond Metaphysics?: Explorations in Alfred North Whitehead's Late Thought*, ed. Roland Faber, Brian G. Henning, and Clinton Combs (New York: Rodopi, 2010), 257.

[249] Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought: Six Lectures Delivered in Wellesley College, Massachusetts, and Two Lectures in the University of Chicago*, A Putnam Capricorn Book, Cap 5 (New York: Capricorn Books, 1958), 109.

[250] This is one of Kracauer's examples of anti-instrumentalist thinking. In *Theory of Film*, he writes that "Whitehead blames contemporary society for favouring the tendency toward abstract thinking and insists that we want concretion," and quotes him "When you understand all about the sun and all about the atmosphere and all about the rotation of the earth you may still miss the radiance of the sunset. There is no substitute for the direct perception of the concrete achievement of a thing in its actuality" (296). Kracauer is arguing that what Whitehead is referring to is the "aesthetic character of experience."

[251] Because of Levinas' insistence on the *human* face, some ecological thinkers have been wary of what they call Levinas' anthropocentrism. The response to such a charge, for authors like William Edelgass, is to consider Levinas' arguments for the unqualified, asymmetrical, human-defining sense of "responsibility" that issues from this encounter with the Other, the encounter with another human that exceeds all conceptualization and objectification. Like Jonas' theory of the same, Levinas' idea of responsibility, from a certain vantage, creates a secular argument for an individual's inescapable moral consciousness, an important corrective to one of the key ethical problems facing environmentalists: making the case for individual responsibility when individuals, on their own, did not cause the environmental crisis and, on their own, cannot correct it. See William Edelglass, James Hatley, and Christian Diehm, *Facing Nature: Levinas and Environmental Thought* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 2012).

world—beyond the painting and beyond the church—just a sliver, in the right and left panels. I can't help but think that it was exactly this hint of spatialization that excited Jonas: that what astonished him was the sight of an organic consciousness imaging itself as a body in space that extended both inwards and outwards. In this painting, both spatial verisimilitude and the impression-of-consciousness-upon-reality are equally rendered, and, as we've seen, consciousness of space is how Jonas describes the birth of reality (185).

Fig. 68: Bellini's *San Zaccaria Altarpiece* (1505) with guests viewing the work. The row of heads along the bottom, facing away from us, are tourists. The columns in the foreground are part of the church, not the painting.

We can see this effect of blurring a 2-D painting into 3-D space in another version of the same painting, one that Bellini designed as a single panel for the church of San Zaccaria seventeen years later—the church that Jonas mentions as the location of his epiphany (Jonas is somewhat confused in his story: he mentions the Madonna triptych directly, but incorrectly identifies its home as San Zaccaria: the tripticyh is in the Basilica dei Frari). Like the Frari triptych, the San Zaccaria altarpiece is set in a niche in such a way that it seems to extend the space of the church. The faces are posed in an even more hallucinogenically detailed rendering with a more noticeable view of the outdoors peeking through the sides of the composition (Fig. 68).

In both works, I can't help but see in the exquisite architectural frame, the shape of a box, and the faces there, in their geometry of looks turned away from us, an image of a butterfly pinned and mounted. The figures placed so perfectly within this virtual niche are all saints from different time periods, each with their own allegorical totem (Saint Peter on the far left brandishes the keys to heaven). An angel-child, in the center of the composition, holds a medieval violin and a gaze that is *just* beyond us: an invitation into the virtual space, perhaps,

but also a signal of the divine distance between us and the painting. The angel's gaze is in contrast to the Frari triptych, in which Saint Benedict (on the far right), engages our look directly. In contrast, the angel's look just to our left might be meant to encourage us to think of the person next to us; it might also encourage us to think of the artist occupying the same space as us, Bellini holding his paintbrush just as she holds her instrument. Or, perhaps, the danger here is not that we might do injustice to the painting (though that is possible), but that we might be pinned by it. Not lost in its thrall; but, as Saint Benedict's stern look challenges, unmoved by it.

Jonas' use of the word "absolute"—in the sense of unbounded—draws our attention to the larger argument he is trying to make about metaphysical isolation and ethical freedom. Early in *The Phenomenon of Life*, he exults in the shared "privilege" of the organic experience of freedom, but also (in a vaguely onto-theological move) expresses what kind of responsibility it entails:

> This is not a success story. The privilege of freedom carries the burden of need and means precarious being. For the ultimate condition of the privilege lies in the paradoxical fact that living substance, by some original act of segregation, has taken itself out of the general integration of things in the physical context, set itself over against the world, and introduced the tension of 'to be or not to be' into the neutral assuredness of existence. It did so by assuming a position of hazardous independence from the very matter which is yet indispensable to its being: by divorcing its own identity from that of its temporary stuff … so poised, the organism has its being on condition and revocable. (4)

On the one side of freedom: our persistent displacement and disconnection from the world. On the other: responsibility beyond ourselves, beyond calculation. In between: the evolution of media. These images-of-cinema are charting this range.

Noa Steimatsky gets at both the limits and unboundedness inherent to images of faces in her astonishing book *The Face on Film*. She writes that the "face is already, itself, a moving image. It stands out in the visual field; continually evolving, it alters with time; it ages, as we do"[252] She sees in our experience of the relation of a face to the person it represents a similar resistance to conceptualization that inspired Levinas. She traces the importance of the face from early cinema, to the glamour of the Hollywood face, to the anti-glamour of the neo-realist face.

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[252] Noa Steimatsky, *The Face on Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1.

But she ends thinking about the non-human face via a discussion of the face of the donkey in Bresson's *Au hasard Balthazar* (1966). And she connects the "problem" of communing with non-human faces with the nature of Bresson's images themselves. She writes, "with no direct or personal projection of subjectivity, no familiar balance to fall back on in the dissimulation of the actor, with no synthesizing of motivation and expression, the Bressonian image obstructs, withdraws, offers the face as a barrier that deflects onto other surfaces."[253] She terms this experience of not-facing-us an example of "reticence," and makes the case that a dimensional increase in our sense of 'facingness' changes the very metaphors we use to describe it: no longer an "open book" to be read, but a "door ajar."[254] When open only a crack, a face is to be regarded, to be noted, and, perhaps, to be invited into. The face will always resist the process of objectification, but, in reticence, it also opens new possibilities of space and mediation. If this experience of a face can happen within the privileged temporality of an aesthetic experience, we've achieved something like understanding. This is the final theme I'd like to explore before concluding.

Places

Near the middle of *The Tree of Life,* Mr. O'Brien, played by Brad Pitt, is teaching his sons how to fight on a patch of yard near their house. He is also trying to show love and care and he is becoming more and more frustrated as he fails to do so. The children, understandably, find this frustration profoundly mysterious. And so we watch their guard go down. He slaps them; they look awed and terrified.

The scene is shot in a very curious way, even though it appears as one of the most conventional in the whole film—one of the very few scenes that unfolds in the pattern of a traditional shot-reverse-shot. What makes it so unusual is the position of the light source. As the camera cuts from father to son, face to face, we might notice that both of their heads are limned with sunlight. The two are facing each other, and yet they are equally backlit by a natural source. This of course is a physical impossibility. It is achieved in the film, simply, by staging the scene in two separate locations, both backlit, and using shots from one location exclusively for the shots of the father and using shots from the other for the angle on the sons. In effect, we

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[253] Ibid., 264.
[254] Ibid.

have an event that has no real spatial logic (if you look at the backgrounds of the shots, beyond the faces, it's clear that the space of the scene is fractured). It is a seemingly coherent scene that reveals itself as multiple occurrences of the same event in two different places. And thus we have a scene where the sun is on both the side of the father and his sons.

As much as we might want to read into this effect—and there is no reason why we shouldn't—the motivation for creating it is not strictly, or even mostly, thematic. It is a choice made for practical considerations in view of Malick's decision to pursue a fragmentary filmmaking approach. *The Tree of Life* demonstrates a resolutely para-continuity style, one not so dissimilar to what we saw in *Melancholia* though far more complex—objects and human bodies will change location from shot to shot, at times even wardrobe will change within a scene. Lines of dialogue are broken by a cut or silenced by an audio fade; sometimes new

Fig. 69: Impossible light sources in *The Tree of Life*

lines of dialogue are overlaid. It is a cinematic space made, ultimately and transparently, in the editing room. But for as much liberty as the filmmakers were willing to take with the continuity of physical objects, they discovered that they could not ask the same of their light sources— cutting within a scene, or even from scene to scene, with wild variations in the natural light, and especially variations in how the sun struck faces, created, to their tastes, a much too jarring effect. The solution on a conventional studio film would be to simply control the light using scrims, silks, bounces, and artificial sources. However, the filmmakers of *The Tree of Life* were also pursuing an improvised style that necessitated quick setups and as little encumbrance on the actors as possible—fiddling with lighting rigs, and risking those rigs appearing in a shot, made that solution untenable. As cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki explains, the real solution to this para-continuity problem was to shoot backlit whenever possible as it made

editing far more flexible. [255] And so, by this choice and countless others, the cinematic world of *The Tree of Life* became infused with vivid pastel skies, gilded highlights, and the omnipresence of the sun—it became beautiful.

And the filmmakers were right. They've discovered something about the way worlds are created on film. And by submitting to the limitations of this illusion, they and their camera have the freedom to go wandering for moments of contingent and surprising beauty (like the butterfly that invaded one scene and landed on the hand of the lead actress). Remarkably, this same approach applied to the daytime scenes inside the O'Brien house. Because the filmmakers wanted to shoot multiple rooms with the same quality of light (for example, noon sun in the living room *and* the boys' bedroom, morning sun in the kitchen *and* the boys' bedroom), the filmmakers 'constructed', cinematically, the O'Brien house out of three separate extant houses, each one oriented differently in space so, for example, they could shoot with morning light in a bedroom and then the next day go to another house to shoot morning light in the kitchen. It is the modern equivalent of an early cinema technique: before the advent of electric lights, a set would be built on a rotating platform that could follow the sun so that the sun could rise and set in the same window. The O'Brien
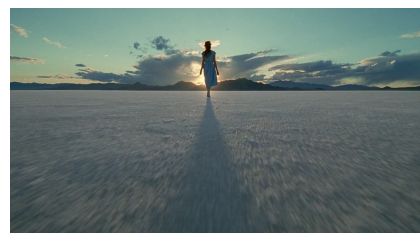

Fig. 70: Backlights from *The Tree of Life*

home is indeed a specific home, but it is also a figurative one; a communal home of the mind, of many minds. The unusual narrative of the film cuts between the solemn philosophic reverie of the eldest son, Jack, played by Sean Penn, and his memories of his childhood as they intertwine with the grief of Jack's mother, played by Jessica Chastain, and her memories of her motherhood. And what we see is a space, and a home, shaped by multiple memories, by the mother's loss, and by Jack's persistent feeling of displacement.

I like this example of 'exploring a medium' because it underlines an important cinematic pleasure that is also one of the most fundamentally organic: moving through space. Malick's entire cinematic aesthetic—at least since Steadicam operator Garrett Brown stepped onto the set of 1978's *Days of Heaven*—seems to exist at the confluence of narrative and organic motion,

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[255] Benjamin B, "Cosmic Questions," *American Cinematographer* 92, no. 8 (2011): 30.

and his camerawork has increasingly attempted to expand that fluency. One enduring Malickian automatism to emerge out of this tendency is a moving Steadicam shot that follows a body from behind as they enter a landscape. There are several examples in *The Tree of Life* (and, indeed, these shots are often backlit). I find these kinds of shots curious for a few reasons. First, in denying us a view of the front of the subject, in denying us a shot of the face, we are denied any sense of what they might be thinking or how they are responding to their environment. Second: this same kind of shot occurs in every film in this study.

In *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, this travelling verso view is used during the ascent of the scientists to the cave entrance—a long sequence, much longer than it needs to be, that seems to exist just for the moment when the camera, which has been doggedly following the walking figures, suddenly turns to regard the faces and flips over on its axis. I've already talked about what I see as the deliberate exploration of regimes of motion in this film. Herzog deploys this verso view not only as a way of making clear that there is a body (notably, his own) that is standing-in for us, but also as a way of drawing attention to the absence of faces in the cave.

Fig. 71: Point-of-verso in *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*

In *Hugo*, of course, these kinds of shots appear gratuitously whenever Hugo is zipping down a slide or running through the clock tower. They might appear to some viewers like shots from video games if they weren't also part of a lineage in Scorsese's oeuvre—the most famous being the long traveling shot into the Copacabana from *Goodfellas* (1990). Hugo's world, when viewed from his clock tower, is one that is denied close-ups of face. The shot of the man in the moon, of course, with its eye poked out, is a parody.

Uncle Boonmee's journey from the farm through the jungle and to the cave where he was born/will die, proceeds almost entirely using one of these shots (though handheld). The face is always elusive in the remembered lives of Boonmee, from the princess whose own face she can't see clearly, to the images of the future where lost souls from the past wear monkey masks. In the long scene of Boonmee's descent to his birth/death-place, we are denied a single shot of his face that might indicate to us what he might be feeling, what might be motivating him.

Fig. 72: Point-of-verso shot from *Hugo*

In *Melancholia*, this point-of-verso shot is used often—much like the way Herzog uses it—documentary-style in pursuit of bodies moving to new locations. It is also used with great deliberation during the odd helicopter shots that follow the sisters riding their horses away from the mansion and up to the very limits of the film's narrative. As I've already shown, the reticence about faces in *Melancholia* is what structures the ending of the film.

Fig. 73: Point-of-verso in *Melancholia*

I first started thinking about this trope while studying Malick's *The Thin Red Line* (1999), but I first became aware of it as an automatism when I saw *Elephant* (2003), Gus Van Sant's film about the Columbine High School Massacre.[256] Van Sant's film features long Steadicam shots of his teenaged protagonists walking down empty school hallways. He links this kind of shot very explicitly with repeated shots

Fig. 74: A long handheld point-of-verso sequence in which Uncle Boonmee travels through the jungle

of first-person videogames, making an ethical argument of sorts about the effect of media upon the remote consciousnesses of the killers.

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[256] Edward Yang's *Yi Yi* (2000) thematizes the point-of-verso in a delightful way

In analyzing this aesthetic, Richard Kirkland follows Van Sant's inspiration back to Alan Clarke's 1989 short film about gun violence in Northern Ireland, also called *Elephant*, and argues that the approach creates something he calls a "mode of contingency."[257] Certainly, we see this kind of tag-teaming at the end of *Hugo*, in which the camera follows a body for a while, before spotting another and then moving off to pursue a new,

Fig. 75: *Elephant*, Gus Van Sant, 2003

contingent, storyline. But this sensation of contingency is suppressed when characters are alone in their environments, when we are denied access to their faces and no new faces are coming towards them. This approach of inscribing the body into the world seems consistent with what Scott Bukatman has called the "technological sublime" and certainly *Hugo* indulges in this form of cinema-of-attraction. But Bukatman is sensitive to what forces might be engendering this address to the body, beyond whatever superficial pleasure it might offer:

> While the incorporation of the body into a range of primarily visual entertainments constitutes for [other commentators like Jonathan Crary] a colonization of the body, it represents a compensation for the declining centrality of sensory experience; a valid (that is, useful) means of recentering one's experience of a decentred world. If this was, in some ways, complicit with dominant ideological agendas, it is also, irreducibly, a necessary means of being in the world.[258]

Indeed, these travelling verso-views seem most in service of signifying "being in the world." Out of a mitigating or complicating context, they perform, at best, a mild narrative function: showing that someone has entered a space. It is an anticipatory shot, future-directed. But, aesthetically, the effect of these shots can be intense. From handheld sprints through the woods, to motorized shots from the back of vehicles (both *Boonmee* and *Cave* feature a motorized journey into a metaphysical landscape), to eerily spectral cameras like the helicopter shots in *Melancholia* and the CGI-equivalent in *Hugo*: this automatism allows us to charge through spaces as if we are dreaming.

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[257] Richard Kirkland, "The Spectacle of Terrrorism in Northern Irish Culture," *Critical Inquiry* 15, no. 1 (2003): 78.
[258] Scott Bukatman, *Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 20th Century* (Duke University Press, 2003), 255.

This cinematic pleasure of moving through space has certainly occurred to advertisers. A 2011 ad from Tourism Alberta gives us a helicopter shot of a convertible careening through the mountains. A cut, and we follow a mountain biker as they ride off the edge of a dock into a lake. A near double of this shot in a 2014 jeep ad: a boy holding a roman candle jumps into a lake (this particular ad also includes shots of 16mm film breaking cut next to cellular metabolism—it eco-critiques itself). A 2014 ad for Apple's iPad begins with no fewer than five shots of people turned away from the camera and moving into space (this particular ad, unsurprisingly, was shot by Emmanuel Lubezki, the *Tree of Life* cinematographer). These ads evince a strategic anonymity of how they deploy bodies: as avatars for us, the consumer, and our desire to feel situated in our lives by being oriented towards a better, more complete version of ourselves. In other words, especially in these ads, this automatism is used to relax the tension of identification, the imposition of consciousness. It leads me to believe that works of art engaged in even more complex articulations of this automatism are after a similar effect. Why? For the pleasure of moving *through* beauty rather than merely regarding it.

Does the power of a face and the beauty of a landscape contradict each other? Vice versa? Unlike the advertisers that have taken up mining cinematic space to move idealization to concretization, Malick's characters can never so easily enter into

Fig. 76: *Sunrise*, Murnau, 1927

Fig. 77: *8½*, Federico Fellini, 1963

Fig. 78: *Stalker*, Tarkovksy, 1979

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such a relationship with landscapes, most often because of how his films pattern the repetition of beauty. *The Tree of Life* continues a trend in Malick's work that Stanley Cavell first noted by posing a question to *Days of Heaven*: "what is the excess of beauty" in service of?[259] Cavell argues that we are "left vacant" by and "crushed by the fact of beauty" in that film—beauty in *Days of Heaven* is not meant to comfort or offer a space for reflection. It is meant more as a rebuke. And indeed, intense beauty, especially natural beauty, is often uncomfortable, it innervates, irritates, it is inscrutable, it defies understanding. A contemporary response to beauty might be more like the guilt that comes with the shirking of

responsibility—guilt about our inability to be in the moment, some might say; to experience beauty as Kant could, perhaps, as a symbol of the good. Malick's film includes many complicating contingencies, but there is a clarity to the travelling points-of-verso shots in films like *The Tree of Life* that comes from the presence of a body on screen with which we are not meant to identify (because it is turned away from us). The body on screen thus mediates an experience of beauty for us. And thus, in a sense, it is a stand-in for the camera; perhaps we *could* be comfortable in that space if we were filming it. The body on screen is a stand-in for the technology that might allow us to rediscover our world in a way that assures us that we belong there. We are willing—filmmakers like Malick seem to be saying—to be anonymous in order to feel like we have found our place.

Fig. 79: *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, Caspar David Friedrich, 1818. One of the most representative of Romanticist paintings.

Anonymity

One afternoon in June of 2009 I saw a video that had been digitally smuggled out of Iran. It was shot and disseminated during the mass demonstrations that swept across the country in the aftermath of that spring's disputed presidential election. The so-called Green Revolution surely

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[259] Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, xv.

stands as the most imaged mass-protest in history up to that point, a trial-run of sorts for the highly mediated Arab Spring of 2011. Despite attempts by the ruling regime to bar media coverage of the protests, videos slipped out of the country onto YouTube with stunning regularity. These videos all appeared in the form of anonymous, tiny, thumbnail-sized cellphone videos with little or no context (like times, dates, or places). High frame rates. Audio tracks saturated with the roar of the protesters. All of them, in their own way, indexing the challenge the videographers faced in trying to capture the crowds. Amateur videographers would stand on rooftops and wildly swing their cameras back and forth, panning over the masses until the image became little more than digital smear. The videos shot from people *in* the crowds were even more vivid. Sometimes, the operators would hold their phones above their heads and turn them horizontally. These early camera phones were incapable of reorienting their aspect ratio, and so instead of a sought-after 'widescreen shot', it was as if suddenly the whole world turned on its side.[260] Despite being anonymous and lacking context, they were remarkably effective documents.

But the video I'm talking about is a very different type. It begins with an attempt to lend specificity: over a black screen, we hear a woman's voice explicitly identifying the date—but notably not the place. Also a video shot from a rooftop on a cellphone, it is shot at night, and the available light is far below what is necessary to create an exposure. The image is almost entirely dark, nearly abstract (fig. 80.): a few city lights register as green and yellow dots; digital noise
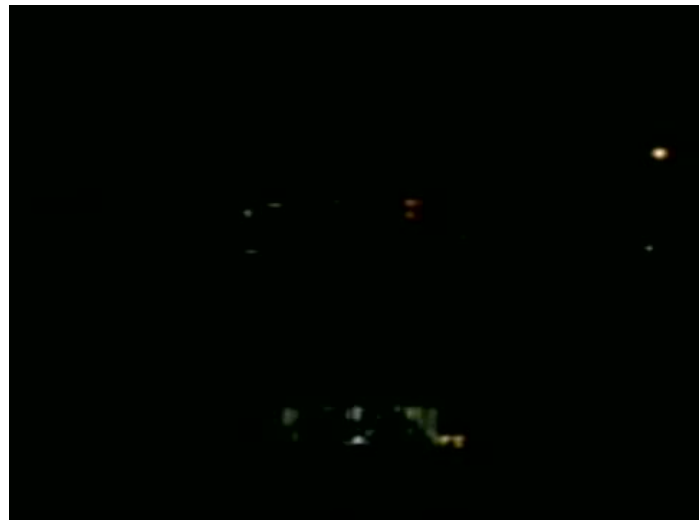
Fig. 80: A still from *Where is this Place*?

courses through the interstices. The cellphone camera has automatically dropped the frame rate as low as possible to create any image at all, so unlike the hyper-real choppy-water of daylight

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[260] c.f. the essay film *Marginal Road* (2011) by Yassaman Ameri, who builds a sequence exploring her own alienation from contemporary Iran through clips gathered from YouTube, including some very well deployed 'turned on their side' variety.

cellphone videos, the movement in this video—despite the effort of the operator to hold the camera still—appears as sudden jump cuts: without an edge to the frame, it appears that the lights themselves are moving. On the audio track we hear calls of "allah-o akbar" echoing throughout the city. The ostensible event being recorded by this video is a pointed form of grassroots protest: Iranians, under the cover of darkness, used these simple words of holy praise to assert their presence, reach out to others, and make a political statement self-consciously and ironically referencing the 1979 Islamic revolution. The subtlety of this act of defiance speaks to the fundamental difficulty Iranians, under strict curfews, were having getting accurate information about the protests from state-controlled media. The calls into the dark function as a

Fig. 81: *Rooftops of Tehran* by Pietro Masturzo. An Iranian woman shouting "allah-o akbar" into the night. Winner of World Press Photo of the Year 2009.

kind of echo-location.[261] The image quakes as the woman holding the camera repeatedly asks the question "Where is this place?" For 2 minutes and 25 seconds, she speaks about what she is hearing and experiencing, her voice breaking into tears at the three-quarters mark when sharp cracks are heard—maybe gun shots, impossible to tell—and she speaks the line "We are sending our voices to the world."[262]

Perhaps most astonishing, this video—a world away from the kind of kinetic images of angry crowds fetishized by news agencies—inspired a whole series of quiet and thoughtful

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[261] I am indebted to Nika Khanjani for this interpretation.

[262] The complete speech of the original "Where is this place?" video: "Friday the 19th of June 2009
Tomorrow, Saturday / Tomorrow is a day of destiny / Tonight, the cries of Allah-o Akbar / Are heard louder and louder than the nights before / Where is this place? / Where is this place where every door is closed? / Where is this place where people are simply calling God? / Where is this place where sound/ Of Allah-o Akbar gets louder and louder? / I wait every night to see if the sounds / Will get louder and whether the number increases / It shakes me / I wonder if God is shaken. / Where is this place where / So many innocent people are entrapped? / Where is this place where no one comes to our aid? / Where is this place, where our voices are heard worldwide through our silence? / We are sending our voices to the world / Where is this place where the young shed blood /And then people go and pray? / Standing on that same blood and pray/ Where is the place where citizens/ Are called vagrants? / Where is this place? You want me to tell you? / This place is Iran. / The homeland of you and me. / This place is Iran."

rooftop videos, a kind of mini-genre, all featuring the same elements, variations of the same voiceover, and the same disbelief in a sudden sense of homelessness. These videos, intentionally or not, use the limitations of low-res cellphone video—low sensitivity in low light, wild patterns of video noise, scratchy audio, rolling shutter effect, the need to explain the image in the audio track, the portability and intimacy of the device, and the 'call and response' nature of the entire series of videos—to express something that would not be possible, in the same way, with cameras or camera operators of greater technical sophistication. The narrators are performing an extemporaneous poem about not being able to recognize their home, each video renewing a tradition in the process of being invented. These are videos of an event that has not yet happened and are made by pushing the camera beyond the visible, using the limitations of a medium to represent the limitations of a people's experience of themselves. These videos do more than represent a crowd or a subjectivity; they represent perception, they are aesthetic.

But so what? In the end, why are they more significant than the images of the crowds that international news agencies use to make the case against the Iranian regime? Because they play on my fine feelings? Because they engage me aesthetically? Setrag Manoukian, writing about these videos soon after they appeared, is very clear about the viewing strategy needed to understand these texts: "It is important to return time and again to constituent qualities of the videos, the blackness of the image, the multitude of sounds, as well as the distance and nearness of the voice to grasp something of their possibilities."[263] These videos communicate most powerfully through their vulnerability; they communicate at all only when they have been rescued from disposability. That they draw attention to their medium is their defense against ephemerality, their competitive advantage in the image ecosystem. And so we are asked to attend to their form, to their style, to their fashion and only secondarily to their content or context. Just like the anonymous woman on her roof in Tehran who reached for her camera to capture something in order to free herself, the viewer is asked to take a position of disinterestedness. We are asked to put our discomfort about her desperation next to our aesthetic experience of her message, an aesthetic experience that tends towards a recognition of a medium just as it tends towards an acknowledgement of her personhood.

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[263] Setrag Manoukian, "Where Is This Place? Crowds, Audio-Vision, and Poetry in Postelection Iran," *Public Culture* 22, no. 2 (2010): 255.

When Cavell writes about media in the context of 1960s modernism and how our relation to a discoverable medium defines an unusual relation to the world, he is writing in the shadow of disinterestedness, in the context of thinking about art not in terms of hopelessly subjective terms like beauty and the sublime, but in rigorously material ideas about media. A modernist fascination with 'the medium' is a kind of fascination with 'embodying' disinterestedness. This plight leads Cavell to speak glowingly about the medium of cinema and not its more subjective qualities:

> I hold on to the critical hypothesis which runs through my book as well as through this continuation of it, that pride of place within the canon of serious films will be found occupied by those films that most clearly and most deeply discover the powers of the medium itself, those that give fullest significance to the possibilities and necessities of its physical basis.[264]

As we've seen, in order for Cavell to make this case he must expand what we mean by 'medium of cinema'. Its "possibilities and necessities" issue from the reality of skepticism and thus its "physical basis" and its "critical discourse" both, together, constitute its medium. But in order to be *interested* in a medium, this thing that both distances us and reconnects us with the world, also leads him, in his next book, to question the concept of 'disinterestedness' itself:

> "Disinterestedness" has never really stabilized itself as a word meaning a state of impartial or unselfish interest, but keeps veering toward meaning the divestment of interest altogether, uninterestedness, ennui. Interestedness is already a state—perhaps the basic state—of relatedness to something beyond the self, the capacity for concern, for implication. It may be thought of as the self's capacity to mediate, to stand between itself and the world.[265]

In light of the persistent confusion inherent to the concept of disinterestedness, our critical task, then, is to identify in the "self's capacity … to stand between itself and the world" the conditions by which the self is also in a state of "relatedness to something beyond itself." This, then, is what I'm getting at in the odd cinematic images of mediation I've been describing: the face-as-image-of-cinema, the point-of-verso shot that denies the face, and the POV shot that signals disinterestedness rather than consciousness. All three views triangulate a position that

[264] Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, 219.
[265] *The Senses of Walden*, An Expanded ed. (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981), 117.

cannot map a single body. This is the anonymity that makes criticism possible. This is the space where the critic takes up what Cavell calls our "human responsibility" to represent reality and to take absolute responsibility for that representation.[266]

Homes

Swimming in the middle of a dirty river for over an hour, I stood up on a sandbar and checked to see if my ankle was bruised. Behind me, upriver, I could see where the water thickened around the rock that had broken my stroke. I was standing, unsteadily, up to my knees, dripping wet, looking downriver now, about half mile, to where the sand corridor that was this river's bed appeared to stop abruptly but in fact veered to the northwest on its way to the arctic ocean. On that far shore, just as they've been my entire life, a familiar row of spruce trees clinging to the crumbling sandbank. Other than that look—at that moment and at fairly regular intervals over the years—we haven't shared much. Through late afternoon curtains of insects and pollen, they looked beautiful to me. And waiting there to look, I found myself thinking about being alive. And I remember realizing that the means of self-reflexivity I'd gathered over my life had been miscalibrated. Instead of leading me deeper into myself or granting me access to some reliable human empathy, my sundry attempts at self-knowledge had in fact underlined, over and over, a sensation I had learned to identify with feeling *distant*. Lingering, unsteadily, on the thought that in the act of regarding those gloomy trees I was, at the moment communing with the long and sad history of metaphysics, and that we organisms share that history, prepared me to think that some great insight was coming out of those woods and into the water against current.

For most of my life, a lingering feeling of unreality. Why else would I study movies? Or maybe I've watched 2,000 too many? This skepticism bothers me not because I feel some deep spiritual longing, but because it seems that I am naturally inclined to skepticism and to materialism. For me, there is indeed a real visceral relief possible in any solution to the 'problem of other minds'. All the varieties of movies, and all the unpredictable ways that they reshape the medium out of which they emerge, and against which they take their shape, has provided me with a much-needed assurance that human beings are not all the same, that human

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[266] *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, 188.

beings really can experience reality very differently from each other, and that I am more than my haunting of those trees.

In this dissertation I have proposed a framework for an eco-philosophical interpretation of cinema oriented by a single sustaining thesis: that the phenomenon of mediation is a pan-organic one and, as such, media (like cinema) and ecological thought exist in a hermeneutic circle. Which is to say that one cannot be thought without the other—at least not completely—and that knowledge about either will proceed through understanding the phenomenological interrelatedness of both.

This is not an argument that one has caused the other, or that one can explain the other, or (alas) that good media can engender good ecological thinking, or that bad media (or mediation itself) threatens ecosystems. This thesis simply states that hermeneutic work on texts, like films, that is oriented towards questions of media are asking curiously potent metaphysical questions that media/organic history, at every step, and certainly right now, allows us to understand differently than they were ever understood before. To ask ecological questions of texts is, in fact and affect, asking questions about how those texts mediate as much as *what* they mediate. It is in the *how* that they contribute to the metaphysics of spatiality, identity, and freedom. The job of the critic is to abdicate the space of the audience in order to put philosophy next to a film and then to increase the friction between them.

This framework also asserts that to understand this *how*, substantially, is only possible through interpretation. The reason for this is relatively straightforward: because *what is cinema?* and *what is being alive?* are not answered through the logic of categorization or genealogy, but by expressions of possibility. And these expressions, as we have seen, emerge as automatisms, not as images. For this reason, from a philosophical perspective: a persuasive theory of the relation between aesthetics and ethics is necessary. From a hermeneutic perspective: it is necessary to put artworks in better light.

In this dissertation I have found works of art that seem to have an idea about themselves. And this image they offer is not really an image but a complex form of spatialization: the face that regards us, that challenges us ethically and asks us to make an aesthetic judgement in order to commit to them; and the point-of-verso, an image that anticipates the future; and the point of view shot, an automatism that in the age of nearly universal cameras is where the medium takes the measure of its limitations and we take the measure of ours.

The Levinasian counterpoint to the face is the home, the space in which the face can welcome us, a space *between* ourselves and the outside world.[267] This uncertainty about what constitutes a 'home' connects these films to the term 'ecology' itself. Coined in the late 19th century by German philosopher and scientist Ernst Haeckel in his 1866 monograph *Generelle morphologie der organismen*,[268] the word 'ecology' shares in English the same root as words like 'economics' and 'ecumenism': the ancient Greek word *oikos*, or *household*. Literally, 'knowledge of the household of nature', the great contribution of ecological thinking is the image of the 'balanced system', the 1920s concept of *homeostasis*: the idea that systems of life tend always towards a delicate equilibrium that we, the unpredictable organism, are rapidly upending. Haeckel, for his part, was resolutely committed to the idea that nature and beauty were compatible and the immense success of his bourgeois coffee table books[269]—featuring precisely symmetrical zoological drawings exploring the patterning of nature—testify to how the notion flattered the desires of early mainstream environmentalists and sanctioned the homes where they demonstrated that commitment.

Hans Jonas doesn't use the term 'ecology' at all in *The Phenomenon of Life*, though he does talk about our "earthly home" and our ability to feel 'at home' there (7). And later, in *The Imperative of Life*, when he develops a theory of responsibility derived from the parent/child relationship, the idea of home moves closer to the forefront, especially in the final chapter, "Critique of Utopia." In defining a home we are also defining an outside world, and contrasting our home to reality. To *be home* is to live within an interpretation that you are crafting with every domestic chore, with every familiarity, with every evasion, with every renovation, with every interminable repetition, with every feeling of safety from the outside world. Jonas' "image of man" is his attempt to set the parameters for us to feel at home in being an organism.

As Jonas describes it, organic evolution is the history of increasing attempts at extending the range of the division between body and world, but in two directions: we see it first in the emergence of animal mobility and the ability to move through the world, and then in the

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[267] Levinas writes, "I welcome the Other who presents in my home by opening my home to him … But in order that I be able to free myself from the very possession that the welcome of the Home establishes, in order that I be able to see things in themselves, that is, represent them to myself, I must know how to give what I possess." Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, 170-1.
[268] Ernst Haeckel, *Generelle morphologie der organismen*. (Berlin: Photomechanischer nachdruck W. de Gruyter, 1988).
[269] *Art Forms in Nature: The Prints of Ernst Haeckel* (Munich ; New York: Prestel, 1998).

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emergence of an inner life that was capable of traveling deeper and deeper into consciousness. A home, then, is a kind of extension of the bounds of the organism, pushing the world back by a few degrees in order to silo a certain kind of self-reflexive metaphysics. Our media, in a sense, become the equivalent inside our bodies. But for whatever relief our media might grant us, ultimately we are asking them to evolve to better allow us to connect to the outside world, to bring the world into our homes, to remove the frame from here and over there.

Or at least, that is what I've wanted from cinema. At the beginning of this dissertation, I identified my subject as "our human place in the natural world as imagined by four films." I was drawn to realist film theorists grappling with modernism because each, in their own way, identified in the experience of art films the possibility of reconnecting with the world. For Kracauer, this connection is the most explicit, urging us to see how films in their "exploration of the texture of everyday life … help us not only to appreciate our given material environment but to extend it in all directions. [Film] virtually make the world our home."[270]

Of all the homes we've studied in this thesis, *Hugo* puts the most faith there. "Home" is the last word of that film, though the image of that home is not the ad hoc community of strangers we've left behind at the party, but the image of the automaton. In the other films, ideas of homes are—like the narratives themselves—much less bounded by clear insides and outsides. In *Melancholia*, we are suspended between three scales of home: the imaginary home Michael photographs and projects into his imagined future with Justine, the unhomeliness of the mansion where the film is entirely bounded, and our home, the Earth, and its failure to protect us. Boonmee wishes to give over his home to Jen, and it is after sifting through his legacy and estate that Jen ends up split (or doubled)—homeless, a spirit in a state of *dis*possession. At the end of the film, we see her suspended simultaneously between a hotel room and a noisy café. In *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, Herzog is obsessed with uncovering the homeliness of what he sees as a sacral space. Though we might want to see the Chauvet cave as a kind of museum, anthropological evidence makes it clear that the cave functioned less as a church and more like

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[270] See Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 304. Kracauer saw this critical tendency early in cinema history, quoting Scheffauer, who argued that "through film, man shall come to know the earth as his own house" and Gabriel Marcel who, upon expressing his wonder in the power of film to render more intimate "our relation to the Earth which is our habitat," goes on to add that, "to me who has always had a propensity to get tired of what I have the habit of seeing—what in reality, that is, I do not see anymore—this power peculiar to the cinema seems to be literally redeeming."

a halfway house: it's likely that humans would live there for a time as they communed with the images. When the humans left and didn't come back, bears moved in for thousands of years.

For Geneste, the scientist squatting outside Chauvet Cave and peering into Herzog's camera, humanness is a form of adaptation to the world, and one of its greatest adaptations is the invention of communication. But when I look at the paintings of Chauvet Cave—or, at least, through Herzog's lens—I do not see any message left for a future generation, nor some effort to represent the self for the future (either because that future generation was not a concern for the cave painters, or was unimaginable). I see only the confusing, semiotically charged remains of an encounter with beauty and the world. Jonas' idea that art is a signal of the absolute present is telling us that our media, when mobilized for art, is not meant to flatter us with reminders of our human ethical responsibility or biological privilege. Indeed, eco-philosophy happens on the scale of generations. The emergence of art has made it possible for us to hold and withhold mediation as the condition of our existence, as constituting both the threat of reality in our lives and a curious kind of freedom too: the hope that a medium is, indeed, itself, like a wild animal and it is in the nature of that animal not to learn and not to retain knowledge. To 'explore a medium' is a process of relearning and reviewing.

"A world complete without me which is present to me is the world of my immortality. This is an importance of film—and a danger," Cavell writes in closing out *The World Viewed*. Like Hamlet's father, "who arrives early with unfinished business"; like Uncle Boonmee, who did the same; or like the artists of Chauvet cave who discovered death by chasing deathlessness; or like Méliès, who loved his own image; or "like the Flying Dutchman, who left [the world] unloved"; or like Michael, who offered an image to Justine that was inadequate of her love and disappeared into it—cinema takes all our lives as "haunting[s] of the world." And yet, to Cavell, this isn't such bad a deal, and we philosophers of life should be grateful. After all, for our media to affirm that the world is complete without us, "is essential to what I want of immortality: nature's survival of me. It will mean that the present judgment upon me is not yet the last."[271]

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[271] Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, 160.

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